MY BROTHERS' KEEPER

DISSERTATION

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My Brothers' Keeper

by

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Doctor of Education in Leadership Studies

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ASHLAND UNIVERSITY, 2014

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Through this qualitative study, the story of the African American male as a learner in the public school system was investigated. There were 12 adult Black male participants, six of whom dropped out of school before completion, and six of whom graduated with a high school diploma. From their earliest memories, they shared their lived experiences in the public school setting. The findings from this study indicated that a supportive network, such as that provided in a two-parent household or by an adult mentor, was the critical factor in the success or failure of the African American male relative to graduating from high school.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this first to God, the source of everything,

To my mother, Margaret Ford-Taylor, the wind beneath my wings.

To my father, Thomas B. Taylor, so kind and deeply missed,

To daughters Karla, Camille, and Kwynn, with whom I've been truly blessed,

To my only son, Carlos Isaiah, one of my inspirations,

With my brothers Thomas, Mark, Jon, and Aaron, in writing this dissertation.

To my sister, Terri Lynn, whom I've always idolized,

To all those invisible students, neglected or marginalized,

To uncles Sonny, Bill, and Bro, who when I needed them, were there,

To aunts Carrie, Polly, Elaine, and Cousin Carla, who kept me in their prayers.

To Bren, Carrie Bell, and Glenn, extended "fam", tried and true,

To Mr. Kidd, my sixth grade teacher, I owe a great deal to you.

To friends Karen Trower and Gregory Towns, there when I needed to talk,

To Felicia, Lanky, and Sharon, who truly walk the walk.

To students like Leah, Andrea, Arnettia, and Kamell too,

If ever I feel discouraged, I'm uplifted by thinking of you.

Whether you were in my life for a reason, a season, or a life time,

The success of this doctoral journey is yours as well as mine.

The footprints of your essence have left an indelible mark,

On my soul, my mind, my spirit, and of course, all over my heart.

Your love and words of encouragement, your belief in my destiny,

Were a source of strength and comfort from the dream to reality

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Table of Contents

List of Tables

CHAPTER I

Fragmented repressed memories

Scraping away the layered scar tissue of a psyche

Calcified by years of denial

Living picks at scabs of shattered dreams

Plucking broken shards of torment from a numbed soul

Drawing blood, exposing a fresh wound

Painful awareness forming a montage of the memories

Of my brothers' quilted struggles

A fleeting smile at the happy delusion of running a relay race

"Runners…on your mark, get set,…"(the pop of a starter pistol)

Flashback peripheral vision of toppled hurdles, injured runners

Baton in hand, effortlessly gliding over some obstacles

Crashing into others, getting up, never giving up

Gasping for breath, crossing the finish line, looking back

My fallen brothers, crippled by the impact

The smile of victory dissipates with the realization

Collapsing under the guilt,

Still clutching the book mistaken for a baton,

Resuscitated by one who heard the silent screams of the invisible

Time for healing

This is the story of my brothers, for my brothers, by my brothers.

-Kim, 2006

Purpose of the Study

The poem above was written to express my view of this country's educational system. Analogous to the hurdler, is the experience of the African American male learner. Both run a race in which crossing the finish line is determined by the ability to successfully leap over obstacles and to recuperate from colliding into them. The major difference between them is that, not only is the athlete aware of the obstacles, but he is also trained to overcome them. In contrast, Black boys are not only placed in races in which they are ill equipped to compete, they are also handicapped by blindfolds of inequities. Many of them are oblivious to the barriers in their path.

Some African American male learners are blessed with the innate ability to navigate the hurdles. Others have their father figures to train them with the proper techniques by which to successfully hurdle these obstacles. Failure is not an option for this select few. They have been conditioned to believe the mantra, "No pain, no gain." They fall. They get back up. If they are too injured, as with Derek Redmond in the 1992 Olympics, they are helped across the finish line by their coaches who can't bear to watch their painful struggle. Redmond, who was slated to win the 400m semi-finals in the 1992 Olympics, tore his hamstring as he rounded the first bend. As he hopped toward the finish line on one foot, after hobbling for an entire lap, his father helped him cross the finish line to a standing ovation. The tenacious spirit of some runners can even inspire strangers to offer shoulders on which to lean as they limp to a symbolic victory.

Then there are the ill-fated ones, neither the recipients of "the gift" nor of the support of a mentor. They are left to their own devices. Unfortunately, too many are felled by the hurdles. They either cross the finish line with wounds so debilitating they

can't function, or they don't cross the finish line at all. This is the backdrop of the African American male learner. This was the track and field event for which none of my four brothers or ten nephews had the athletic prowess to compete or complete, all having dropped out of school. Some did eventually stagger across the finish line in their adulthood with a GED. As a result of this study, I hope to discover the characteristics and environmental conditions of those learners who successfully completed the educational journey through this country's public school setting.

As the first college graduate in my family, the writing of this dissertation has been an arduous journey relative to both the process and the content. My mother, Margaret Ford-Taylor, writer, director, Emmy nominated actress, retired professor and "All But Dissertation," offered her assistance many times. However, due to the topic, I knew that proofreading this dissertation would evoke painful memories. At 75, after raising six children, raising six of her 24 grandchildren, and helping raise most of the others, she deserves peace.

This is the story of my brothers, literally and figuratively. Familial ties make it my story. The ties of humanity make it your story. The ties that bind us all together are quite frayed and have been for hundreds of years. They are the common threads of African American male learners interwoven throughout the fabric of society. Sharing this story is akin to tugging at these worn strands, unraveling an ugly truth. I have come to realize that, without immediate attention and due diligence, it could also be the reality of my only son.

My Brothers

Even though my five siblings and I grew up in the same household, my place in the birth order, the fourth of six children, resulted in a closer bond between me and my two younger brothers, identical twins. Our mother and father divorced before my younger brothers and I were of school age. I have no recollection of this period in my life.

My father remarried when I was about ten years old, and on rare occasions, I would visit him, his wife and my half-sister. During most visits to my father, I was not accompanied by any of my siblings. When I was in junior high, he moved to Washington D.C., leaving both his first and second family in Cleveland. The next time I saw my father was 15 years later, when, due to illness, we had to relocate him back to Cleveland. I was 30 years old.

My mother also remarried when I was about 12 years old. Prior to this union, she worked several jobs to support her six children. My oldest brother who is five years older than me was responsible for looking out for us while my mother worked. As one can imagine, my younger brothers and I had liberal supervision because my oldest brother was responding to, what hooks (2004) described as "the lure of the streets" (p. 52).

The addition of a father figure to our family was not well received by my brothers who, by this time, were set in their ways. My mother, who married my stepfather to provide us with a two-parent, two-income household, eventually arrived at the same place she had with my father. I can say with great certainty, however, that this separation was more celebrated than traumatic for my mother and siblings. For me, the loss of a second "father" was devastating.

My mother left my stepfather during my first year of college. She moved to Kent, Ohio to attend Kent State University. I was in my sophomore year when my mother arrived with my two younger brothers in tow. It was her attempt to remove them from the negative influences of the streets that had claimed our older brother. The move was too late. They had already joined a gang and, understandably, hated school. They were statistics. The doors of Roosevelt High School were revolving doors for my younger twin brothers. Frequently suspended, they both eventually dropped out. They joined the ranks of the numerous other African American male high school drop outs. My sister, two years my senior, joined the military immediately following her completion of high school.

The twins, both having fathered children before the age of 18, floated through the next few years cohabitating with the mothers of their children. My mother returned to Cleveland after simultaneously earning a Bachelor's of Science and a Master's Degree. She accomplished this while raising four of my oldest brother's children, three of whom were boys. Nothing of consequence happened for the next few years other than a dramatic increase in the number of grandchildren for my mother. My siblings and I lived our separate lives, seeing each other during holiday visits to our mother's home. The sporadic presence of my oldest brother was dependent on whether he was a guest of a penal institution. More often than not, we were not blessed with his company.

I can only piece together the stories of my two older brothers from fragmented memories they shared and from stories told by mother, my sister and other family members. However, I lived the educational stories of my younger brothers. Being only a year apart in age and attending the same elementary and junior high school, I was there to witness scores of negative experiences that served to isolate and to alienate them.

On many occasions in school, I observed my younger brothers being tormented by teachers. I saw tears stream down their faces as teachers twisted or pinched their arms under the guise of "redirecting" behavior. I witnessed their looks of confusion and pain as they suffered through many verbal assaults. As traumatic as these exchanges were for me to witness and as much as I wanted to defend my brothers from these unwarranted attacks, I was paralyzed by fear of reprisal. Challenging adults was not an option. We were children, brought up in a culture of "children should be seen and not heard" and raised to respect our elders. We were under the delusion that all adults cared about children. Bewildered by the actions of these teachers, we were powerless. My brothers were powerless to fight back, and I was powerless to protect them.

My brothers endured this cruelty until they reached an age and the posture that clearly communicated to teachers that verbal and/or physical abuse would, not only not be tolerated, it would be reciprocated. Unfortunately this defense mechanism was not restricted to the classroom. It spilled over into encounters with any adult perceived to be a threat, including school administrators and police officers.

As a result of the constant exposure to interactions as described above, my brothers and I became distrustful of teachers. And, I suspect, as a result of society's constant barrage of negative portrayals of Black males, teachers were probably leery of my brothers. Regardless of the origin of their fear, they treated my brothers as if they were a menace. In actuality, my brothers were reacting to hostile entities. They were trying to protect themselves by using the only coping mechanism they knew, that is, assuming a stance similar to that of an animal backed into a corner.

By the end of junior high and at the beginning of high school, teachers used a much more subtle method of "pushing" my brothers to their breaking points. Worn down by the constant undeserved mistreatment, accompanied by feelings of academic inadequacy, the twins both walked away. As articulated by Boddie (1997), they did "not have the motivation or ego-strength to build psychological buffer zones against these ego assaults" (p. 2).

Of all my brothers, my second oldest is most like my father in temperament. As far back as I can remember and even to this day, he has always been an introvert. Like our father, he was not a big talker. Contemplative by nature and very artistic, he was quite different from other boys in our neighborhood in disposition but not in appearance. Athletic in build, he was an imposing figure. Many of his teachers, probably appreciative that he was low-maintenance, left him alone. He was not overtly victimized like my other brothers. On the contrary, he was invisible.

One might think that this treatment was preferable to the abuse experienced by my other brothers, but the outcome was still the same. This disconnect resulted in another disengaged Black boy who, bored with school and detached from his surroundings, also walked away. As explained by Boddie (1997), "there is a sense of futility, disaffection and social disengagement" (p. 2). Years later, when asked why he dropped out of school in the 12th grade, my second oldest brother responded that he didn't see the point in staying because he wasn't learning anything. He eventually joined the Army.

By this point, my oldest brother had been incarcerated several times. He, too, had dropped out of school, thereby joining the scores of other Black males who contribute to the "school to prison" statistics (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Like my younger brothers, my

oldest brother was victim to verbal abuse as well. He was called ignorant, stupid, and dumb among other names by teachers, but he was never the recipient of physical mishandling. Unlike my younger brothers who were perceived as dangerous, my oldest brother actually was. I suppose this was the result of assuming the role of protector once our parents divorced.

Perceptive by nature, he has a keen understanding of human nature. His ability to thrive in the streets further honed this intuitiveness. There are many stories of my brother outwitting teachers and authority figures. A skilled chess player, I imagine he used similar strategies to deal with everyday life. To him, life became a game, one of survival of the fittest. Maybe he adopted this swagger in response to earlier negative school experiences of which I became aware years later. The constant battering of his self-esteem, or "manhood" in street terms, resulted in my oldest brother succumbing to the lure of the streets, where he felt respected and revered. Enamored with this lifestyle, he, too, dropped out of school.

My oldest brother's story is the "Once upon a time …" of too many Black boys. It is the clichéd story of a hustler, complete with the stereotypical characters such as "pharmaceutical representatives," pimps, prostitutes, bank robbers, and gangsters. Consequently, the climax is not very climactic, and anyone could easily predict the ending. When told from the first-person point of view, however, it becomes a heart wrenching account of a Black boy's experiences, as only he could have lived them, and the consequential impacts of his street life. My brother's ending is not the dreamed, happily ever after that children have. It is Langston Hughes's "dream deferred" never to come to fruition.

I don't know my brother, the criminal. I have heard many anecdotes about this character, but most of the narrators are ignorant of his motivation. Unaware of his conflict with society, as experienced in a hostile learning environment and through numerous encounters with blatantly racist law enforcement officers, as well as his conflict with self in trying to successfully navigate in an antagonistic culture, many would probably characterize my brother as a villain. This is a distorted view. I look at him through the lens of a structuralist. My brother was shaped by forces beyond his control, and, as a means of survival, adapted to his surroundings. It's as if my brother's ending, like so many other Black boys, was predestined. As described by Noguera (2008), "Drug abuse, crime, and dropping out of school are largely seen as social consequences of inequality" (p. 58). This has been the ending of my brother's story.

I reiterate, however, that I don't know the criminal; I only know the brother who I witnessed literally give a stranger the coat off his back during a blizzard. I know the brother who respects and protects the elderly. I only know the brother who "borrowed" a truck full of frozen meat which he shared with numerous families on our street during a particularly rough financial time, but later returned the truck. I know the brother who served several years for manslaughter after intervening to protect a woman, a stranger to him, who was being beaten by her male acquaintance. This is not the brother to mainstream culture, but he is a brother to the marginalized and stigmatized. This is the brother I know and of whom I now have a better understanding. This is the brother I love and revere. This is the brother society fears.

As is customary during family gatherings, we relived memories of growing up. In the absence of my own genuine memories about my father, I adopted the reminiscences

of my sister, a self-proclaimed Daddy's girl. The twins could not offer much during these exchanges either. During these family get-togethers, I mistook their silence for nostalgia. It was not until my father was hospitalized due to cancer and his 2005 death two years later when I figured out that my younger brothers were as confused as I was. Although my brothers and I have never discussed this, I now recognize their reaction to our father as a mirrored image of mine. He was virtually a stranger to the three of us.

Their visits to our father were sporadic. My visits to help care for my father were out of a sense of moral obligation and empathy for my sister more than anything else. How do you miss something you never had? I don't know the answer to that question. I do know that at 43 years old, I realized that I did miss the father I never really had. I thrived on my sister's memories, internalizing them as my own. It was not until recently that I realized that the childhood recollections of my father were not mine.

This revelation sparked inner turmoil. I felt the pain of his abandonment as deeply as my brothers. Our father's death had an even more distressing effect on my sister. But, in spite of the devastation caused by the absence and subsequent death of our father, my sister and I were able to forge ahead. Why couldn't our brothers do the same?

My Father

By all accounts, my father was a kind man. Words such as "sweet" and "gentle" are often used by those who knew him. In contrast to many divorced single mothers, my mother never spoke ill of my dad. He was also a genius, having invented a device to help prevent crib death. Regrettably, he did not get a patent on it. Some say that genius is close to insanity. Such was the case with my father who, in retrospect, I would characterize as having crossed to the other side. Yes, he was sweet, kind, gentle, and always had a smile

on his face, but, I can now remember that he couldn't function in the real world. He did odd things like buying toys instead of paying the electric bill. He would say, "It isn't fair for my children not to have toys to play with." Never mind that, having not paid the light bill, we couldn't see the toys anyway. As a child at the time though, it was great being spoiled by our father. Of course, through maturation and the basic process of socialization, children eventually learn what is "normal." For all intents and purposes, he wasn't.

It was not until I was 30-something that I discovered he had a mental disorder. I also learned that my mother didn't divorce my father because she no longer loved him. As much as my mother loved my dad, her sanity hinged on her leaving him. Although her survival played a role in having the strength to walk away, of far greater consideration was the survival of her six children. I have no recollection of any specific event other than an overall sensation that my family didn't feel whole or "normal."

Too young to articulate or to even understand the void, I escaped through books. Luckily, our neighborhood library was only three houses and one street crossing away. While many of the unsupervised kids in my neighborhood ran the streets, I read. While many of them occupied their free time with destructive behavior, I occupied mine with reading. I read right into the heart of my sixth grade teacher, Mr. Kidd. He looked past the obvious and to my potential. He enrolled me in the school's Enrichment Program, and from that experience, I discovered my passion for learning. Many of my childhood acquaintances became criminals, teenage parents, or drop outs. I became the first one to go on to college. Driven by the negative educational experiences of my brothers, I

returned to our neighborhood as a teacher, determined to provide a safe and nurturing learning environment for my brothers.

My Students

As a junior high school teacher with a consistent record in high academic achievement with the at-risk population, one of the classes to which I was assigned was a single gender classroom of at-risk males. This afforded me the opportunity to observe the dynamics of this group in comparison to my heterogeneous classes. I also discovered similarities between these learners and my male family members. As with my younger brothers, I was once again witness to the mistreatment of Black boys. I heard many conversations replete with the same stereotypical presumptions harbored by my brothers' teachers decades earlier. The difference between then and the present was that I was no longer a powerless little girl.

Scarred by the memories and laden with guilt at my helplessness, I have become an advocate for Black boys. It has not been an easy undertaking. Not only do I have to contend with colleagues, many of whom are not receptive to the topic, I must also face my own demons. I have watched enough Dr. Phil shows to recognize that some of my issues can be attributed to the absence of a father figure in my life. But, there is a big difference between "knowing" and "doing." Just as my brothers were shaped by the circumstances of our upbringing, so was I. The past few years have been chaotic, both personally and professionally. As stated by Wheatley (2006), "As we reflect on the times when we personally have descended into chaos, we can notice that as it ends, we emerge changed, stronger in some ways, new" (p. 119). Out of chaos came order.

I have many anecdotes about many students that I could share. However, there are memories of three students who have had a tremendous impact on my life and that are relevant to this study. To protect their identity, pseudonyms have been used.

Shamar. The first is the story of Shamar. I first met Shamar's mother at the promotion exercise of my sixth grade class for which I was one of the speakers. During my speech, I expressed my love for my students and invited all of them to keep in contact with me over the years. I advised the parents to maintain, if not to increase, their level of involvement due to the many obstacles students face while transitioning to middle school. I reminded my students and parents that they had my phone number and to contact me any time.

Shamar's mother was standing in the reception line after the ceremony. Because Shamar was not one of my students, I had no idea who she was. She introduced herself and shared that, during visits to the school for her other children, she had observed my interaction with students. She asked that, even though Shamar had not been in my class, could he also call me if he needed help. She stated that she knew his sixth grade teacher did not care about him and this apathy had a devastating effect on her son. I gave her my phone number.

At the beginning of the next school year, due to restructuring in our district, it was decided that seventh graders would remain at their elementary schools. When the parents of my sixth graders discovered that I would be "looping," those students who had been transferred to other schools were reenrolled back into my class. Shamar's mother visited the school several days prior to the students' first day and requested that her son be

placed in my class. She was touched to learn that, upon finding out that I would be teaching seventh grade, Shamar's name was the first I requested be put on my roster.

The culture of my classroom was alien to Shamar. My classroom resembled a cozy living room complete with a couch, plants, and classical music. The classroom functioned as a learning community. We looked out for each other. Shamar was foreign to my students. Suffice it to say, there was a period of adjustment for us all. For several weeks, we observed Shamar hide under desks, disappear from the line as we traveled throughout the building, and use grunts and inaudible sounds as a means of communication.

Once I ascertained through the school psychologist that prior testing had revealed that Shamar was of average intelligence with no learning disabilities, I went to my second source of information, his previous teacher. Her only comment was that something wasn't right. One day, as was his habit, Shamar arrived to school late. Because he had arrived to school too late to eat breakfast, I asked if he was hungry. Looking at the floor, he mumbled a response. Placing my hand under his chin and lifting his head so that he and I were looking in each other's eyes, I repeated the question with the condition that his response had to be clearly stated. He said, "Yes, I'm hungry."

The first half hour of our morning routine involved eating breakfast, using the full length mirrors in the coatroom to tend to any appearance related needs, reading the newspaper, holding conversations with each other, or finishing up homework. This routine was my attempt to equip my students with basic tools of civility. There were two microwaves as well as a compact refrigerator, stocked with a variety of snacks. After Shamar stated that he was hungry and without direction from me, several students

prepared a light breakfast for Shamar. Another student who had brought his own food, scooped some of his breakfast onto Shamar's plate. I overheard one of them tell Shamar, "Man, you don't ever have to be hungry in Ms. T's class!"

Something in my brain clicked, and it was Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. I remember learning about this as an undergrad, but this experience took it from an abstract concept to a concrete reality. I discovered that, because Shamar's mother earned a little above the minimum to qualify for a reduced lunch fee, she could not always afford to pay the lunch fee. Shamar had not been eating lunch. I paid his lunch fee for the rest of that school year. Approximately a month later, Shamar stopped hiding under desks; he stopped disappearing from the line; he started communicating using words. He became so talkative that, during our downtime in the classroom, students would tease him and remind him of the first few weeks when he didn't talk. Sometimes they would jokingly threaten to starve him again just to get him to be quiet. Shamar's academic performance improved. He finished high school and is currently in college.

Jason. Then there is the story of Jason. In my 19th year of teaching, Jason transferred to my 6th grade class from another school district, one month into the school year. He was escorted to my class in the middle of a math lesson. When he arrived, two of my male students got up from their seats, greeted him at the door, escorted him to the coatroom, assigned him his space, and proceeded to tell him the "do's and don'ts." As I continued with the lesson, I could hear their conversation.

During the student work period, the two boys partnered with Jason. At the end of this lesson, Jason joined the two boys at the front of the class to report out. He contributed to the discussion as if he had been with us from the first day of school. Before

going to lunch, the two boys officially introduced Jason to me. When I extended my hand to shake his, the other two coached him by telling him that "real" men always have a firm handshake and maintain eye contact with the other person out of respect.

On Jason's second day, I invited him to have breakfast with me. I recognized the early signs of the same defensive demeanor of my brothers, my nephews, and many male students. He was on the precipice of disengagement. I was doing my best to pull him back. I told him that, unless we were testing, he was welcome to get up and walk around, as long as he didn't disrupt others. I asked how he felt about school. He expressed a great dislike for it, and when asked for the reason, his response was, "Cuz no teachers care 'bout me—til you." Prompted further, he said I was the first teacher who just talked to him instead of yelling at him. The small amount of attention Jason had received in 1½ days may be of little consequence to many, but it was of great significance to him.

During that entire school year, the question frequently asked by visitors, "Who was that boy that kept getting up out of his seat?" was often followed by the comment, "It didn't interrupt the learning." Jason rarely sat in his assigned seat, opting instead to position himself in close proximity to me. Many days, he would stand next to me at the overhead, book in hand, thoroughly engaged. In my absence, he would follow socially accepted protocol for the class environment by sitting in his assigned seat. I learned from substitute teachers that, on rare occasions, students had to remind him of my expectations, but, overall, he was able to adapt.

I am not in the habit of looking at my students' previous records. As I updated Jason's records at the end of the school year, I was astounded to discover a file thicker than that of any student I'd had in my previous 18 years of teaching. That included my

ten years as a teacher at the junior high school. In looking through his records, I learned

that he had been suspended on multiple occasions, and the most common infractions

were "defiance," "classroom disruption," and/or "failure to comply." Most of the

infractions were attributed to his refusal to remain seated. The majority of his grades

from 4th and 5th grades were D's and F's. During his year with me, Jason was never

suspended and, although initially he struggled academically, he finished the school year

with a strong C average. At the end-of-the-year promotion ceremony, he cried like a

baby. By the following school year, his mother moved again. I lost contact with Jason.

Marshall. The last story concerns an encounter as a result of my mother's

hospitalization. During one of her overnight visits, she had a roommate, a nice elderly

White lady. I was studying for an upcoming exam while my mother watched television.

Although the drawn curtains provided visual privacy, any conversations were heard by

all. I sat in a chair at the foot of my mother's bed which enabled me to see anyone

entering the room. At the sound of hospital tubes rattling against each other, I looked up

to see a male phlebotomist enter. We could hear his conversation with the other patient.

"Hello, ma'am. I'm sorry to disturb you, but it's time to take samples for the lab. Is that

all right with you?"

My mother's attention had been diverted from the television to the conversation at

hand.

 "Oh, what a polite young man you are."

We could hear the sound of the contact of rubber against skin, as the hose was

being tightened around the patient's arm, constricting the flow of blood, better enabling

the male nurse to draw blood from the engorged vein. "You might feel a little pinch, but

I'll try not to hurt you." A few seconds of silence were followed by the sound of several tubes being capped and then switched, presumably for empty ones.

"How long have you been a nurse?"

"Well I'm actually in nursing school. I want to be a doctor some day." He paused to cap another test tube.

"Good for you, young man."

We heard a light snap of rubber as he probably removed the hose from her arm. "Yeah, I had a teacher once who inspired me to become a doctor."

"Stick with it, young man. You can do it."

"Thank you, ma'am. Let me freshen up your water before I leave." We heard the sound of hands sloshing in water followed by the sound of water and ice being poured into a plastic cup. I returned to my studies, but I knew the conversation still had my mother's full undivided attention.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Based on the sounds of the rattling test tubes, I knew he was now coming to obtain samples from my mother. I scooted my chair back without looking up, and then turned my attention back to my books. "Good evening, ma'am. How are you?" My mother was so pleased. She was so proud to see a young, productive African American male.

During their interaction, I could sense that the young man was staring at me. I tried to ignore him. When that didn't deter him, I finally looked at him with an expression that basically said, "What are you looking at?" In response to my silent question, he spoke my name, "Miss Taylor?" At that moment, I realized he was a former student. I

looked at him in earnest. "You were my 7th grade reading teacher. I'm Marshall." He and I said his name at the same time as I recognized who he was. "You were my favorite teacher. I'm going to be a doctor because of you. Remember you made each of us memorize a quote every week, and we had to explain what it meant to the class? Mine was, 'Education is the passport to the future. Tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today.' Malcolm X. I never forgot it."

By this time, my mother was crying, and I was fighting back tears. While he removed the hose from her arm, Marshall proceeded to tell my mother how I had refused to let him fall through the cracks. He assured me that he would be a doctor one day as he left the room. My mother said to me, "See, you do make a difference." I thought about Marshall and remembered that he had been one of the quiet ones, satisfied to float through school unnoticed. I was overjoyed to see what he had accomplished.

Summary of stories. These three stories reveal the roles that student-teacher relationships can play in the academic experience of the African American male learner. The anecdotes also demonstrate the importance of a haven for these students. Shamar needed something as primal as food. Until this basic need was met, academics were the least of his concerns. My two younger brothers' primal need for safety was often unfilled at school. In response to perceived danger, they were on auto-pilot in the "fight-or-flight" mode as mentioned by Kotulak (1996) in the discussion of noradrenaline, the brain's "alarm hormone" (p. 67).

Jason needed a more supportive learning environment, one in which interventions were put in place for his learning style. My oldest brother had the same need. While in a

juvenile detention facility, it was discovered that he is dyslexic. At 16, he was obviously already disengaged. Like Jason, his academic needs were not met.

Lastly, Marshall needed refuge from anonymity. He was content being invisible, like my second oldest brother. Unlike my brother whose creative ability remained undiscovered as he faded into obscurity, my former student Marshall is on the path to realizing his dream of becoming a doctor. One of my brother's misfortunes relative to school was that his artistic talent, his craft, was never developed. As articulated by Piirto (1999), "In all cases, the school is merely an environmental factor in the development of talent, but the school can be either a powerful shaper or a deterrent to that development" (para. 23). More time and energy could have been the catalyst for the development of my brother's creative side. Instead, his growth was stunted.

What was the refuge for my brothers? Was the absence of our father the precipitating factor that caused all four of them to drop out of school? How were my sister and I able to persevere even though we, too, experienced the same void? Were the negative student-teacher interactions so devastating that my brothers could not recuperate from the crippling impact? What will be the safe haven for my son, soon to also have divorced parents? The answers to these questions may be the difference between my only son earning a high school diploma or dropping out of school. It is the pursuit of these answers that now fuels the fire of this study.

My Son

My mother made a deal with her higher power. Not willing to disclose the terms and conditions of that arrangement, she will only share that she bargained to live at least long enough to see her last grandson, my son, finish high school. When he does, he will

be the first male offspring to accomplish this. Due to my mother's failing health, there is a sense of urgency. Based on findings of some studies (Cass & Curry, 2007; Holzman, 2010; Kunjufu, 2005) that Black boys who become disengaged from school by fourth grade have a high probability of dropping out, there is a sense of anxiety. Based on the academic history of the males in my family, there is a sense of despair.

Traumatized by my mother's second divorce and the subsequent loss of the closest thing to a typical "father figure" that I had experienced, I was the quintessential girl looking for love in all the wrong places. I found it, not love, the wrong place. I resided there for almost 20 years. I was under the delusion that my children were being raised in a stable environment, because it was a two-parent household.

Everything happens for a reason. I gave birth to my son two years after a miscarriage which, according to my doctor, prevented me from having any more children. Looking back, I remember an ever-present nagging feeling, an elusive thought, skirting at the edge of my subconscious the first five years of my son's life. It was as if I was walking toward the light in a fog. Eventually, I saw things with such clarity. The commonalities of the trials and tribulations of the males in my personal and professional worlds were illuminated. The desire to provide a fighting chance, a fair chance, for my only son, my fourth child, snapped me out of a perpetual state of denial. I followed in my mother's footsteps and, albeit after a longer journey, sacrificed companionship with my husband for my son's future.

My soon to be ex-husband, like countless other Black men, is a statistic. Raised by his mother, he dropped out of school and embraced street life. At the age of 16, he witnessed the murder of his father. He did eventually earn a GED and found gainful

employment. But, fitting in to what he perceived to be an unwelcoming culture proved too great a challenge. I didn't see the forest for the trees. Our daughters seemed to be doing well. Six years after the birth of our fourth child, our son, we separated. Hindsight is 20/20.

Since the tender age of six, my son has professed to hate school. This will not be an easy race. In the not-too distant future, I will transform from active coach to participant observer, cheering from the sidelines as my son tries to jump over the many hurdles he will most certainly encounter. In the event that he stumbles or falls, like Redmond's father, I will help him cross the finish line. Only time will tell if he will remain intact enough to function after that. In actuality, the starter pistol was fired the minute he was born, some would argue even sooner. As contended by Davis (2005), being Black and male places one at greater risk for school failure and being labeled special education. The literature review seems to support this contention.

The U. S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), a national data tool for analyzing equity and educational opportunities, paints a bleak picture for my son. The CRDC has collected data on education and civil rights issues since 1968. Section 504 is an anti-discrimination, civil rights statute under the provisions of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. As a result of my son's diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder, he is currently served by a 504 plan. A 504 plan is a legal document that requires that children with disabilities have equal access to an education. The 2012 results of the CRDC revealed that, of the 12% of the students in its sample, 400,000 were served by 504 plans. Of that population, a disproportionate number, 18%, were African American males.

My son now bears the tag many proclaim is too liberally and disproportionately affixed to males, especially Black boys (Cass & Curry, 2007; Holzman, 2010; Sax, 2007; Whitmire, 2010). Researchers, scholars and authors reference the fact that African American males are more frequently and disproportionately identified for special education than their peers (Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Tyre, 2008).

Relative to students in gifted education, the 2012 results of CRDC, as well of other studies, highlight the fact that African-American students, especially boys, are also disproportionately underrepresented in this cohort (Ford, 2012; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). My daughters were described by many teachers as bright, creative, determined and/or intelligent. The youngest has been identified as gifted. In contrast, my son has been branded stubborn and "special ed."

In terms of discipline practices, African American males, 3½ times more likely to be suspended than their White counterparts, have higher suspension and expulsion rates than any of their peers (Cass & Curry, 2007; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Laing, 2010; Tyre, 2008). Students who are frequently excluded from school become entwined in a suspension-failure cycle that eventually leads to them dropping out of school and/or being incarcerated (Bireda, 2007; Cass & Curry, 2007; Holzman, 2010). Luckily my son's timidity has served to exclude him from this cycle. Unluckily, the downside of this trait is that it has left him at peril to bullies. All four brothers and ten nephews did become entangled in the exclusionary cycle that ultimately pushed each of them, one by one, out the doors of the very institution that should have embraced them. They are the epitome of the disengaged learner.

When pressed for the cause of his dislike for school, my son has consistently stated over the past few years that his teachers didn't like him. The importance of positive relationships between students and their teachers has been documented by many (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Bensman, 2000; Boddie, 1997; Cass & Curry, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Roderick, 2003; Townsend, 2000; Tyre, 2008; Wimberly, 2002). My daughters and I were able to trace the origin of my son's downward educational spiral to his first grade teacher whom we will call "Miss Smith." Coincidentally, Miss Smith was also my oldest daughter's teacher. Upon this discovery, my oldest daughter confirmed my son's allegations. "He's probably right. She didn't like me either."

Suffice it to say, Miss Smith's malice did not deter my daughter. Currently a social worker with a Master's Degree, she was able to clear that hurdle. For my son, however, it was a head-on collision. Successful Black males often speak of caring teachers who helped instill belief in their potential. Conversely, boys have the tendency to attribute the beliefs of one negative teacher to other teachers and classrooms (Sax, 2007).

Compared to their counterparts, African American males perform better academically in environments in which it is perceived that the teacher genuinely cares about them (hooks, 2004; Wimberly, 2002). This obstacle, Miss Smith, may have caused irreparable damage. There is growing evidence that when Black males disengage from school in the early grades, the disengagement continues (Cass & Curry, 2007; Davis, 2005). My seventh grade son's current status in school, struggling academically and resentful that he has to attend, is a perfect example of Davis's conclusion relative to disengagement. Conversations with friends reveal that we are fighting the same battle.

Thus far, my son's schooling experience has been vastly different from that of mine, my daughters, and my nieces, all of whom earned high school diplomas. Regrettably, his educational odyssey mirrors that of my brothers and nephews. He has already run half the race and has too many scars for my comfort. The indisputable reality is that my son is going to encounter obstacles that are unique to the African American male learner.

In a study of effective teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1994) recounted a teacher's response to a parent's similar question. "'I've seen too many Black children, particularly boys, get messed over in this school. I'm being hard on him because he's got to be tough enough to endure'" (p. 139). Is that the motivating factor behind the actions of some teachers of Black boys, to make them tough? Are other students also being trained to be tough? As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, endure means "to bear without resistance; to suffer without yielding." Is that the prerequisite for my son to realize the "American Dream", to suffer? Sadly, it seems that the answer, to this last question is, "Yes."

Summary

The main goal of this study is to discover those attributes and environmental conditions present for those who triumphed despite the odds. To that end, the overarching question is what are the differential characteristics between African American male high school drop outs and high school graduates? Through an analysis of those traits, we can discover those factors contributory to the success, or failure, of African American male learners in graduating from high school. Identification of those factors will serve two purposes. All involved in the educative process of Black boys will gain a better

understanding of their plight. The newly gained knowledge can then be used to better prepare these learners for what many consider to be an adversarial terrain. By equipping them with the appropriate coping mechanisms, we will surely increase their likelihood of success in the educational arena.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature: An Introduction

As I revised my dissertation for the "umpteenth" time, my thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of my cell phone. Grateful for an excuse to take a break, I quickly responded to the call from my sister who, without the customary greeting of "Hello," told me to turn to CNN. I assumed she wanted me to see some news story about one of her favorite stars; I didn't ask questions. I searched for the device that, like Calgon, would "take me away."

Just as I found the remote, the phone vibrated in my hand, alerting me to a text message. I was totally unprepared for the headline that affronted me: "George Zimmerman Found Not Guilty." I couldn't believe my eyes. I reread the words and instantly became nauseous. I comforted myself with the thought that he must have been found guilty of the lesser charge of manslaughter. I quickly turned to CNN and was stunned to learn that he had been acquitted of all charges in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year old Black boy.

The next day, exhausted from sleep deprivation and emotionally drained, I called off work. As I watched the coverage of the aftermath of the jury's ruling, my thoughts turned to my son. Sheltered from the Zimmermans of the world and with minimal exposure to street life, have I failed to prepare him for the reality of his existence in this country?

I thought about his physical appearance. Though only 12½ years old, wearing a man's shoe size of 13 and already 5'9" in height, my son has yet, according to his pediatrician, to begin a true growth spurt. Clearly, he is going be a tall man. Like

many other urban children, he prefers hooded sweatshirts, or "hoodies," much like the one Trayvon was wearing. Should I tell my son not to shield his head from the rain by wearing his hood, because someone might think he's dangerous? I could relate to the reaction of a pastor quoted by Scherer and Dias (2013), "There's a racial consciousness that rises up within me that somehow takes my ability to see this objectively. I am angry" (p. 30).

I needed to commiserate with others, but I was on edge with raw emotions; I decided to stay in the house and chose an alternative means by which to interact with people, the Internet. After Googling "Trayvon Martin," hundreds of hits were displayed. I was not surprised to discover some derogatory comments about Blacks nor was I angry after reading a few expressions of gratitude to Zimmerman. Instead, I took solace in the popular incredulity at the verdict which indicated that, as a nation, we have made a great deal of progress.

The reader might wonder about the connection between this study and the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. If one believes, as I do, that racial profiling was the impetus to Zimmerman's actions, then this case is a classic example of the presumptions of many that Black boys are of ill intent. The very appearance of Black boys can instill fear in the hearts of many, prompting such behavior as that exhibited by George Zimmerman. The suspicions held by Zimmerman represent the biases of many.

One of the comments posted anonymously online in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin was so profound I felt compelled to include it. The respondent stated,

I will not be there to assuage white [sic] guilt. I am horrified at what this
means for my country and for me as a Black man. Our country has a history
of creating the conditions that put Black males in horrifying conditions, and
expecting us to not fight back, for if we do, we will lose our lives. George
Zimmerman vs. Trayvon Martin is an allegory for America.

Organization of the Literature Review

The purpose of any literature review is to establish the context of a problem
as well as to justify any need for further research. Since the backdrop of this
qualitative study is the public school system, this literature review begins with a brief
analysis of the historical origin of African Americans within this setting which is at
the very crux of this study. The reader will then be presented with a variety of
opinions relative to its function. Subsequent to that is an examination of those
environmental forces, both internal and external, that may have an impact on African
American males as learners. This chapter concludes with a discussion on the effect
of those factors.

Historical Background of the African American Learner

"In one fashion or another, black [sic] Americans have struggled to educate
themselves and to be educated since they were brought to America as slaves" (Schwebel,
2003, p. 129). Awareness of the historical context of Blacks is requisite to understanding
the plight of African American male learners. The path traveled by the African American
learner originated out of discriminatory practices and blatant exclusion. In the words of
Paige and Witty (2010), "The African American's unfinished journey from chattel

slavery to racial equality and social justice in America has been, and continues to be, a long and arduous struggle" (p. 1).

Some, however, are of the opinion that African Americans should have been able to overcome discrimination like other immigrant groups, and, that with the election of our first Black president, past transgressions are inconsequential. In discussing this school of thought, Loewen (1995) stated, "The segregation and physical violence aimed at African Americans has been of a higher order of magnitude" (p. 168) than any other group of people. Loewen (1995) further explained that when racism is minimized in recounting history, our present view is distorted.

This mindset ignores the interminable impact of past events on the present educational reality for African Americans. In the words of Jenkins (2006), "In many social arenas, Black participation is a relatively new phenomenon, particularly the arena of education. The deficit incurred by history is substantial and has had a generational impact on the African American community" (p. 132). The resultant effect was aptly described by Ford (2003):

> Treating the past as the past is unhelpful because it ignores the reality that decades of denial to an equal education cannot be overcome easily or quickly. That is, uneducated slaves (generation 1) raised undereducated children (generation 2) who raised undereducated grandchildren (generation 3), and so on. And we have these [children] – a few decades removed from slavery and segregation – in our classrooms competing with students whose ancestors and parents benefit(ed) from all that schools have to offer. (p. 285)

This succinct description of the evolution of our current educational system depicts the present reality for most Blacks in public schools. Ford's (2003) portrayal of this educational setting is germane to understanding the phenomenon investigated in this study.

Function of the Public School System

Public schools were initially created out of the desire to preserve American democracy, for the advancement of the common good. Almost two centuries later, that purpose continues to be at the core of many discussions. My assertion, and that of others, is that the structure of our current system makes it impossible to achieve this goal.

Sizer (2004) and Singham (2005) characterized the public school system as the vehicle for social justice, social mobility and democracy, on the other hand, Cooper and Jordan (2003) maintained that the purpose of schools is to develop human resources. The description by Darling-Hammond (2004) seems to be a combination of these two definitions

> It is the nation's most valuable public resource for creating common
> ground in what we as a collective know and believe, for developing a
> strong citizenry, and for ensuring a prepared workforce. . . [Schools] will
> meet the aspirations Americans hold if they are given the critical supports
> they need. (p. 32)

In contrast, Schwebel (2003) contended that the notion of a unitary school system is a myth. He is of the opinion that it is actually composed of three systems with very different societal functions. The effectiveness of each is determined by its contributory role in maintaining the nation's economy. The function of each of the three systems can

be deduced from the labels assigned by Schwebel (2003): (a) the "elite leadership school system," (b) the "workforce school system," and (c) the "marginal school system" (p. 3). If one accepts this analysis of our nation's public schools as the backdrop to this study, then in Schwebel's own words, "From the perspective of the complete development and well functioning of *all the people*, this [system] is failed, inequitable, and inhumane" (p. 7).

Many would agree with Schwebel's (2003) characterization of the system as inequitable. The disparities that exist in educational attainment for African American males have caused some to conclude that there is a crisis in this country (Boddie, 1997; Gurian & Stephens, 2005; Hopkins, 1997; Noguera, 2008; Whitmire, 2010). Crisis, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "an unstable or crucial time in which a decisive change is impending." On the other hand, Schwebel (2003) maintained that if an educational crisis did exist, the United States "could not be the thriving, accomplished society that it is" (p. 6).

Singham's (2005) opinion is synonymous with that of Schwebel (2003) who further asserted that, although there is a problem of inferior schooling for the lower socioeconomic classes, the economy is well maintained by the leadership of the elite leadership system. Sadly, "we see no serious, committed efforts to change because the educational system, as it currently exists, is acceptable to those that hold power and formulate policy in our nation" (p. 39). Lipman's (1998) assessment also paralleled that of Schwebel's:

> Schools are key institutions in which the knowledge of those who hold
> economic and social power is transmitted and legitimated. And the

knowledge and dispositions, or cultural capital of dominant groups is

rewarded while that of subordinated groups is negated. Schools socialize

and sort students for unequal positions within the social division of labor,

thus helping to reproduce social inequality. (p. 6)

Loewen (1995) referred to this as the "power elite theory" (p. 275). Specific to

Schwebel (2003) and Lipman's (1998) analyses of the public school system, there is no

need for change and, as such, there is no crisis. Singham's (2005) characterization of the

system as contradictory in nature is substantiated by Hopkins's claim (1997) that public

schools serve "two potentially conflicting purposes: (1) to educate citizens and (2) to

process them into roles for economic production" (p. 4).

Hopkins (1997) depicted the schools as "agencies of social, economic, political

and cultural reproduction" (p. 2), all areas in which the currency of African American

males is of little value. This system, described by Boddie (1997) as a "structural

hypocrisy" (p. 3) presents many challenges to African American males. It is unfortunate

that those most disadvantaged by its structure are the least poised to access the resources

by which to initiate change.

The various descriptions seem to point to the same objective of furthering

society's common good. However, the diversity of our national populace and the existing

social stratification begs the question, "Can a true common good actually exist?" The

hierarchical division of American society sheds light on the seeming impossibility of

achieving that goal.

Many readily admit that the privileged few, the elite, do possess the resources by

which to address the system's inequities. Unfortunately, "one of the hidden biases of

education is that the people who are now in a position to influence the system are the very people, possibly a small minority, who were successful in the existing system" (Singham, 2005, p. 20). They determine how society's resources are allocated to education.

The current status of Black men within this power structure illustrates the challenge of achieving the systemic change necessary for educational reform. As described by Jenkins (2006),

> Black men lack real and substantial economic, political, and social power. For a real investment to be made from society at large, Black men must be seen as a vital asset to society and tied to the growth of local economics and social order. (p. 151)

Specific to the African American male learner, Boddie (1997) stated that the role of the school is to "provide them with the knowledge they need to deal with the social environment, help them find out what roles are available, what society expects and how to achieve the legitimate goals in society" (p. 14). Unfortunately, the structural forces and discriminatory practices encountered by Black males have relegated them to a position of inferiority. Understandably, many have not been successful in such an antagonistic environment.

Influences of Forces

Regardless of one's belief about the function of public schools, arguably, it has failed to fulfill its purpose relative to African American males. As stated by Mandara (2006), "one indisputable discovery is the most consistent finding of educational research which is the underachievement of African American males at all levels of the

educational pipeline" (p. 206), a pipeline described by Tyre (2008) as "leaky" (p. 38). The finding of the 2010 *Yes We Can*! report by the Schott Foundation for Public Education (Holzman, 2010) was that "in the majority of U.S. states, districts, communities, and schools, the conditions necessary for black [sic] males to systemically succeed in education do not exist" (p. 4).

It was concluded that Black males are being set up to fail. There are many political, cultural, and economic forces at play, forces that, according to Davis (2005), "undermine both the development and the appropriate expression of the masculinity of African American boys" (p. 519).

Ogbu and Simons (1998) echoed the assertion of Davis (2005) as it pertains to the influence of these same forces on the academic performance of Black boys, some of which account for the achievement gap between them and their counterparts. Cooper (2008) stated, "Ensuring high quality educational opportunities for African American males is one of the greatest challenges that public schools face in the 21st century" (p. 137).

Meeting the challenge of equalizing opportunities for Black boys requires removing those obstacles that impede their success. Singham (2005) described the difficulty in determining the causal relationships between environmental forces and student success. "Trying to isolate the factors that influence learning is notoriously difficult. There are so many confounding variables that it is not easy to arrive at unambiguous conclusions about what works and what does not work in education" (p. 18). As difficult as the process is, we must at least try. It is only through the identification and analyses of those factors that we can even begin to dismantle the environmental

forces that prove to be barriers to African American male learners. Dweck (2000) spoke

to the importance of this process and the "dangers [that] arise when people lose sight of

the complexity of those factors" (p. 94), while Schwebel's (2003) description exemplifies

the intricacies of the process:

> The education of humans is a highly complex process. What happens in Ms.
>
> Jones's class on a given day has been influenced by decisions handed down by the
>
> Supreme Court, by legislation enacted by Congress or state legislatures, actions of
>
> city councils, a policy decision of a new board of education, layoffs at the town's
>
> largest plant, marital conflict in Kevin's home, illness in Karen's home, and the
>
> state of Ms. Jones's own romantic relationship. (p. 193)

Internal Factors

Based on Schwebel's (2003) three-tiered characterization of the school system,

the majority of African American males are in the third system which Schwebel (2003)

described as "thoroughly inadequate" (p. 3), "little reason to envision a bright future" (p.

3), "disruptive" (p. 3), and "not amenable to learning" (p. 3). Following is a discussion of

those internal factors that contribute to the condition of the public school system.

Feminized culture. Some contend that one feature of the school setting that

hinders the progress of some boys is the feminized culture. As stated by Mandara (2006),

"unfortunately for African American boys, the modern American public school system is,

for the most part, designed for and run by European American women" (p. 218). The

predominantly female educators may unwittingly create a feminine culture. Tyre (2008)

stated that "many teachers have a blind spot when it comes to boys and school" (p. 40).

Because "the vast majority [of teachers] are white females – a different demographic

profile" (Cooper & Peebles, 2008, p. 123), the female-dominated environment that develops is often perceived by Black boys as foreign and unfriendly.

Davis (2005) and Hopkins (1997) thought that this type of environment often provokes oppositional behaviors. According to Boddie (1997), Black boys "play it cool" (p. 13) to counter this stress and further explained, this "African custom of coolness is equated with character" (p. 13). Other authors have also highlighted the tendency of Black boys to assume a "cool pose" in response to stressful situations (hooks, 2004; Hopkins, 1997; Staff & Kraeger, 2008). Anderson (2007) explained how the "survival of the fittest" mentality used in the streets is the same they use to resolve conflicts in the school. As recent research indicates, there is a correlation between behavior and brain chemistry (Kotulak, 1996; Sax, 2007).

Kotulak (1996) discussed two chemicals of the brain, noradrenaline and serotonin, both of which are affected by the environment and that drive students' behavior. Noradrenaline, "the alarm hormone . . . organizes the brain to respond to danger, producing chemicals that prepare the body to fight or flee" (p. 67). Seratonin regulates emotions. Environmental stressors lower the serotonin levels which results in impulsiveness and aggression. This is of particular significance as it relates to Black boys who are disproportionately referred and disciplined for behavior often characterized as aggressive (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003; Townsend, 2000; Verroneau et al., 2008). Such disparities in discipline have been at the center of numerous conversations. Referred to as "exclusionary discipline" by Fenning and Rose (2007, p. 536), the process has had a devastating effect on African American male learners (Bireda, 2007; Laing, 2010; Townsend, 2000; Tyre, 2008).

Brain-based research. Although there are numerous skeptics to this cutting-edge research, many others are quite receptive to its findings, especially in the field of education. Although the structure of students' brains is not under the control of educators, the information can be used to create a learning environment that is most conducive to the diverse needs of all students. For this reason, it is included as an internal factor. Whitmire (2010) attributed the lag in the academic performance of boys to the failure of schools to "embrace brain-based learning theories about how boys and girls absorb information in different ways" (p. 7). As stated by Anderson (2007), "if teachers could see the internal chemical changes within their students' minds, they would appreciate their own powers much more" (p. 5).

In the last two decades, brain-based research has highlighted the importance of structural differences in the brain relative to the educative process. Researchers have provided compelling data to support their position that the variances in how girls and boys learn can be attributed to these differences (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Hopkins, 1997; James, 2007; Kotulak, 1996; Sax, 2007; Singham, 2005; Tyre, 2008; Whitmire, 2010). Once considered "the Black box" (Kotulak, 1996, p. xii), recent advances in imaging technology and current biochemical research have now enabled scientists to examine how the brain works.

According to Sax (2007), "the researchers found that the various regions of the brain develop in a different sequence and tempo in girls compared to boys" (p. 17). One such example is how differently the brains of boys and girls experience light. These findings, based on the results of MRIs and brain scans, indicate that boys perform better in bright light. Gurian and Stevens (2005) concluded that light can really make a

difference in how boys perform. According to James (2007) and Gurian and Stevens (2005), vision is the best sensory mode by which boys acquire information whereas the typical female depends on the other senses.

Another difference with potential implications for the classroom is related to the structure of the cochlea. As alleged by James (2007), because the cochlea is longer in boys' ears, sound takes longer to register with boys than with girls. James (2007) contended that boys "may have trouble with auditory sources of information" (p. 37). Male students, often chastised for not responding quickly enough to verbal prompts, would probably benefit from more visual cues. Boys are frequently labeled as nonresponsive, disrespectful, or as having a learning disability when in actuality, there may be a physiological reason for their delay in responding.

Male learning styles. The structure of our public school system presents challenges to a large number of male learners. As stated by Gurian and Stevens (2005), there is "a crucial mismatch between how our boys learn naturally and how many of our schools are set up" (p. 52). Males are put at a great disadvantage when placed in traditional classrooms which are structured in alignment with the learning and communication styles most associated with females (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Hitchens, 2009; Noguera, 2008; Sax, 2007; Whitmire, 2010).

In most classrooms, teachers rely on verbal directions and/or facial expressions and body language to communicate. These methods of communication are to the detriment of male learners. According to James (2007), girls are "better able to blend information from facial expression, tone and inflection of voice and body language . . . to interpret what the person means. In a classroom, girls can perceive nonverbal cues from

the teacher . . . while boys may have more difficulty" (p. 35). Obviously, this presents

another challenge for the typical male learner who is more responsive to visual prompts.

It was contended by James (2007) that "the major problem any boy has in school is that

he is a boy. Deal with that issue first and other efforts to include him in school are likely

to be more successful" (p. 166).

Males have been characterized as predominantly kinesthetic and tactile learners

(Kotulak, 1996; Lattimore, 2005; Whitmire, 2010). As explained by Lattimore (2005)

and Tyre (2008), in comparison to girls, boys move around more. They learn better by

physically engaging with their environment which is in direct contrast to the actual

methods used by most teachers (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; James, 2007; Lattimore, 2005;

Tyre, 2008; Whitmire, 2010). This behavior, frequently characterized by teachers as

disruptive, is a manifestation of their gender-based tendencies as they are attempting to

learn.

It is one of the reasons for the disproportionate number of disciplinary referrals

for males in comparison to their female counterparts. Fenning and Rose (2007) explained

that, boys "who are not perceived as fitting the social and behavioral norms of the school

are labeled as dangerous or as troublemakers" (p. 537). However, Sax (2007) contended

that "the real problems in American education are problems of race and social class, not

gender" (p. 39), it is important to note that African American females do not encounter

the same adversities. So, for Black boys, the combination of race, class, *and* gender is

lethal.

Racial biases. Many of the comments posted by African American males that

I read directly following Zimmerman's acquittal were cogent testimony to the

commonality of the practice of being racially profiled. As stated by Scherer and Dias, "This practice of drawing suspicion from skin color, is publicly disavowed but widely practiced" (p. 33). Although some still debate the legitimacy of its existence, those in the Black community, especially men, can attest to the continuation of this discriminatory practice. Tragically, somewhere in America, a Black boy is being racially profiled the minute he enters a classroom.

According to Whitmire (2010), race is one of the predominant issues for Black boys. Although we have made tremendous progress, racism still exists. In his reaction to the tragic circumstances surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin, President Obama stated, "each successive generation seems to be making progress in changing attitudes when it comes to race. It doesn't mean that we're in a postracial society. It doesn't mean that racism is eliminated."

Cooper and Peebles (2008) stated that "Educators, like all members of society, are limited by their experiences and guided by their assumptions" (p. 123). Bireda (2007) identified the set of negative expectations, historical stereotypes, and faulty assumptions of educators as contributing factors to the negative experiences of African American males in the school setting. According to Fenning and Rose (2007), "Black students in general were the most likely to perceive discriminatory treatment by teachers" (p. 546).

Because many educators enter the classroom with certain biases and stereotypes, any behavior driven by these biases can be very detrimental. This prejudiced conduct has a damaging effect on learners such as described by Roderick (2003). "Increasing awareness of racial barriers shape students' behaviors" (p. 541). Others have also discussed the awareness Black boys have of their teachers' negative expectations (Harper

& Davis, 2012; Swanson et al., 2003) and its impact on how they interact within the school environment. As explained by Townsend (2000), "students' behaviors are likely to be misinterpreted – contributing to the disconnection of African American [males] from school settings" (p. 383).

An additional byproduct of racial bias is the mindset of some educators that Black boys lack certain characteristics. Citing the work of Gibbs, authors Parson and Kritsonis (2006) categorized the perception of Black males into "the five D's: dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant and disturbed" (p. 3). In essence, the "perceived cultural, psychological, and/or mental deficiency of black [sic] males are used to blame them for their social and academic failure" (Cooper & Jordan, 2003, p. 388).

According to Bomer et al., (2008), this deficit perspective has been advanced for decades by some to explain school failure among low-income students and students of color" (p. 2523). Cooper and Jordan (2003) contended that this deficit paradigm is used to interact with African American males. This position of double jeopardy was highlighted by Noguera (2008) when he stated that "there is considerable confusion regarding why being black [sic] and male causes this segment of the population to stand out in the most negative and alarming ways, both in school and in society" (p. 53).

Those with this frame of mind focus on perceived cultural or mental insufficiencies. Singleton and Linton (2006) commented that these "tightly held beliefs and understandings regarding the significance of race make it difficult for teachers to comprehend, examine, and rectify the very ways in which race dramatically impacts achievement" (p. xv). Oblivious to the source of these misconceptions, educators

unwittingly convey their biases through words and deeds. The deficit mindset translates into low expectations.

Teacher expectations. According to Wimberly (2002), "There is a positive relationship between teachers' expectations and student achievement. African American students have indicated that they try to please their teachers [whose] expectations often have more influence than parents" (p. 5). This is unfortunate because African American males believe teachers had lower expectations for them in comparison to their peers.

"The negative images and stereotyping of African American males affect the decision making of teachers, principals and other authority figures" (Hopkins, 1997, p. 30). Some contend that the expectations for African American students are lower across all socioeconomic backgrounds (Cooper and Peebles, 2008; Lattimore, 2005; Townsend, 2000; Wimberly, 2002). In the words of Cooper and Peebles (2008), "Realistic expectations for African American students is often synonymous with low expectations" (p. 135).

The expectations of teachers are manifested in how they interact with students (Stearns et al., 2007; Swanson et al., 2003). As stated by Parson and Kritsonis (2006), "Teachers who expect that African American male students cannot achieve academically will model inappropriate behavior to support this erroneous assumption" (p. 4). Expectations also impact African American male athletes. Based on the findings of a study on these student athletes, Beamon and Bell (2006) reported that, "Due to low expectations of Black student athletes, they are more likely to be suspended instead of given a second chance" (p. 402). The expectations of school personnel were one of three

characteristics identified as having a significant impact on the educational experience of African American students (Wimberly, 2002).

Given the significance of the impact of teachers' expectations on the performance of Black boys, Mandara (2006) cautioned that allowing teachers to have a high degree of control over their education could result in a disastrous future for this particular group of students. The powerful and destructive influence of teachers is clearly portrayed through the words of the participants in Chapter IV.

In comparison to their white counterparts, Black boys are disproportionately labeled by their teachers with a learning disability, are suspended, and/or expelled (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Brown & Beckett, 2007; Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Fenning & Rose, 2007). African American male learners are also labeled "at-risk" (Eppert, 2000; Lipman, 1998; Noguera, 2008) thereby shifting attention and responsibility away from ineffective practices and initiatives to placing the blame on the learners themselves. As Lipman (1998) explained, "The at-risk label operates as if it were a scientifically determined trait of youth who embody a diffuse set of supposedly perverse personal and social characteristics. Naming children at-risk implies that widespread school failure is a rather natural consequence of these students' characteristics" (p. 13).

Cultural disconnect. In addition to the challenges of functioning in an environment better suited for females, African American males have the added burden of surviving in a setting that has historically been exclusionary and hostile. "African American students, typically not from the same culture as their white middle-class teachers, may lack understanding of the subtle nuances of classroom expectations that are highly defined by one's culture" (Fenning & Rose, 2006, p. 553). Children from

mainstream families successfully navigate the system because it is similar to the culture of their homes whereas "African Americans struggle for cultural expression" (Hopkins, 1997, p. 63). This cultural disconnect becomes a barrier that too many Black boys are unable to break through.

The findings of a study by Tyler, Boykin, Miller, and Hurley (2006) illustrated the source of this dissonance. "The public schooling experiences of low-income African American students are largely permeated by individualistic and competitive classroom practices more so than those preferred in their out-of-school contexts, mainly communalism and verve" (p. 375). Classroom learning practices are more representative of mainstream culture.

Most educators are ill-prepared to teach children with different racial and cultural backgrounds (Lipman, 1998). Fenning and Rose (2007) attributed this to the fact that "the majority of educators have not had significant contact with individuals outside of their own racial group" (p. 552). According to Townsend (2000), this causes a "cultural divide between African American students and their teachers" (p. 383).

The importance of students' culture as it pertains to the learning environment is supported by those who consider race-related issues and students' cultural background as major factors in the education of these minority students. The lack of knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity to the culture of African American males contributes to the disparities in discipline. (Bireda, 2007; Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Graham & Bridwell, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Stearns, Moller, Blau, & Potochnick, 2007; Wimberly, 2002).

It is the contention of Howard (2001) that, "Misinterpretations of students' cultural characteristics are more likely to manifest themselves in a multitude of punitive actions in schools such as suspension, expulsion, and other disciplinary actions" (p. 145). Suspensions and/or expulsions cause excessive absences, the result of which is usually non-completion. This disciplinary practice only serves to create a suspension-failure cycle (Bireda, 2007), perpetuating the status quo. While suspended, students are punished by being denied access to classroom instruction (Bireda 2007). In essence, they are pushed away from the very institution whose purported intention is to provide a nurturing environment. Evidence proves that suspension/expulsion policies usually result in contradictory outcomes, dropping out of school.

Many researchers and scholars have established a connection between dropping out of school and "enrolling" in prison (Boddie, 1997; hooks, 2004). Referred to as the "school-to-prison pipeline" by Fenning and Rose (2007, p. 544), this is often the outcome of school discipline policies that push poor students of color out of school through the use of suspension and expulsion. "Data indicates that most systems contribute to the conditions in which Black males have nearly as great a chance of being incarcerated as graduating" (Holzman, 2010, p. 4).

A lack of cultural understanding or sensitivity can create tension between students and teachers, eventually leading to an increase in incidents between them. Ford, Moore, and Harmon (2005) attributed the disproportionate representation of African Americans among low achievers and dropouts to their behavioral response to "this color-blind culture-blind curricula" (p. 126). In response to such discipline problems, born out of cultural conflict, (Bireda, 2007) teachers usually take disciplinary measures, thereby

continuing the cycle is which so many African American males have become trapped. It is thus imperative that race and gender remain at the core of any discussion in regards to this specific group of learners.

"While those on the margins, or in the minority, must at once understand both the majority/mainstream and the minority/margin, those in the mainstream typically only understand the mainstream" (p. 4). The reaction of educators to the mannerisms exhibited by a large number of Black boys is such an example. A number of researchers highlight the consequences of the lack of sensitivity to the communication styles of Black boys which are largely misunderstood by those outside of the culture (Bireda, 2007; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Ogbu, 1992). As illustrated by James (2007),

> [They] may appear to be interrupting or talking back to the teacher, when the behavior is simply part of the traditional culture of many African American families. This is actually an indication of a child who is engaged in the lesson. When combined with boys' nature, the teacher may perceive this behavior as angry and hostile. (p. 167)

It is this unawareness that serves as an anchor to a multitude of roadblocks encountered by Black male learners, ruining the efforts of even the best intentioned in his pursuit of a quality education. According to Cooper and Jordan (2003), it will be difficult to address this issue "primarily because attempts to change expectancies and cultural sensitivities cut to the core of teachers and other school personnel as individuals" (p. 390).

It is critical for educators to reflect on the potential biases they may bring to the table. As suggested by Townsend, (2000), they "must take deliberate steps to better

engage African American students, especially males" (p. 385). Such findings are aligned with the opinion of hooks (2004) and a considerable number of others who have emphasized the inability of our schools to connect with Black boys (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Hitchens, 2009; Noguera, 2008; Parson & Kritsonis, 2006).

Hopkins (1997) described the powerlessness and hopelessness experienced by the African American male learner and asserted that, "Black males are not oblivious to the negative imaging and stereotyping placed on them by society at large and in turn by the public school" (p. 64). This viewpoint is shared by Winkle-Wagner, Hunter, and Hinderliter (2009) as it pertains to Black boys. "To be marginalized as a group is to at once have an understanding of the mainstream while also knowing that one is not a commonly accepted part of it" (p. 3).

Chavez and DiBrito (1999) said, "It is critical to understand the culturally constructed nature of educational environments. Difficulties arise for many minority learners when they attempt to negotiate learning environments that have been constructed within an environment that is different from their own" (p. 44). Further support of this position is provided by Fenning and Rose (2007) who described the difficulties minorities experience in trying to decipher the unwritten rules and the subsequent labels they are assigned when they fail to navigate the school environment successfully.

School relationships. African Americans have a strong reliance on schools and the resources it provides. Anderson (2007) said that, relative to school climate, "relationship building is a key factor. In order for significant learning to occur in any class or in any school, relationships must be built" (p. 7). According to Wimberly (2002), relationships

with teachers were the second of three characteristics that can have a positive effect on the educational experience of African American students.

It is Townsend's (2000) contention that positive relationships are crucial for African Americans because they are people oriented. Others have also highlighted the significance of positive relationships to the success of African American learners (Fenning & Rose, 2007; hooks, 1994; Hopkins, 1997; Lattimore, 2005; Lipman, 1998; Roderick, 2003; Wimberly, 2002). According to Townsend (2000), "African American students are more likely to comply with school directives when they have positive relationships with school personnel" (p. 386). Unfortunately, as Hopkins (1997) shared, "without proper relations between Black male students and teachers, Black males either become successful in athletics, or they sought other ways to become important through acting out" (p. 57). Unfortunately, as explained by Veronneau et al., "disruptive behavior affects students' relationships with teachers. These students may not receive the same amount of help, support, and encouragement in their schoolwork" (2008, p. 437).

The comments of Lipman (1998) and Townsend (2000) highlight the impact of positive relationships on the behavior of students. On the other hand, Wimberly (2002) discussed the adult behavior. "Students who formed good relationships expressed behavior and attitudes that school personnel responded to favorably" (vii). This presents a conundrum. Did students follow the rules of the mainstream culture because of the positive relationships, or did educators form relationships with students because they adhered to the rules? Regardless of which came first, the message is clear. Positive relationships do impact their academic achievement.

External Factors

Ogbu (2004) contended that "critics ignore the historical and community contexts of Black students' behavior and focus almost exclusively on the transactions between students and their schools" (p. 2). Any substantive efforts to address the inequities of our public school system must acknowledge external factors and their impact, whether positive or negative, on the educational experience of Black boys. As shared by Sparrow and Sparrow (2012) from the interviews of Black males, "these young men rarely talked about schools or teachers. They are clear that the challenge of educating Black males is much bigger than the schoolhouse" (para. 4).

The Serenity prayer says, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." In the field of education, it is difficult to maintain this viewpoint in the face of the many factors outside of our control. As articulated by Jordan, Lara, and McPartland (1996) "Conflict between the educational objectives of schools and social forces external to the school may interfere with student success" (p. 64). However, even though these external factors are indeed a set of circumstances over which schools have no control, their influence cannot be ignored.

Socioeconomics. Veronneau et al., (2008) contended that, "SES has a significant direct and negative relationship with the failure to graduate" (p. 437). Many speak to the inferiority of education in high-poverty settings, the majority of which are populated by minorities. Fenning and Rose (2007) and Townsend (2000) thought that, due to their socioeconomic status, children of poverty are more susceptible to exclusionary discipline consequences, because they are not "perceived to fit the norm of school" (p. 537). This

falls in line with Bomer et al. (2008) as it relates to the deficit perspective. Educators may be reinforcing ways of thinking and talking about children of poverty that are false, prejudiced, or at the very least, limited. Contrary to that, students in schools in higher socioeconomic areas were offered "proactive alternatives to punitive responses in comparison to those school environments in which students of color receive their education" (p. 547). In a study of Black fifth and sixth grade students, Ferguson (2000) concluded that:

> African American males are apprehended and punished for misbehavior and delinquent acts that are overlooked in other children. The punishment that is meted out is usually more severe than for other children. This racism that systematically extinguishes the potential and constrains the world of possibilities for Black males would be brutal enough if it were restricted to school, but it is replicated in other disciplinary systems of society. (pp. 233-234)

Family. Wimberly (2002) stated, "Students bring academic and social resources to school that reflect their families and experiences" (p. 15). Through an examination of family related factors, educators can gain a better understanding of the behavior of their students. According to Veronneau et al. (2008), "Children born to families of lower SES are particularly likely to be raised in a risky family climate. The pattern of behavior [they] develop in response to the family environment are in contradiction to the prevailing social norms" (p. 430).

Peers. The powerful influence of peers should not be underestimated since statistics indicate that African American males are more likely than any other group to report dropping out because their friends dropped out (Jordan et al., 1996). Staff and

Kreager (2008) summarized the findings of educational research that "high school dropouts frequently report feelings of social isolation and a lack of belongingness prior to leaving school" (p. 447). Lacking positive coping resources, Black boys are more likely to adopt negative coping mechanisms (Roderick, 2003).

School for Black boys, as described by Roderick (2003), is "an arena of risk and failure, an arena in which their day-to-day interactions undermine their school attachment and sense of competence and self-esteem" (p. 580). Davis (2005) stated that, "For many of them…schools disrespect their ability to learn, fail to access and cultivate their many talents, and impose a restrictive range of their options. Within this overwhelming oppressive schooling context, too many Black boys simply give up - beaten by school systems that place little value on who they are and what they offer" (p. 145).

"When students become concerned they cannot receive their props from teachers and staff, they turn elsewhere, typically the streets" (Staff & Kraeger, 2008, p. 449). To earn peer respect, many of them begin to associate with "deviant peers who reinforce behaviors not compatible with school" (Veronneau et al., 2008, p. 430). Townsend (2000) described this effect as "a negative self fulfilling prophecy" (p. 383). However, just as the dropouts became disillusioned with schools and succumbed to negative peer pressure, the positive influence of peers is illustrated by the interactions between the graduates and their peers.

Impact

Author Ladson-Billings (1994) made reference to this drastic impact of the inequities during a discussion of the achievement gap that exists between African American male learners and their white counterparts on all standard measures of

achievement. In response to findings that there have been significant gains in the rates of highs school completion for African American youth during the past 30 years, Saunders, Davis, Williams, and Williams (2004) asserted that, though such progress has been made, a discrepancy still exists in the educational achievement between African American males and others.

According to Veronneau et al., "the failure to graduate is the end result of a developmental pathway that starts at home where young boys develop behavior patterns that are incompatible with school" (2008, p. 430). As explained by Stearns et al. (2007), school context interacts with students' experiences to produce drop out behavior" (p. 211).

Unfortunately, despite the findings indicating that African American males are indeed still in peril, society continues to respond with indifference (Boddie, 1997; Noguera, 2008). In the words of Noguera (2008), "Educators have grown so accustomed to seeing Black male students drop out, fail . . . it could be argued that the problems confronting Black males are so pervasive and commonplace that they have been normalized" (p. xxi).

Advocates for African American males would agree with Noguera (2008), Garibaldi (1992), and Saunders, Davis, Williams, and Williams (2004) that perhaps we have gotten so used to their failure, we either expect it or have become immune to it. One need only look at the convincing findings of numerous studies and the conclusions of many scholars (Boddie, 1997; Hale, 2004; Hughes, Riley, Brown, Moore, Sarrett, & Washington, 2007; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996; Swanson, Cunningham &

Spencer, 2003) to realize that we have unintentionally become saboteurs for a significant

number of Black male learners.

In describing the damaging effect such bad experiences have on the brain,

Kotulak (1996) stated that "the antidote is giving children a sense of self-worth and

teaching them that they are not helpless" (p. 44), a remedy most Black boys don't

receive. Instead, Kotulak (1996) declared, "They are verbally impoverished on the one

hand, but are extremely rich in stressful experiences on the other. They are above average

in reading nonverbal cues that tell them when others may be threatening" (p. 45).

As stated in their analysis of marginality, Winkle-Wagner, Hunter, and

Hinderliter (2009), contended that exclusionary practices can occur "unwittingly" (p. 3).

This persistent state of ignorance speaks to the need for continued research. Further

examination of the disparities that exist between African American males and their

counterparts would aid in the discovery of those factors prohibitive to an enriching

educational experience for them. The findings could be used to address the complacency

of which Noguera (2008) spoke. They should also serve as a vehicle through which to

inform practitioners and policymakers and to fuel the initiation of the comprehensive

reform necessary to improve the conditions of education for the African American males.

I am in agreement with authors such as Davis (2005) who defined school as the

critical site where learners make meaning of who they are, what they are supposed to do,

and how others perceive them. Wimberly's (2002) description is similar to Davis's.

"Students acquire educational information and use resources from the school's social

structure, from peer interactions, and from the relationships they develop with teachers

and other school personnel" (p. 4). It is the responsibility of educators, scholars, and

practitioners to acknowledge the role that school sites play in shaping and molding all students, including Black boys.

Despite the obstacles, there are some African American males who successfully negotiate the public school environment, who, as stated by Bailey and Paisley (2004),"accept the challenges for what they are and still move forward" (p. 15). How are some African American males able to succeed in the midst of such oppositional forces while others give up? Adelabu (2008) contended, "Adolescents who are socialized by their parents to understand racial barriers and who are taught various mechanisms to counter these barriers are motivated to achieve and show greater potential for upward mobility" (p. 350). It is the contention of Parson and Kritsonis (2006) that it is often "the result of strong determined personalities, rather than systematic improvements" (p. 3) that led to success for some African American male learners. The voices of those who lived the phenomenon will bear out these assertions.

That is the intent of this qualitative study, to allow the participants to tell their stories. The most viable avenue for dealing with the crisis facing the African American male learner is to determine the differential characteristics between the completers and the drop outs. In so doing, we can replicate the environment to increase the likelihood for success, and we can equip the learners with the coping mechanisms necessary to successfully navigate the educational terrain.

Until we address the inequities that exist, as Jackson (2011) said, "America and its states and communities will not thrive in the 21st century without providing all students - including Black males - a fair and substantive opportunity to learn" (para. 4).

Summary

The main goal of this study is to discover those attributes and environmental conditions present for those who triumphed despite the odds. In order to accomplish this goal, we needed an understanding of how the current system was designed to function, or in this case malfunction, for Black boys. Such a discovery will enable us to restructure the system in order to address the inequities revealed in the literature review. A more in-depth discussion of possible solutions is included in Chapter V.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenological study was twofold. The primary intent was to investigate the differential characteristics between the African American male high school graduate and the African American male high school dropout. Creswell (2008) stated that, "The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (p. 58). The fact that one group completed an academic journey that their peers failed to complete might seem to belie the researcher's contention that they did experience the same phenomenon. The question the reader might then ask is, "What is the phenomenon central to this study?" It is the researcher's assertion that the journey of the African American male as a learner, in and of itself, is a phenomenon. As highlighted by the literature review, the educational odyssey of this specific population of learners has a uniqueness unparalleled by that of any other group of learners.

As a female, it is impossible for me to have directly experienced the phenomenon, but I felt it vicariously. Consequently, biases still surfaced. In the words of poet Maya Angelou, "Defying a history of horror and a newness of brutality, Black men glisten with strength, sparkle with wit, and glow with love. I am the daughter, the mother, the grandmother, the sister, the friend, and the beloved of wonderful Black men." Taking into consideration my relationship to Black men such as described in the excerpt from this poem, it is difficult to maintain objectivity when conducting such a study.

Researcher Bias

My own experience with the phenomenon of the African American male learner was described in Chapter I. The biases and attitudes of a researcher do have an impact on the study. With the unveiling of the researcher's personal connection, the reader is made aware of potential biases in the researcher's own construct of reality. In order to achieve a fresh perspective and to neutralize the aforementioned prejudices, I used bracketing (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). To increase validity, I also used the self-reflective process (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2009) of frequently analyzing my thoughts and experiences relative to the phenomenon of the African American male learner.

Even with all of the precautions and safeguards, a disadvantage to using the interviewing process is that the information shared by the participants is "filtered" through the interviewer (Creswell, 2008, p. 226). Because the predispositions of the interviewer can "color the interaction and the data elicited" (Merriam, 1998, p. 87), I, the interviewer, made every effort to be nonjudgmental.

I hoped to achieve the ultimate goal of in-depth interviews which, as articulated by Seidman (2006), is to gain an understanding "of the lived experience and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). Even with a sincere effort to bracket, as previously described, the reader should be cognizant of the fact that the summary of the interviews were filtered through the lens of the interviewer.

Research Paradigm

Central to this study is the overarching question of "How do some Black boys successfully navigate through this educational terrain wrought with obstacles while so many of their brethren do not?" In this study, I examined the perceptions and

interpretations of African American males in pursuit of that answer. In so doing, the secondary purpose, that of contributing to the existing body of knowledge, was accomplished.

It is this very body of knowledge that has already clearly established the inequities that exist in the educational system for these learners. By pinpointing these inequities, we can then, in the words of Ladson-Billings (1994), begin to "deligitimate them" (p. 130). The newly gained understandings can enable us to dismantle the barriers encountered by African American males through the complex dimensions of the schooling process. Or, at the very least, the knowledge can be used to provide them with the supports necessary to cope with impending obstacles. Adding to the knowledge base can also expose gaps (Merriam, 1998). The discovery of such breaks in the data would be of great value as it would highlight the need for more in-depth research to fill that void.

Too often, the perceptions of those who experience a phenomenon are omitted. Howard (2001) emphasized the significance of this when he stated:

> The discussion on school reform for academically and marginalized students has included perspectives from countless vantage points. Teachers, school administrators, university researchers, policymakers, and politicians have all contributed to the myriad of "what students need," "best practices," or "effective solutions" conversations on school reform. A number of scholars have made the call for greater inclusion of students' viewpoints in the discussions on school reform. (p. 133)

I believe that the most powerful source from which to gather information is from those who lived the phenomenon. As stated by Howard (2001), consideration must be

given to "the power and insight from [African American males] naming, describing, and analyzing their own realities" (p. 133). Aside from my hope of contributing to the existing body of research, this study is further triggered by my desire to give voice to African American males for the reason as described by Ford, Moore and Harmon (2005). "If the voices of students of color are valued, their teachers, counselors, and administrators will listen to them, respect them, and address their needs" (p. 137). This will give them the opportunity to make a valuable contribution to breaking a cycle that, for such a large number of their peers, threatens their very existence.

Prior to the study, approval was sought from Ashland University's Human Subject Review Board. This process served to ensure that the rights of the participants were protected (Creswell, 2008).

Participants

By virtue of the nature of this qualitative study and in contrast to quantitative studies, the sampling was small, 12 participants. To recruit participants, the purposeful sampling technique of snowballing (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Weiss, 1994) was used. Participants were recruited through third party contacts. The size of the sampling can be attributed to my plan to obtain a great deal of information through the intimate process of interviewing, which is very time consuming. Critical to the quality of this study was the requirement that the individuals have experienced the phenomenon, therefore, criterion sampling (Creswell, 2008) was used.

I recruited 12 African American male learners, six of whom completed high school and six non-completers. Creswell's (2008) general suggestion relative to the number of participants is dependent on the type of approach that is being used to conduct

the research. The sample study of 12 participants was small enough to complete the in-depth interview sessions while being large enough to identify common themes and to develop well-saturated theories.

Ethical Consideration

Confirmation was obtained via phone calls to participants. The initial phone conversation was brief, as its purpose was to set up the logistics of the first face-to-face meeting (Seidman, 2006). Written consent (Creswell, 2008) was obtained from each participant prior to participation in the study (See Appendix A). The consent form not only outlined their rights, but also articulated their right to withdraw at any time. The consent form was also used to inform participants of the possibility that the information gleaned from the interviews might be used for purposes other than just the dissertation (Seidman, 2006). In the event that the material can be used in future presentations, such provisions precluded the necessity to track down participants for additional permission.

The interviews were face-to-face. The advantage of this intimate process is the opportunity for the researcher to observe the participants' nonverbal cues. The results of the observations were added to the compilation of the other evidence collected by the researcher. Both the verbal and nonverbal bits and pieces of data assembled by the researcher were used to paint a vivid picture of the phenomenon that will enable the reader to empathize with the participants.

The identity of the participants was protected through a confidentiality agreement between the interviewer and interviewee. The use of pseudonyms served to further provide anonymity. To further protect the confidentiality of participants, their identity was coded from the beginning of the study as suggested by Seidman (2006). Other

security measures were taken as well. Those included securing original records, consent forms, and audiotapes in a locked cabinet. Procedures were followed and participants were treated in accordance with the guidelines as set forth by the university's review board.

Data Collection

The experiences and insights of those who have experienced the phenomenon should be at the center of any discourse relative to this study. Accordingly, I used interviews as the technique by which to gain this information. In so doing, those factors, both common and differential, to all participants were exposed. According to Merriam (1998), interviewing is one of the best techniques to use "when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate" (1998, p. 72). In-depth interviews are the most desired form of gathering information in a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2008).

I used the semistructured type on the Interview Structure Continuum (Merriam, 1998, p. 73), which is halfway between the ends of the continuum. Although the researcher sought specific information, the format of this type of interview also allowed for the discovery of new ideas on the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). I "sacrifice[d] uniformity of questioning to achieve fuller development of information" (Weiss, 1994, p. 3).

Upon receipt of written consent to participate and consent to audiotape (Appendix B), the interviewing process began. Participants were interviewed twice. The duration of the first session ranged from 90 minutes to two hours. In an attempt to avoid having to reconnect with the interviewees, I did not allow more than three days to lapse between the two sessions as suggested by Seidman (2006). The second interview sessions lasted

from 90 minutes to almost three hours. Two of the sessions lasted almost three hours because the participants shared family keepsakes and pictures. When the opportunity presented itself, I took advantage of it to observe them in their own environment. The interview sessions were audiotaped with the approval of the participants. I used two recording devices, my cell phone and a digital recorder, in the event that one malfunctioned. At the beginning of the first interview, the participants seemed very conscious of the digital recorder, frequently looking at the blinking green light or inquiring if they were speaking loud enough. At first it had an impact on the manner in which they responded. Eventually, they became immune to it. By the second interview, it was ignored altogether.

The viewpoints of those who experienced the phenomenon were solicited by the researcher to uncover their mental, social, and emotional processes that made up the coping mechanisms they used when encountering the educational hurdles. I join Howard (2008, para. 20) in recognizing the "value of experiential knowledge . . . as it . . . allows their voices to shed light on the day-to-day realities in schools and challenge mainstream accounts of their experiences." It is invaluable to allow participants to "define their own issues in their own, words, from their own perspective, using their own terms, and in a word, speak for themselves" (Lattimore, 2005, p. 268).

As recommended by Merriam (1998), descriptive information was obtained at the beginning of the interview to set the foundation. The interviews were conducted in the respondents' home whenever possible. The advantage of this location is that it allowed me to observe the participants in their setting. If other family members were present, I was also able to get a snapshot into the dynamics of the family. Weiss (1994) spoke to

potential risks involved with such an arrangement, especially for women, and suggests

that researchers rely on their own intuitions. Weiss further highlights the advantage of

such a setting, that being the respondents' desire to be hospitable and therefore

cooperative and willing to share.

I took "working notes" (Seidman, 2006, p. 79) during the interview sessions.

Working notes, as well as the use of a tape-recorder, were beneficial in that they enabled

the researcher to be an active listener. In the words of Merriam (1998), "Hearing what is

not explicitly stated but not implied, as well as noting the silence . . . is an important

component . . . " (p. 23). Additionally, the participants were afforded the opportunity of

being uninterrupted as they told their story.

A set of ten open-ended questions (Appendix C) served as the basis for the first

interview of each participant. According to Creswell (2008), the use of open-ended

questions allowed the participants "to voice their experiences unconstrained by any

perspectives of the researcher or past research findings" (p. 226). Admittedly, some of the

questions were influenced by, and based on, the learning experiences of my brothers. The

remaining time of the interviews was spent "exploring" (Seidman, 2006) versus

"probing" (Merriam, 1998).

Probes, as defined by Creswell (2008) are subquestions that can be used to clarify

points of confusion or used to encourage the respondent to elaborate. I am in agreement

with Seidman relative to the use of the word *probe*, which sounds intrusive. Regardless of

the term used, the goal allowed for clarification and to follow up on the participant's

responses. This also enabled me to move the interview forward based on the participants'

responses (Seidman, 2006). The eight questions (Appendix D) used during the second interview were asked in hopes of elaborating on the responses from the first interview.

Seidman (2006) described the delicate balance involved when exploring with the participant. Too much involvement on the part of the interviewer can "shift the meaning making from the participant to the interviewer" (p. 84) while too little can result in a lack of clarity relative to the participants' responses. The use of open-ended questions allowed me to build upon their responses in order to facilitate the process by which the respondents reconstructed their lived experience (Seidman, 2006).

Data Analysis

Postinterview field notes were written immediately following each interview (Merriam, 1998). The notes were used to initiate the process of analyzing the data which, according to Creswell (2008) is cyclical in nature. The notes were descriptive reflections about the interviewer-respondent interactions. Insights about the behavior of the respondent as well as verbal and nonverbal cues were recorded. As previously mentioned, the face-to-face aspect of the interview maximized the opportunity to gather a plethora of data. I listened to the taped interviews numerous times in an effort to detect patterns or recurring themes. The data were coded for emergent themes after each interview.

As discussed by Ladson-Billings (2000) relative to critical race theory (CRT), "the insider status that scholars of color may have can alert them to the way oppressed peoples both protect themselves and subvert the dominant paradigm by withholding and "distorting" data" (p. 268). In acquiescing to my position as an insider by virtue of my race, I recognized some of the responses as exaggerations or distortions of reality. I made note of those embellishments and did not include them as part of my findings.

The interviews were transcribed immediately following each interview. A transcriptionist was not used. Through transcribing my own interviews, I became more intimately acquainted with the data. The transcribed interviews were studied in-depth with the same purpose as the field notes. The initial set of questions and the participants' responses on the surveys permitted me to form a common base of information from which to begin further discussions and questions during the follow up interviews.

I analyzed the data as I compiled it. As highlighted by Creswell (2008), this is in contrast to the traditional approach in quantitative studies where the process is vertical. Characteristic of qualitative studies, I read the data several times to make sense of it. The similarities were categorized and grouped according to themes, defined by Creswell (2008) as "similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea" (p. 252). Five to seven themes were identified per the suggestion of Creswell (2008). This number was small enough to allow the researcher to provide a detailed qualitative report. Themes were developed to the point of saturation (Creswell, 2008), the point at which no new information was discovered.

Negative case analysis and strip analysis (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2009) was used to further strengthen the validity of the study. In terms of negative case analysis, data that seemed unrelated to themes was reevaluated. I cut the transcribed interviews into strips and, based on the content of the response, taped them on my bedroom wall under the categories of home, school, and other. This process took several weeks, because I had the tendency to "overthink" some of the responses. I had to distance myself on occasion due to the fact that I was projecting my own interpretation on the significance of the data instead of accepting it on its own merit. Through strip analysis, or reexamining data in

strips taken out of the context of the primary script, I was able to take a fresh look at the data.

Observations

Additionally, for the purpose of triangulation, I observed the participants. According to Jones (1996), observations are "the cornerstone of qualitative studies" (p. 24). The location and circumstances of the event to be observed was dependent on the preference of the individual participants. Field notes were used and, during the analysis of the information, these notes served as another data point. For example, I was present at Will's family cookout. Once he assured his family members that I was "cool," I was treated as if I belonged in their social circle. I was offered food and beer, both of which I graciously declined. Several times, an adult had to rescue me from the attention of young children who had either climbed into my lap or who were trying to persuade me to help them draw pictures. Will's girlfriend was very attentive, checking on me periodically throughout my two hour visit.

In sharing the responses of the participants in Chapter IV, I also included details that I observed specific to the individual. However, following are general observations that were common to some of the respondents. As previously stated, my preference for the location of the interviews was the home of the participants. Luckily, this was accomplished for most of the interviews. I was able to observe them in their natural setting as well as how they interacted with family and friends.

Of the two groups, the dropouts were the most relaxed, with the exception of one. But, as I share in Chapter IV, this was due to his state of exhaustion after a ten hour work day. During the interviews, family and friends would meander throughout the house,

frequently stopping to listen to the anecdotes of participants. Oftentimes, they contributed to the conversation. The sessions at their homes felt like storytelling around a campfire. In reflecting on the sessions with the graduates, they were in direct contrast. Although I still felt at ease, the interviews were more formal. I asked the questions. They responded. Where the dropouts' responses were interspersed with unrelated memories, the graduates reflected before answering. The more time consuming sessions were with the dropouts whereas the interviews with the graduates felt more like a business transaction.

It was my intent to study the respondents as a nonparticipant observer as described by Creswell (2008). In my role as a nonparticipant observer, I would not have been actively engaged in the experience. According to Creswell, subjects under study would be more inclined to act more natural than if the researcher is an active participant. However, it was my experience that the majority of the participants were more responsive to me because of our similarities. I have come to realize that my perspective was as a critical race theorist.

I was subconsciously using a critical race theoretical framework for the same reason as articulated by Ladson-Billings (2000) in her discussion on this perspective. "All of my selves are invested in this work – the self that is a researcher, the self that is a parent, the self that is a community member, the self that is a Black woman" (p. 272). In retrospect, I was very much at ease when I first met the participants. This may have had the added benefit of putting them at ease as well.

Multiple sources of information were used to enhance the internal validity of the study (Creswell, 2008; Jones, 1996; Merriam, 1998). This was accomplished through the use of a variety of techniques to collect data to corroborate the information gathered by

the researcher. Upon the conclusion of data gathering, the themes and findings were used to write both textural and structural descriptions (Creswell, 2007). Textural descriptions are the experiences of the participants whereas structural descriptions highlight the context of the phenomenon. My findings will be visually represented in a table and my personal reflections and interpretations of the data are included. Chapter IV discusses the findings.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was my lack of access to childhood experiences of the older participants, because they had a difficult time recalling past memories. Where some of the respondents were too old to remember some experiences, several of the participants were too young to have lived experiences from which to gain much insight. I alluded to another limitation earlier as it pertains to the tendency of some of the participants to embellish. One of the traits common to four of the dropouts was their braggadocious nature. The subjectivity of the data collecting process relative to the truthfulness of their responses must be considered.

CHAPTER IV

Study Findings

The main purpose of this study was to ascertain how some African American

males were able to successfully complete high school while others were not. To that end

and through qualitative analysis of the data, I explored the similarities between the

graduates and the dropouts and, more importantly, the differential characteristics. The

results of the interviews presented a dilemma however. Initially, it was my intent to sift

through the data and focus only on school factors within the scope of educators' control.

Yet, as the reader will discover, many of the environmental factors that impact the

academic performance of African American males are so tightly interwoven as to make it

virtually impossible to separate them. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter

V.

After describing the interviewees, their responses are shared according to those

factors both external and internal to the school environment in the areas of home, school,

and extracurricular activities. For the intent of this study, the term extracurricular is in

reference to any activity that is not academic. The term is not specific to school-related

organized activities. The responses of the dropouts are followed by those of the

graduates. See Figure 4.1 for a chart of the participants. Figure 4.2 illustrates subthemes

that emerged. Paraphrasing of interview questions relevant to each category is also

included. A discussion of the implications of data collected will be shared in Chapter V.

Table 4.1

Participant Descriptive Chart

Participant	Age	Highest Level of Education	Parents' Status	Parents' Education	Socioeconomic Status
DROPOUTS					
1. Joe	50-55	10th GED	Single mother	High school graduate	Lower
2. Brian	35-40	10th GED	Mother and stepfather	High school graduate	Lower
3. Tony	30-35	9th GED	Single mother	High school graduate	Lower
4. Curtis	40-45	10th	Single mother	Drop out GED	Lower
5. Warren	35-40	10th	Single mother	Drop out GED	Lower
6. Jeff	20-25	11th GED	Single mother	High school graduate	Lower
GRADUATES					
1. Phil	35-40	Two years college	Single mother	High school graduate	Lower
2. Eric	30-35	Bachelor's	Mother and father	Both college graduates	Middle
3. Troy	30-35	Master's	Mother and father	Both college graduates	Middle
4. Mike	40-45	One year college	Mother and father	Both high school graduates	Middle
5. Steve	20-25	One year college	Grandmother	High school graduate	Lower
6. Darryl	30-35	High school diploma	Single mother	High school graduate	Lower

Table 4.2

Participants' Adulthood

Participant	Biological children	Number of Babies' mothers	Incarcerated	Drug/Alcohol Abuse	Legally Employed
DROPOUTS					
1. Joe	Two	Two (married)	Yes Repeatedly	Yes	No
2. Brian	Two	Two	Yes Repeatedly	Yes	No
3. Tony	Six	Three	Yes Repeatedly	Yes	No
4. Curtis	Six	Four	Yes Repeatedly	Yes	No
5. Warren	Three	One (live together)	Yes Once	Yes	No
6. Jeff	None	NA	No	No	No
GRADUATES					
1. Phil	None	NA	No	No	Yes Recently laid off
2. Eric	None	NA	No	No	Yes
3. Troy	Five	One (married)	No	No	Yes
4. Mike	Two	One (live together)	No	No	Yes
5. Steve	None	NA	No	No	No A student
6. Darryl	Two	One (live together)	No	No	Yes

Participants

Interviewing the participants of this study was enlightening. Repeatedly listening

to the interviews afforded me the opportunity to get to know each of them as African

American male high school learners. I connected with all of them on some level. Though

we were no longer in contact, I became reacquainted with each of them through the

analysis of transcribed excerpts in search of emergent themes. The participants as well as the settings of the interviews are illustrated below. The descriptions of the participants found below are presented in the same order in which they are presented in Tables 4.1 and 4.2.

Dropouts

Joe

Joe was a 51-year-old married father of two sons and a step-daughter. His two sons are by different women, the youngest being a product of his current marriage. Of all the interviewees, and the oldest, Joe was the most jaded. Major offenses for which he was incarcerated were rape, burglary, and drug trafficking. He earned his GED and a 2-year Associate's degree while in prison. But, as a result of his criminal history, he has not been able to get a job. During our second interview, his wife brought out a scrap book in which there were certificates that he had earned in prison. She seemed to take more pride in his accomplishments than he did. After a few minutes of looking through the scrapbook with his wife explaining the certificates, she responded to a phone call. As she exited the room, he closed the book and set it to the side. It was not a rude gesture. In reflecting on it, the reality of his current situation is that, as a three-time convicted felon, he has no real prospects for the future. Regardless of the sentimental significance of the certificates, in the scheme of life, they seemed to be of little value to him.

Brian

I interviewed Brian at the home of "one of" his girlfriends. Brian's style of communication and story were very similar to Joe's. He had also served time for drug trafficking and was not able to get a job. However, where Joe seemed to harbor anger

against himself for his past mistakes, Brian seemed to miss his days as a hustler. His recollections were tinged with a feeling of, "those were the good ole days." He reminded me of my oldest brother who, were he not presently suffering from a debilitating medical condition, would probably still be hustling. Like my brother, Brian was the victim of a gunshot wound. He described the circumstances surrounding his near death experience for which he now receives monthly disability payments. In essence, it was a drug deal gone bad. As he tried to get away, he was shot in the back by rival drug dealers.

Tony

I interviewed Tony at his grandmother's house where he lived. Two of his adult sons lived there as well. Although he did make a noticeable effort not to use profanity, his responses were the most uncensored. His last full year of attendance in high school was ninth grade. Shortly after that, he fully embraced the street life and eventually served time for bank robbery, drug trafficking, and murder. He seemed very unapologetic about his choices in life and seemed to have fully accepted the consequences.

Curtis

The first session with Curtis was conducted in the living room of his home which he shared with his three year old son and five year old daughter, the youngest of his six children by four different women. His children would periodically interrupt our first session with typical behavior expected from children. For example, his son asked for water several times while his daughter sought sole audience with him by asking him to play with her. Several times, she appeared at his side with a well-loved doll, asking "Daddy" to help her comb "Lala's" hair. Reinforcement arrived in the form of his mother who arrived 45 minutes after we began our interview. The first interview was paused

while Curtis prepared them to go to their grandmother's house. Cries of "I want to stay here with my Daddy!" were screamed by both children as they reluctantly followed their grandmother down the steep, rickety stairs of their home. The second interview took place at the home of one of his girlfriends. While we sat at the dining room table, she maintained vigil on a sofa in the adjoining living room. The most loquacious of all the interviewees, both sessions with Curtis lasted almost two hours.

Warren

Warren was one of the easiest to interview. Once he relaxed, about 15 minutes into the first interview, he was very entertaining. Occasionally, he seemed uncomfortable. I discovered that direct questions about his mother seemed to be the cause of the discomfort. Instinctively, I changed the direction of the questions, and avoided explicit inquiries about his mother. After about 30 minutes, his guards were completely down. Comedic in nature, his responses were peppered with humor as he mimicked the voices and mannerisms of the people he discussed. The setting of both interviews was his dining room. His high school sweetheart sat next to him for both interviews and occasionally contributed a comment. Their two sons played video games on a large screen television during my first visit and, typical of children, repeatedly ran in and out of the house during my second visit. Their five year old daughter sometimes appeared to ask her daddy a question but, for the most part, remained upstairs. At the end of the second interview, his girlfriend retrieved a plastic container full of photographs from upstairs and for an additional hour, they shared pictures that they had been collecting since elementary school.

Jeff

Jeff lived at home with his mother. The first session took place in her living room. He showed me his framed GED which is proudly displayed on his mother's mantle. There were numerous pictures on the mantle as well, some of which he would refer to when reminiscing about his eight siblings. For our second session, we met at Jeff's church following a Sunday service. Jeff was the most persistent in responding to my requests for interviewees. In hindsight, I wondered if selecting the church had been his attempt to recruit a new church member when several members asked me to join. I felt hoodwinked.

<div align="center">

Graduates

</div>

Phil

I interviewed Phil, the youngest of three brothers and two sisters, at his mother's house where he currently resides. Having recently lost his job, he was forced to move back in with his mother who runs an in-house day care. Our sessions were often interrupted by children who were obviously fond of him. He readily obliged their requests to open a juice box, tie a shoe and find a sock. He finally asked his mother if she could keep them out of the way until we finished. I learned my lesson and scheduled the second interview on a Saturday afternoon, a kid-free day. After the second interview and at my request, he asked his mother if she knew where any of his papers were. Due to his recent relocation, many of his belongings were still packed away.

Eric

It was most difficult to relate to Eric. Based on his responses, he had no major obstacles and even experienced great difficulty in selecting a "least favorite memory"

from his high school years. An anomaly to me, he seemed impervious to what would have been obstacles for any high school student, regardless of race or gender. He is the first person I have ever encountered who seemed to have nothing but positive memories from high school. At times, it was difficult to remain focused. Eric was very laid back, taking a great deal of time to respond to questions. He frequently rubbed his chin, stared off as if trying to recall a memory, and then would answer with a one or two-word response. The frequent pauses made it difficult to follow his train of thought. Even with such a care-free existence, as I transcribed the interview, I did discover similarities between him and some of the other participants.

Troy

It was most intriguing to interview Troy. As a teacher, he and I shared a certain bond that did not, could not exist, with the others. In discussing educational issues, I did not have to interpret the jargon. I knew it. Once I posed the initial interview question, it was easy to follow his articulated thoughts and to understand the nuances of his answers. In contrast to the other respondents, I did not have to restate or clarify questions for Troy. In transcribing his interviews, very few of the words were mine, because, unlike the others, he elaborated on his answers. With the other respondents, I had to either redirect their focus back to the original question, probe for more in depth answers, or ask for clarification. The pages of the transcribed notes from Troy's interview were full of his thoughts.

Mike

Mike, an acquaintance of Warren, was interviewed at Warren's home both times. He frequently gave one word answers and, when asked to elaborate or to clarify

something, still managed to provide as few details as possible. Getting information from him was a laborious process. I often had to pull back in order not to feed him answers or to project my assumptions into the conversation. I do not attribute his short answers to discomfort as he seemed quite laid back. He was simply a man of few words. At the end of both sessions with Mike, I was exhausted. I couldn't help but to think that, as a former Marine, based on his disposition no one would ever have been able to torture him for information. By the end of the second interview, I felt enough of a connection to share this opinion with him to which he responded, "You're right."

Steve

Steve, the youngest of the interviewees, tugged at my heartstrings. Talking to him reminded me of conversations I have had with my nephews. I consciously used the phrase "talking to him" because, of all the sessions with the other interviewees, our interaction felt least like an interview. Our first session was held at a local coffee shop and the second at a local library. Even though Steve graduated from high school and was awarded a full academic scholarship, non-academic living expenses prevented him from returning after his freshman year. He is currently enrolled in a government sponsored program and resides at the facility. The setting was not conducive to interviews. I could not interview him at my home because of his allergies to animals. A willing subject, he matter-of-factly discussed intimate details of his upbringing, some of which were very tragic. Within the first five minutes of our interview, I learned that he and his seven siblings were removed from their mother's care several times, that he witnessed the rape of his sister which resulted in all of them being parceled out to different relatives, and that his youngest brother was also residing at the facility which is scheduled to close in

July, leaving the two of them homeless. Yet, with such obstacles, Steve still managed to graduate from high school. His reward for earning a high school diploma? At 21, not only was he soon to be homeless, but he was also burdened with the responsibility of taking care of his brother. At the conclusion of our second meeting, I felt guilty driving him back to the residential facility which, upon my first visit, I mistook for a prison.

Darryl

Both of the interviews with Darryl were conducted at the home he shared with his girlfriend and their two sons. The first meeting was held directly following a long ten hour work day for him. It was obvious that he was tired. Many of the questions had to be repeated several times. In comparison, the second session was held on his day off work. After the first session, I initially thought he had trouble accessing memories. Because he seemed more responsive and at ease during the second session, I attributed the difficulties of the first interview to fatigue. Although he thoroughly answered the interview questions, of all the respondents, he was the least engaged in the process.

I recognized the paths of the dropouts as the same road too many of my students have traveled. Their stories had many elements common to so many of my family members. I was so engrossed in the fidelity of the process that the angst I felt at the beginning quickly disappeared. At the second interview, I shared some of the details of my brothers' experiences which seemed to put the participants even more at ease. Following is a table of the themes and subthemes.

Table 4.3

Themes and Subthemes

1. Home and Upbringing	
Dropouts	Graduates
Single mothers Stepfather figures Lack of quality time Maternal grandmothers	Child care not required Family male role models Educational culture in homes Presence of athletics
2. School Environment	
Dropouts	Graduates
Memory of teachers Suspensions and expulsions Lack of parental school involvement	Involvement with sports Student-teacher relationships
3. Extracurricular Activities	
Dropouts	Graduates
The allure of easy money Downside of the hustle	Church attendance Club sports

Themes and Subthemes

1. Home and Upbringing

At the beginning of the interviewing process, participants were asked to describe

their family, the dynamics of the interaction between household members, and any other

information they deemed significant as it pertained to their upbringing. Following are

excerpts from the transcribed interviews.

Dropouts

Mothers. The African American male poet, Tony Medina, wrote a collection of

poems that described the house in which he grew up. In his poem titled, "In My House,"

he wrote, "My uncle, my uncle he lives in my house/And my mother of course who's

hardly ever home 'cause she works so hard/My mother, my mother she lives in my house/Working hard all day." The households of the dropouts were similar to Medina's in that their mothers were also hardly home. They, too, had to work several jobs, long hours, or a combination of both to support their families. As a result of their demanding work schedules, their mothers were rarely able to spend quality time with their children.

One of the consequences of their mothers' demanding work schedule was that most of the dropouts had to assume the supervisory role for younger siblings. Though none of them were of legal age to be considered adults, each of them recounted being told by family members that they were the man of the house. Kunjufu (2005), in discussing this tendency of mothers using their sons to replace an absent husband, posed the question, "Can a nine-year-old boy be a man?" (p. 58). Of course, any rational person would answer with a resounding "No!" but, contrary to the developmental limitations of a young boy and through no fault of his own, too many are placed in this position. Four of the six dropouts were either the firstborn or, in the case of Joe, the oldest male child. As such, they played as much of a parental role to their siblings as their mothers, if not more.

While their mothers worked, they were often charged with maintaining the household by overseeing the completion of homework, chores, and the preparation of meals. In essence, the burden of taking care of their siblings was placed squarely on their shoulders. Even with the understanding of the circumstances surrounding the need for them to assume the role of caretakers and role models, most of the dropouts communicated regret at having to assume such a responsibility.

As Brian stated, "It wasn't fair. Even with a stepfather, I still had to babysit. I was a kid myself. I escaped a lot of ways . . . in the streets, drugs, going to my

grandmother's." Brian went on to further explain the level of expectation his mother and stepfather had as it pertained to him watching his younger siblings and the toll it took on him.

> It was my job to make sure my brothers and sisters came home from school, did their homework, ate and cleaned up before our parents got home. Then, when they got home, I had to try to keep everybody quiet. I got in trouble if they didn't do what they were supposed to do. You know how now a lot of mothers like . . . abandon their kids or go crazy and kill 'em . . . I mean I wouldn't kill my kids, but I see how people do.

> In the words of Curtis, the first born son and the second oldest of six, "I raised my brothers and sisters. I wished somebody would have did the same for me. I took the short end of the stick to make sure they be raised good and brought up with a male role model." Curtis felt especially obligated towards his sisters. "I took care of my sisters real well. Whatever they needed, I made sure they was provided with." Joe, the oldest in charge of looking out for his three siblings, echoed thoughts similar to Curtis's. "I ended up sacrificing a lot for my sisters and brother but. . . there wasn't anybody else. I just wish sometimes somebody could've given somethin' up for me. I missed a lot of opportunities."

Although participant Tony's mother expected him to watch out for his younger brothers and sister while she was at work, he admitted that he often passed the responsibility on to his younger brother. However, as his comments indicate, he thought he was being responsible by contributing to household finances and ultimately keeping his siblings from resorting to his lifestyle of choice.

I knew my mother needed me to man up, but. . . I was busy makin' paper. I know

now she needed me to hold it down at home , but. . . when you're young and got

money, you think you the man. . . helpin' pay the bills. I would give my brother

money to take care of things at the house while I was in the streets. Otherwise he

would've been hustlin' like me. As much as I liked the street life . . . it ain't

nothin' . . . I mean if you really lookin' out for fam, you want better for them.

Plus, my sisters needed somebody at home. All of 'em graduated 'cept my second

youngest brother . . . hardheaded . . . tryin' to be like me. He shoulda finished

school.

Similar to Tony's opinion that he needed to contribute financially to the

household were the expressions of some of the others. Embedded in several of the

discussions about household finances were references to "stepfathers." Based on the

demeanor, tone, and in some instances, the direct statements of the respondents, it seems

that they thought of these men as intruders. At various times during each of the

interviews, some of the dropouts used the word "resent" when asked to describe their

feelings about stepfather figures.

Stepfathers. When asked about stepfathers, Curtis's curt response was, "I was the

authority in the house." He didn't care to pursue this line of conversation any further.

Although he did not use the term "resent," that was the sentiment communicated by the

tone of his voice.

As Joe stated, "We had an abusive stepdad in the household at one point." He

went on to further describe his reception to a different male friend of his mother. "By the

time one did show up, it was very little that he could do as far as trying to discipline or

punish me coming in my household, being a stepdad so to speak." He added, "I resented anybody coming in my house . . . hell, I was the man of the house . . . helping my mother pay bills by the time I was 15. What I look like listening to another man?"

In reflecting on his parents' divorce, Brian said, "When my mom and dad divorced, my dad told me I was the man of the house and to look out for my sister. When my mother remarried, it was like he was trespassing." Brian frequently referred to the tension that existed in his household. He used the terms "stepfather" and "my mother's husband" interchangeably. "Me and my mother's husband never got along. He didn't like me, and I didn't like him. Having a stepfather in the house just made me want to stay in the streets."

Tony expressed his feelings by saying, "I didn't like any of 'em. There was nothing they could do for me that I wasn't doing for myself already. As far as I was concerned, they were useless." He discussed the conflicting emotions he felt towards one of his mother's male friends. "He wasn't a bad guy. I didn't resent him as much as the others, but he couldn't keep a job. He tried hard to get along with me, but having two men in the house . . . didn't work, and I wasn't going anywhere."

Warren and Jeff, neither of whom are the oldest or the first born, both seemed more accepting of their mothers' male friends as indicated below. Warren described his biological father as "a street person who raised himself since he was 13 years old." Although Warren stated that his biological father frequently came around, his father's presence did not seem of any consequence. Warren was not able to provide much information about him. When asked if his father finished school, he answered, "I doubt it." When pressed for further details, he said, "He had some stories to tell when we asked

him something." His recollections of his father were vague. One can infer that Warren and his father were not close.

Even though Warren stated that he had a relationship with his father who, according to him, "always used to come around," he also shared the following: "I got a stepfather . . . the guy that raised us all our lives. He didn't live with us, but he helped my mom out a lot. He used to let me and my brother ride on the truck with him all the time." Warren shared that he has aspirations of following in his stepfather's footsteps by working for the sanitation department. "I just applied about a year ago, but my felony wasn't far enough along. They said if I get it expunged, I can probably get in there." Although Warren spent time with his "stepfather," he did share that his stepfather never visited his school.

Jeff, the ninth of ten children, seemed to have the most nonchalant attitude of all the dropouts relative to his single mother's male friends. "It was a lot of us. Sometimes they would buy us stuff. My real father died, but I had so many older brothers who took care of me. I ain't really pay them no attention."

Lack of quality time. Although the mothers had to work hard to provide for their families, another negative consequence of their hectic work schedules was the lack of quality time spent with their children. When the mothers did interact with their children, the exchanges were usually reactions to stressful situations as indicated by the words of the participants. For example, Brian shared, "My mom worked all the time to take care of us. When she was home, she was sleep. But if something jumped off, whew, since I was the oldest, she always came after me if my brothers and sisters woke her up." Tony's response was similar as it pertains to his mother being tired from work.

We didn't interact all that much unless she was mad about something like bad grades or me cuttin' school. She didn't have a lot of free time. She was always working. Really though, lookin' back, I know she wasn't so much mad as disappointed . . . and tired. Being young, I just thought I made her mad. I mean . . . she worked all day . . . by the time she came home, she was tired, cranky.

Jeff could not recall any substantial time spent with his mother. "My mother. . . I think she had a job. She wasn't home much. I don't know where she worked. She changed jobs a lot." Warren's mother relied on him to keep her informed of his academic behavior. He revealed that he had stopped attending school for a full year before his mother found out. "Cuz we still left out the house for school. She asked me one day, What you doin' out there? I know you ain't graduating." When asked about her reaction upon finding out he had dropped out of school, he replied "I don't know if she was disappointed or not. She just said, 'You blew it. I can't make you do nothin' you don't want to do' and that was about it. She would speak her mind then leave it alone."

Grandmothers. Although there were no interview questions specifically about grandmothers, several of the dropouts brought up the topic when asked to describe their upbringing. In another of Medina's poems titled, "When My Grandmother Died," he described why he cried so much when his grandmother died. As he wrote, "She was the whole world to me/She was my favorite/She was my everything, my protector and friend." The words of this poet resonated with me because they so aptly describe the nature of the relationship that existed between the participants and their grandmothers.

Even though their grandmothers did not reside in the same household, they were an intricate part in the lives of the participants. Warren identified his grandmother as the

family member who had the greatest impact on his life. Due to his mother's gambling, Warren revealed that, "Most of the time my moms would send us to school from our grandmother's house 'cuz it was convenient for her to move around."

The deaths of these matriarchs had a profound impact on the respondents as evidenced by their remarks. Warren was still emotional about the death of his grandmother who died in 2011. "Yeah, it's hard on me. It's hard on all of us 'cuz we used to be over to her house every day. She was pretty cool. She was hip." Joe commented, "My grandmother was my heart. She loved me. I believe I was her favorite. She was crazy about her grandson. When she died, I lost the one person who took up for me." Participant Brian recalled the protective nature of his grandmother.

> Whenever me and my stepdad fell out, I went and stayed with my grandma . . . when I got shot, she stayed with me in the hospital . . . she told me I didn't have to worry about them coming to finish the job long as she was there. She died when I was 19. That's probably the only person in my life who never judged me, no matter what I did.

As with the other two participants, Tony shared his feelings about his grandmother. "I could always go to my grandmother. She'd tell me I was wrong . . . that would break my heart . . . disappointing her. When she died . . . I think that's when I became ruthless."

In discussing the deaths of their grandmothers, the words of the participants convey a sense of hopelessness. All of the dropouts seemed filled with veneration for their maternal grandmothers. With the loss of their grandmothers, it appears that some of them consciously gave up any pretenses of being law-abiding citizens, fully embracing a

life of hustling. In the words of Tony, "I didn't have to worry about disappointing my grandmother anymore, and I didn't care what anybody else thought of me."

Completely surrendering to a life of crime seemed not to be the course most desirous to the participants; it was the path with which they were most familiar. In response to the loss of the one person they perceived to be their only true champion, they sought solace in the one thing they knew, hustling. Of great interest to me was that none of the participants conveyed the feeling that they perceived their mothers to be as supportive as their grandmothers.

Education-related behaviors. Relative to the culture of their household in terms of educational values, the mothers of four of the dropouts were high school graduates and the remaining two mothers eventually earned a GED. However, when asked about the routines of their homes in terms of completing homework, only Warren explicitly recalled a specific homework time.

> Soon as we got home, we had to do homework and chores 'cuz she had places to go. She . . . she . . . she gambled. So she had to get back to that little stuff she always in. We finish all that up then she take us to our grandmother. Most of the time, though, we was at my grandmother house. Walk in the door doin' homework at her house.

Graduates

Half of the six graduates were raised in two-parent households. However, even in the three single-parent households and in direct contrast to the dropouts, none of the graduates had to function as caretakers for their siblings. Also in contrast to the dropouts,

all of the graduates discussed the routines of their households which seemed to keep them grounded.

Eric, the eldest of two boys raised in a two-parent household declared, "Oh, my parents, they didn't play. By the time me and my brother got home from school and did our work, dinner was on the table. My mother worked, but she was home before us." Mike, the oldest of four and a man of very few words, grew up in a household similar to Eric's. Though both of his parents were employed, his mother was home in time to greet him and his siblings upon their arrival. "My mother was there all the time."

Both Eric and Mike explained that their mothers ran their households, but in terms of disciplinary matters, they had to answer to their fathers when they got home. In Mike's words, "When my father got home and heard the story, you gon' get some heat put to you." while Eric stated, "I shuddered at the words, Wait til your father gets home."

Troy, the oldest of four boys in a two-parent household was raised in a similar fashion. As he articulated, "The difference between me and some kids is that, I was afraid of my dad. I would have to face him when I got home, and he would tear my behind up." As he explained, the structure in his house was an understood. "It's interesting," he stated,

> because I always reflect on that part of my life . . . it wasn't . . . the expectations were built in. My parents didn't have to say anything. It's strange. I don't know how they got that through to us 'cuz I'm trying to emulate that to my own kids . . . reproduce that type of environment where the expectations are built in.

Although the other three graduates raised in single-parent households did not have

the benefit of their biological fathers, they did have a family member who provided a supportive network for their single-parent households. For example, in Steve's case, as with the dropouts, his maternal grandmother took care of him and his sister in his mother's absence. Even though his grandmother worked, she was home by the time Steve and his sister arrived from school. But, as Steve shared, his grandmother straightened him out in first grade. "I remember I was cuttin' up, and they called my granny. She had to come up to that school one time when I was six. That's all it took."

Family role models. Another direct contrast to the dropouts is that none of the high school graduates were exposed to a "stepfather," In the absence of biological fathers, family members like uncles became role models. For example, as shared by Mike, My Uncle Jeff and Uncle Gerald had an impact on me. They were role models because they were successful." Darryl relied on guidance from his mother's brother. "My Uncle Warren, he was around a lot. My mother called him when I started smellin' myself. He taught me about bein' a man. If my mother couldn't come to my games, he came. Sometimes they came together."

Unlike the dropouts, four of the graduates also described the routine of going to church every Sunday. In Troy's case, both his father and paternal grandfather are ministers. He couldn't recall ever missing church. Steve remembered spending many Sundays at church with his grandmother while Phil, on the other hand, shared, "We didn't go to church every Sunday, but we went more often than we stayed at home. Put it this way, we didn't just go on holidays like a lot of people do."

Educational culture. In terms of their family's educational values, several of the graduates could not recollect any specific conversations relative to graduating from high

school. They explained that it was the culture in their household that the children would graduate from high school and continue on to college. As stated by Troy, "the expectations are kind of like built in. That's the same thing as far as college, like…it was not even…it was not even a possibility for me not to go to college. We never even talked about it". Based on Mike's words, he and Troy had similar expectations in their households. In response to a question about homework time, Mike replied, "We already knew what it was soon as you walked in the door."

Presence of athletics. With the exception of Phil, all of the graduates described themselves as athletes. Phil played basketball for one school year. As athletes, they were required to attend study tables before practice. Rarely finishing their work during this time, they were still expected to do schoolwork when they got home. Participant Eric found the idea of not completing homework preposterous. "Not do your homework . . . in our house? I can't even wrap my mind around that." Graduate Steve, who earned a full academic scholarship, completed his homework during study tables. He elaborated.

It had to be done. Like I said, I cut up on my granny one time. I never thought about not doin' it. I just figured out the best place to get it done. My teammates were there, and my coaches were there if I needed them. The study tables kept me focused.

Phil's experience was slightly different. Although he was not able to recall any structured homework time, he stated that, as the youngest of six children, "somebody was always bossin' me around and tellin' me to do my homework, especially my older sisters." Darryl, on the other hand, recalled his mother's stern warning, "Your homework better be done before I get home." When asked to describe what happened when his

homework was not finished, he replied, "I can't remember a time when it wasn't finished."

An obvious difference between the dropouts and the graduates is in regards to the culture of their households. It seems that a great deal of the variation can be attributed to established routines, expectations, and supervision. A more detailed analysis of the differential factors of the home environment will be provided in Chapter V.

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Themes and Subthemes

2. School Environment

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Respondents were asked to describe their learning environment from their earliest memory to their last completed year of high school. They were also asked to identify what they liked least and most about school. Additionally, I inquired about factors or obstacles that made it difficult for them to succeed. Finally, they were asked to list the characteristics of a good teacher.

Dropouts

Memories of teachers. Most of the dropouts' favorite and least favorite memories about school were in connection to a teacher. For example, Curtis's fondest memory of school was his Industrial Arts class and, when asked why, he answered, "Because Mr. Mason made it interesting. He didn't waste time on nonsense like most teachers worryin' about petty stuff. Soon as you got to his class, it was on." When asked for clarification of petty stuff, Curtis described it as, "being a few minutes late to class, not having a hall pass, talkin' back . . . you know . . . stuff like that." In hopes of understanding Curtis's thought process as it related to talking back to the teacher, I prompted him to talk about a time when he talked back to Mr. Mason.

I was a few minutes late to class 'cuz . . .well, I don't really remember why . . .

probably just kicking it in the halls with some girls. It was the last day to finish

our project so he told me I would have to come back after school to finish mine. I

basically told him I wasn't comin' nowhere. He ain't say nothing. Most teachers

would've wrote me up, made a big deal out of it, sent me to the office . . . he was

cool. I mean I went after school and finished my project . . . he knew I was gon'

come. I loved that class.

For dropout Curtis, the least favorite thing about school was synonymous with an

obstacle. "My major thing was when I was in junior high school, and I got to see how it

was a difference between Black and white from my principal. He had his own special

group of people that he protected. Never once did he want to protect me."

Warren's recollection of the least favorite thing about school was the overall

boredom. "I would have graduated if they had made it exciting, you know, worth my

while. Most of the time people get bored with learning." Injecting a bit of humor, he

imitated a student sitting in class, staring off into space. "Oh, I forgot I was in Science

class . . . thought I was chillin'." Conversely, he loved math because, "the teacher made it

worth learning stuff"; he loved Social Studies, because "the teacher was smart and

intriguing"; he loved sixth grade, because the teacher "coached us through a lot of

problems."

Joe's comment targeted teachers in response to his least favorite school-related

memory.

What I liked least about it was that you had a couple of teachers that seemed like

they were only there for the paycheck. Somewhere along the line seems that

maybe teachers have lost focus or lost interest in trying to help the kids. They tend

to give up on . . . it seems like . . . to give up on their students.

The participants verbalized their belief that most of their teachers were either

apathetic or saboteurs. Based on Joe's account, one can assume that he perceived his

teachers to be apathetic in that they were indifferent to the academic success of their

students.

Whereas Joe's description seems to indicate apathy, Brian and Tony experienced

teachers who committed acts of cruelty against them. Brian recalled the verbal abuse to

which he was subjected. "Most of my teachers were mean. A few of them even told me

how dumb I was. One of them said I wouldn't amount to anything." Tony was mistreated

as well, which is apparent by his following statement: "I have been called stupid, dumb,

ignorant, a loser . . . even a nigga . . . you name it . . . by teachers. I got my GED in

prison. All that time teachers had me believing I was dumb."

The importance of relationships as it pertains to the success of African American

males has been discussed by numerous researchers. As discussed in Chapter II, many

have emphasized the significance of the relationship between African American male

learners and those in their immediate environment. In support of this contention, were the

voiced opinions of both groups of participants, all of whom emphasized the impact of

teacher-student relationships on their academic performances.

In response to the request to describe the ideal teacher, dropout Warren wistfully

described his sixth grade teacher. "Ms. Culp give it to you like it is. It ain't just about

school. She would even come to your home. Like on an understanding level to the parent.

I'm like, oh yeah. Yep, that was the best teacher ever." He further stated that, "If I hadda

had more teachers like her, I probably would have stayed in school." Encouraged to recall memories of any other "good" teachers, Warren went on to describe the popularity of his high school assistant principal.

> She was the motherly type. She took care of everything. She had the open door policy. I think she had a good relationship with all the kids. You get to school late, you go see her. The other principal suspend you, but she was happy just 'cuz you come to school to learn. Her office stayed packed with kids.

When asked to describe an ideal teacher, dropout Curtis responded, "An ideal teacher is a teacher that cares for where you're going and willing to try to put everything and instill a lot in you. You know the teachers who care. Like, my son's teachers care about him, so he does better."

The participants were presented with the scenario of a student who arrives late to class, without any books, and with a bad attitude. When asked what they thought would happen to this student based on their own experiences and observations, all six of the dropouts said the student would be suspended. I then asked if they could think of alternatives to suspending the student. Amazingly, none of them could fathom a different outcome for the student. Warren proposed that the student's only hope would be if he had a teacher like Mrs. Culp or like his high school assistant principal to fight on his behalf. Otherwise, in his words, "He don't got a chance."

Suspensions and expulsions. Consistent with the findings of Bireda (2007), the theme of repeated suspensions and/or expulsions emerged. A common reason that students gave for dropping out of school was that they had been suspended or expelled.

Bireda (2007) also discussed the suspension-failure cycle in which African American males become entwined, ultimately resulting in their non-completion of school. This is reflected in the comments of Joe. "I was getting suspended all the time. They would rather suspend you than deal with you. That's what I wanted too. Being suspended just gave me more time in the streets." Brian commented, "In middle school, I had already been suspended so many times for stupid stuff. How could I keep up if I wasn't in school?" Like Bireda (2007) and Noguera (2008), participant Tony used the word *cycle* to describe his downward spiral:

> I would get in trouble. They would suspend me for a couple of days . . . then they started giving me more days. It was a cycle . . . a few days out of school . . . a day in school. I got expelled. I think I was in the ninth grade . . . for like two months. You can't pass if you're not in school. So, I just stopped going.
>
> In asking the dropouts to identify the cause of the disproportionate rate of suspensions for

Black boys, some attributed it to racism. As Joe shared, "Back then, it wasn't a lot of white kids at my school, but the few that was . . . they never bothered them." When asked to elaborate, he had this to offer. "They did some of the same stuff we did, but I don't remember none of them gettin' kicked out like Black kids. Matter of fact, I don't remember no girls gettin' kicked out, Black or white." In Curtis's opinion, "They figured they had to keep pressing down on us because they figure that we were the type of people to get out of control if you allow it. They wouldn't give us an inch." He also shared his conspiracy theory.

You know how they like to torment Black folks. They want to torment before

they strike. But we never closed our eyes on certain situations 'cuz that's

something that has been throughout our generation. They want us to close our

eyes, and act like it's not happening, but it is. They already put you in a category

as though if you do something you going to get the max. They do something, they

going to get a pat on the back.

When asked if he felt like that is the underlying reason for so many Black boys getting

suspended, he said emphatically, "without a doubt 'cuz the white boys get another

chance. We don't".

When asked to describe their mothers' reactions to the frequent suspensions, the

dropouts shared that that was usually the only time when their mothers visited their

schools. None of the parents of the dropouts were involved in school related activities.

For the purpose of this study, I consider parental involvement as behaviors such as the

parent initiating contact with the teachers, volunteering at the school, or actively

engaging in school sponsored activities. Though educational researchers have long

established the correlation between parental involvement and academic achievement

regardless of ethnicity, Mandara (2006) described the findings specifically as they relate

to that of African American males, which indicates a sizable effect.

Lack of parental involvement. Using the definition of parental involvement as

provided above, a lack of such involvement was common to the dropouts. On the

occasions that their mothers visited the schools, it was in response to disciplinary issues

such as suspension or expulsion hearings. The dropouts were not able to recall many

instances in which their mothers took a proactive role in their educative process.

This is evidenced by the participants' responses about parental visits to their schools. Joe shared, "When I got in trouble, she would come to the school until about ninth grade. Then she told them just send me home because she couldn't keep leaving work." Brian recalled, "The only time my mother came to school was when I was in trouble and she had to." Tony stated, "My mother lost a job taking off so much for me. One time, she told the principal to just send me to the juvenile detention home. After awhile, she just avoided their calls. She couldn't afford to lose another job."

Neither Warren nor Jeff recalled any parental visits past junior high school. Warren remembers that, on the rare occasion he was suspended, his grandmother attending the hearings. Jeff, the ninth of ten children, stated, "They would talk to my mother or older brother on the phone when I got in trouble, but nobody went to the school. I didn't get suspended a lot though."

Graduates

Involvement with sports. Eric and his younger brother were close in enough in age that they played on the same football team and, as with Troy, Eric and his brother attended many functions together. "We weren't allowed to just hang out. We had a select group of friends whose houses we could go over or they came to our house. My parents loosened the reins my senior year, but I still couldn't run the streets." Eric's fondest school memories were his involvement in sports. When asked to give more details, he said this was because of the comradeship with his teammates and his relationship with his coaches.

He further explained, "The coaches were approachable. If you got in trouble, they would help from their heart. It was like having a dad away from home . . . one you could

actually talk to." Eric had a difficult time dredging up "least favorites" and finally settled on homework as his least favorite thing about school.

Darryl, who played football in junior high and high school, identified his relationship with coaches as the highlight of his school years. "My Uncle Warren was there for me, but I spent more time with the coaches . . . we bonded on a different level. My uncle was more like a strict father, but the coaches were more like friends."

Several times before the age of 18, custody of Steve and his six siblings was taken away from their mother by Children and Family Services. He found comfort and constancy in sports. Youngest of all the interviewees at 21, Steve seemed the most contemplative about his upbringing and the least optimistic about his future. In response to his plans for the future, Steve uttered one word, "Cloudy." He played sports year round.

> It gave me stability and discipline. Plus, I grew close with a couple of coaches. I could talk to them about stuff. When we stayed with my granny, we pretty much had to fend for ourselves. When we stayed with my mom, there were seven of us living in a two bedroom apartment. One of my brothers was in jail so he wasn't with us then. We were pretty much on our own. Going to practice early in the morning and staying there til late at night . . . that was the best time for me.

Student-teacher relationships. In reference to student-teacher relationships, similar to the dropouts, the graduates discussed the importance of a caring teacher. Like dropout Warren, Eric used "motherly" in reference to what he considers an ideal teacher. He also emphasized that effective teachers "give learning some purpose." This statement

is comparable to Warren's in his description of his Social Studies teacher who "made it worth my while."

Mike characterized an ideal teacher as, "having a positive attitude toward the kids, knowing the kids background history, being there for that child while the parent is at work like my two stepson's teacher." When asked to give a more detailed description of that teacher, he stated, "I think it's because of his repertoire he has with the kids, period. He can sit down and talk to them like a big brother."

I probed more, "Were your stepsons able to relate to this teacher because it was a male teacher?" "Yes and no," he answered. "It helps boys if they have a man teacher for an example, but if it's a lady, if they don't have respect for their mother, they're not going to respect a female teacher." When asked if he had a preference, he said, "Somebody that cares about me . . . and respects me."

Even though the graduates earned a high school diploma, four of them articulated that, if they had had more caring teachers, they would have achieved at an even higher level. Several admitted that, although they did graduate, they put forth minimal effort to do so. When asked to reflect on being motivated to achieve, Eric attributed the greatest source of his motivation to his high school coaches as did Steve who stated, "If it hadn't been for my coaches, I wouldn't have made it."

On the topic of not being challenged by his teachers, Troy said, "At that particular point, I just needed to be . . . needed to have somebody to pique my interest. Somebody who would believe . . . invest in me a little bit. I definitely wasn't . . . I don't think I was challenged in the right way." For Troy, the interviews sparked self-reflection. Currently teaching in a district with predominantly African American students, he compares his

motivation to those of his current students. When asked how he was able to graduate even though, in his words, he was not being challenged, he answered,

The expectations were so high, it was not cool. I mean it was not cool to be a dummy. I mean I'm intelligent, but I wasn't pushing myself in high school. I was the class clown telling jokes but even so, I still maintained.

Based on the replies of the graduates in response to questions about disruptive students, it appeared that, as athletes, they were insulated from much of the counterproductive behavior prevalent in the lives of the dropouts. When Troy was asked if he knew any dropouts, he answered, "Um, dropouts? I'm sure that there were some there, but that wasn't the culture." Steve, Darryl, and Mike explained that their main circle of school friends were all athletes. As Mike said, "I went to parties, but, me being an athlete, I was very popular. I just didn't hang out with the wrong crowd." Overall, they seemed oblivious to the existence of classmates on such a destructive path. As a year round athlete, Steve did not have much opportunity for exposure to students engaged in unproductive behavior.

Darryl acknowledged that every class had a class clown but further stated, "by sophomore or junior year, they get weeded out, but I don't really know any drop outs from high school. All my crew graduated." When asked to define "crew," he explained, "Crew . . . my clique . . . the people I hung out with." He elaborated,

They weren't all athletes. That was my school set but on weekends, there were five of us that were tight. Three of us played sports. The other two . . . it's hard to explain. We just had better things to do. Can't get in trouble and stay on the team.

Several of Eric's childhood acquaintances did not finish school because,

according to

him, they fell in with the wrong crowd. He attributed their downfall to "trying to be cool

and trying to impress people. A couple of them were on the football team, but they started

hanging with the wrong crowd and stopped coming to practice."

As with the responses about their households, reflections about their school

environment were coded for themes and are shared in Chapter V. None of the dropouts

participated in structured activities as evidenced by the responses in the next section. It is

apparent, however, that the graduates were involved in long term organized activities,

with the exception of Phil.

Themes and Subthemes

3. Extracurricular Activities

The last section of this chapter is the investigation of the activities the respondents

engaged in during their free time. Because of their involvement in sports, the graduates

did not have a great deal of free time. When they weren't participating in an athletic

activity or event, they were oftentimes engaged in family oriented events. On the other

hand, in the absence of adults to supervise and monitor their behavior, the drop outs had

an abundance of free time.

Dropouts

None of the dropouts were involved in structured extracurricular activities. Some

of them played basketball or football afterschool with friends in the neighborhood, but

none belonged to a school related team. The dropouts had a great deal of unstructured and

unsupervised free time on their hands. They did not join school athletic teams. Instead,

they joined ranks with a team that would help them line their pockets with money while simultaneously feeding their need to be accepted and respected-the team of street hustlers.

Author hooks (2004) contended that, "Black men who could show they had money (No matter how they acquired it) could be among the powerful. It was this thinking that allowed hustlers in Black communities to be seen as just as hardworking as their Wall Street counterparts" (p. 19). Indeed, this perception was evident in the words of Joe who said, "I wanted to be a bonafide stomp down gangsta. School couldn't compete with the street hustlers. They were my role models. They had fast cars and pockets full of easy money. I couldn't get that going to school. So why go?"

The allure of easy money. Curtis reminisced, "I was 17, living the life, two brand new cars at the age of 18, my own apartment. Why should I go back to school? I'm making the money that I was going to school to get." Warren was attracted by the easy money of some of his classmates. "I wanted to know where they get that money from. Then I got stuck in that little crowd. I stopped going to school more and more." When asked the specifics of his money-making ventures, he jokingly answered, "I plead the fifth." He then confessed that he did everything except steal. In his words, "I wasn't no thief. I don't steal. I made mine illegally honestly!"

The common perception shared by disenfranchised African American males in reference to making easy money in the streets was also mentioned by hooks (2004) and was the topic of Brian's reflection:

I saw people working 9-5 with nothing to show for it but bills, bills, and more bills . . . like my mother's husband. That's why he was always mad. Why work

hard at a job you don't even like and still be broke on payday? I wanted the

Cadillacs, the fly clothes. That's why I started hanging out in the streets . . . so I

could learn to hustle. I liked hustling better than my stepfather liked his job. He

probably envied me.

Tony's contribution indicates that he was of the same opinion:

Guys in the streets figured out a way to beat the system…make the money

without working all them years. You gotta remember . . . the guys I looked up to

were hustlers, players, pimps. This one dude always had a lot of money . . .

always dressed in fly clothes. I remember thinking I wanted to be just like him.

As previously mentioned, all of the dropouts were seduced by the concept of fast

money.

In order to achieve this, they engaged in criminal activity or what they commonly

referred to as hustling. For purpose of clarification, participants were asked to elaborate.

Joe contributed the following, "Yeah, I hustled. That's the only way to make fast money.

First I just hustled for the older guys, but I wanted my own thing. I started my own hustle

. . . drugs, women . . . numbers." Brian recalled, "I was small time at first, but when I got

older, I was making so much money hustling, you know drugs and stolen stuff mostly . . .

people started looking up to me. Money gave me power."

Downside of the hustle. Even though the dropouts seemed to glorify the life of

hustling, they readily admitted that that lifestyle did have its price. Joe recalled, "One

time, I had to throw about $70,000 out the car fleeing from the police. They still got me .

. . and my money . . . spent five years in prison." Brian admitted, "Hustling wasn't easy

though. You had to look over your shoulders all the time . . . couldn't trust anybody. One time my own family member turned me in for the reward money."

On being incarcerated, Tony revealed, "I used to be afraid of getting caught . . . going to jail, but that's this life. I read somewhere that prison is a hustler's destiny. That's exactly what it is! But, you get used to it." Warren didn't get used to it. Shortly after his release from his first and only "bit," his first of two sons was born. Although he is still suffering the consequences of his felony conviction, he is no longer drawn to easy money for, in his words, "It's easy at first, but it gets harder and harder to make it." Like Warren, Curtis also considered the potential impact of his criminal ventures on his family. "I backed out of that lifestyle, because I said, this ain't the type of life I want to bring my kids up in after I kept going back and forth to prison."

The phrases, "lure of the streets" and "hustling" were used by hooks (2004) who described the attraction of Black boys to the life of hustling, selling drugs and fast money. A large part of the attraction was the perception of the neighborhood hustlers as powerful because they had so much money. As indicated by their responses, all the dropouts, with the exception of Jeff, admittedly were attracted to this lifestyle. Even so, several of their statements indicate they understood the downside of hustling, because they tried to prevent their siblings from choosing the same lifestyle.

Graduates

Responses in the previous sections illustrate that five of the six graduates participated in sports as an extracurricular activity. Half of them played more than one sport. According to each of them, by the time they got home, completed remaining school work, and then fulfilled household duties, they were too exhausted to do anything else

during the week. In the case of Troy, Eric, and Mike, they attended church regularly on Sundays.

Church attendance. As Troy explained, "My family was close. My mother and father were high school sweethearts. Their families grew up together. If I wasn't at church or football practice, I was with my family." Troy continued that, "because my brother Trenton and I were only two years apart in age, we played on the same team and hung out together."

Unlike the others, Darryl did not attend church regularly. According to him, he and his friends spent the little free time they had playing video games. Supervision by his mother was looser than the others, but "no matter what I did, I knew I would have to answer to my mother, my uncle, or my coaches. That was always in the back of my mind."

Mike's area of concentration in high school was cosmetology. Sometimes he made extra money on the weekends styling hair. He was following in the footsteps of his father who was a master barber. But, according to him, there was not much free time. School and sports were the priority. Like the others, his parents did not allow him to just hang out and, as told by him, he had no desire to do so. "I like to keep to myself. I joined the Marines straight out of high school to get away from my neighborhood." When asked why he chose that branch of the military, he countered, "Who guards the president? The Marines! If I'm going to be part of a team, it has to be the world's finest." He was honorably discharged due to an injury after serving seven years. Currently working as a hair stylist, he has also returned to his religious upbringing, serving on the usher board at his church.

Club sports. In his spare time, Steve's extracurricular interests revolved around his love of sports. He spent his free time playing basketball at local recreation centers. As he expressed, "I'm most comfortable on the courts." A self-professed loner, he has recently taken up playing golf which one of his high school coaches taught him how to play. "I like being alone. It gives me time to think. Right now, I don't know what I want to do with my life, so I gotta figure that out." In recognizing the importance of sports in his life, Eric coaches a little league baseball team at an inner city neighborhood recreation center. In his words, "Even though I kind of floated through school, I know sports can keep boys out of trouble. Plus, I love the game."

Summary

Excerpts of the interviewees' responses were chosen based on their potential contribution to answering the overarching question, "What are the differential characteristics between African American male high school dropouts and high school graduates?" The interviewing process revealed similarities as well. Regardless of common threads revealed through the analysis of the responses of the 12 individuals, there is something unique about each of their narratives. The method by which I chunked the memories was my attempt to give voice to the participants to share their own stories from their own perspectives. In so doing, the reader was given access to their genuine lived experiences.

I felt a connection with each of the participants. In some cases, it was a personal connection, while in the case of others, it was professional. While transcribing the interviews, I discovered other points of connection. Irrespective of how I dissected the

interviews and organized their responses according to themes in Chapter V, the reader

will still ascribe his, or her, own meaning to the dialogue.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

As stated by Cass and Curry (2007), "Children are a complex amalgam of biological potential and environmental realities. Analyzing causes and effects, and understanding the links among all these factors, requires separating them into subject areas" (p. 17). In an attempt to isolate those factors that might have an impact on the African American male learner, the responses of the participants were separated and identified in Chapter IV as environmental factors from home, from the public school setting, or from extracurricular activities. This chapter is an examination of those factors. It concludes with a discussion on the implications of those findings relative to providing African American males with an equitable opportunity for academic success.

Home Differentials

"(We) must consider and include the factors confronting Black men outside of the classroom – in their homes, communities, and minds. The intersection of this complex lived experience is having dramatic consequences in the classroom" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 129). One of those factors that impacts the academic performance of any learner is their home environment. A finding reported by Holzman (2010) was "the most important factor in a child's upbringing is whether the child is brought up in a loving, healthy, supportive environment" (p. 3).

Family

Unfortunately, as stated by Jenkins (2006), "the American power structure and the history of oppression of African Americans have had a devastating effect on the African American family unit" (p. 132). The disintegration of the African American family has

resulted in an increase of single-parent households. According to a 2007 study by the Children's Defense Fund, "Black babies are almost twice as likely as White babies to grow up in single-parent households" (Cass & Curry, 2007, p. 41). Some research (Mandara, 2006; Veronneau et al., 2008) indicates that African American males are more at risk for academic problems if they live in a neglectful home. This is not to say that the mothers of the dropouts care less about their sons than those of the graduates. It does, however, illustrate the challenges faced by single working parents in trying to raise their children. The impact of the parenting of the households of the participants is discussed below.

Parenting. The main differences between the dropouts and the graduates were a direct result of the parenting of the households. Five of the six dropouts were raised by single, working mothers. The sixth dropout, Brian, was raised by his mother and stepfather. Even though his was a two-parent household, the relationship between Brian and his stepfather was unhealthy. Toxic relations between Black boys and stepfather figures exacerbate already volatile situations. The outcome is usually disastrous. Although only half of the graduates were reared in two-parent households, the other three were supported by a network of male family members and/or athletic coaches.

One effect of the single-parent household was the impact of the mothers' work schedule on the emotional well-being of the family. "When moms need to work to meet financial obligations, not only are they often depressed, but time for children is squeezed" (Cass & Curry, 2007, p. 3). Brian recalled how upset his mother became if he didn't supervise the children while she attempted to rest. As Jenkins (2006) stated, "The entire family is affected, and the parent is incapable of fully developing and actualizing the role

of nurturer and encourager" (p. 135). For example, Tony characterized his mother as cranky, stating that, "We didn't interact all that much unless she was mad." Schwebel (2003) explained that, "The state of mind of parents, their feeling of security, and their physical condition are all critically important to the educational achievement of their children" (p. 208).

The proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." is most descriptive of the family environment of the graduates. As previously stated, although only half of them lived in two-parent households, there was a supportive network for the others. The existence of this support system ensured the stability of the upbringing for those boys. As will be discussed later, this appears to bear out the truth of Holzman's (2010) emphasis on the significance of such an environment to Black boys.

Man of the house. "In unsupervised situations at home, [Black boys] get premature independence. Often, they must assume the role of man of the house and accept autonomy without possessing the good judgment to use it" (Cass & Curry, 2007, p. 4). Several of the dropouts articulated the unfairness of this burden but still felt duty-bound to try to fulfill it. According to Jordan, Lara and McPartland (1996), "it is not uncommon for adolescents in poverty to transition rapidly into adult roles" (p. 66). It goes without saying, however, that boys should not be expected to assume the responsibilities of men. The burden of maintaining the finances of a household and of rearing children is an overwhelming responsibility for many adults. As illustrated, for those boys saddled with such adult duties, the outcome was even more calamitous.

Throughout the conversations of the dropouts was the statement, "I raised my brothers and sisters." Considering that these same dropouts were self-professed hustlers,

their siblings would have had little supervision while their brothers hustled in the streets. The Chapter IV quote, in which dropout Tony described how he paid his younger brother to take care of the house, is one example of the type of supervision that existed in the homes of the dropouts.

The absence of an adult also meant a lack of structure in the homes of the dropouts, none of whom could remember routines for completing homework. Even though four of the six dropouts were held responsible for supervising younger siblings as it relates to household duties and school work, there were no established rituals. As Brian expressed, he would get in trouble if his mother and stepfather returned home and homework had not been completed. His frustration was evident. "I tell 'em to do their work and sometimes they would, but most times they didn't. Me and my sister was less than two years apart. She never did what I told her."

In direct contrast to the single-parent households of the dropouts were the two-parent households of the graduates. Unlike the dropouts, the graduates did not have to assume the role of man of the house. Consequently, they were able to go through the natural stages of development and maturation. The presence of their biological fathers or other male family members nullified the existence of stepfathers. As a result of this supportive network and stable environment, the graduates possessed coping mechanisms by which to break through any barriers in their path to academic success. The graduates, who were nurtured and well supervised, received the guidance and support required to be fully engaged in the educative process.

Father figures. Kunjufu (2001) discussed the findings of research that addressed the significance of the father being in the home. The presence of this patriarch would

create the supportive environment referred to by Holzman (2010). In the absence of their biological fathers, the dropouts formed a distorted view of the role of men serving in that capacity. The dropouts' perception of manhood was in the context of household finances. This was the only lens through which they viewed their mothers' male acquaintances. Interestingly, none of the now-adult dropouts spoke in terms of their mothers' needs for companionship. The dropouts perceived the relationships between their mothers and men to be financially motivated. One such example was Jeff's comments about the monetary contributions of his mother's male friends in buying clothes and groceries for them, and in some instances, paying to keep utilities on. As Warren shared about his stepfather who did not live with them, "He would come around . . . give her money. That helped some."

In the case of the four graduates whose fathers lived with them, they all shared the same fear of having to answer to this patriarch. In the absence of a biological father, like in Darryl's case, a male family member provided the guidance and, if necessary, the discipline. As Darryl stated, "My mother called [Uncle Willie] when I started smellin' myself." On the rare occasion of a disciplinary issue, as with the case of Troy, punishment was meted out by the father. But, as previously stated, this was a rarity.

The responses of the participants substantiate Kunjufu's (2001) opinion as to the effects of exposure to numerous stepfather figures. In their own words, they resented these men.

> It is a sad commentary that adults seldom consider how shacking up and other
> unhealthy relationships can negatively impact a child. When mothers allow men
> to act like rolling stones in their homes . . . young sons are watching and learning.
> It's a powerful lesson . . .". (p. 161)

The findings shared by Cass and Curry (2007) are substantiated as well. When dropouts "become fathers, lacking the necessary background and skills, they may disengage, move away and abdicate responsibility. Then, the cycle repeats itself. Children raised in fatherless families are more likely to drop out of school" (p. 4).

The current relationship status of the dropouts and graduates bear out the findings of Cass and Curry (2007). With the exception of the youngest dropout, Jeff, all of the other five have children. Four of those five have sets of children by different women, and none of those four are in a committed relationship with any of the mothers of their children. The present-day family structure of the graduates is indicative of their upbringing. The four who have children are in committed relationships with the only mother of their children. Of the remaining two, the youngest is currently a student, and the other has no children. As he explained in response to the interview question about children, "I'm not set up to have kids right now. It's hard enough for me. I don't want no kids I can't take care of."

Role models. In the words of Sax (2007), "to become a man, a boy must see a man. But that man doesn't have to be his father. In fact, ideally, it shouldn't be only his father. He also needs a community of men" (p. 204). Darryl's uncle provided a supportive network to Darryl's single mother. As he stated, "I look at my Uncle Willie as my father figure. Him being my mother's older brother, he looked out for her by looking out for me." The significance of a role model is highlighted by Boddie (1997) who stated that the lack of "support and protection of a father or a successful male mainstream role model eventually spells disaster. The impact of male role models proves to be significantly important to these students as they pursue academic success" (p. 12).

In spite of growing up in a single parent household, graduates Phil, Steve, and

Darryl, successfully finished school. What, then, was the difference in their upbringing in

comparison to the dropouts who were also raised by a single parent? The main difference

was that all three of the graduates played sports while the dropouts did not. As athletes,

the graduates were under the supervision of their coaches. More importantly, there was a

relationship between the graduates and their coaches. Roderick (2003) emphasized the

significance of this bond. "The presence of nonfamilial adults who were willing to be

coaches and guides was critical in forming their sense of persistence and coping" (p.

581).

Finances. According to the statistics shared by Cass and Curry (2007), "single

mother households are almost six times as likely to be poor as two-parent households" (p.

41). This necessitated that the single mothers work in order to support their families.

Observing the effects of their mothers' demanding work schedule, one concern that

permeated the conversation of all of the dropouts was having enough money to pay the

bills. The dropouts who had assumed an adult role felt obligated to help pay the bills.

However, none of the dropouts recalled ever being told by their mothers that they were

expected to help with household finances. In some cases, their mothers explicitly forbade

them from working any job. They were needed at home as caretakers for their siblings.

All of the participants' mothers were angry at the discovery that their sons were hustling,

but they still accepted money from them. Curtis shared the following.

> She wasn't happy about what I was doing, but she didn't turn down money I gave
>
> her so she must have needed it. One time, as the FBI was comin' through the front
>
> door to get me, she ran out the back door with a trash bag full of money. But after

that, she told me I had to get my own spot. I was 17. I still gave her money. I just

didn't live there anymore.

The dropouts believed their job was to help maintain their households. Hustling

was the means by which they earned money to help their families. Dropout Brian found

the idea of working at a fast food restaurant to make honest money preposterous. "I

couldn't make enough money working at Mikky-Dees (McDonald's) to help my family

and I needed an open schedule. Who would have watched my brothers and sisters after

school?" Curtis also pointed out the conflict of working a "real" job. "Can't work regular

hours on somebody's clock. If I had to make a move, what am I goin' to tell the boss? Let

me leave real quick to make this transaction. I'll be right back."

The impact of a single-parent household and the resulting liberal parental

supervision "predisposes young Black males to . . . associating with negative street

groups and disciplinary problems in school" (Boddie, 1997, p. 12). African American

males with liberal parental supervision are more inclined to become involved in a street

lifestyle (Boddie, 1997). This was definitely the end result for the dropouts. The money

made from hustling made it possible for them to live a flashy lifestyle, and it gave them a

sense of power. The admiration from their peers further added to this sense of power.

Ultimately, it gave the dropouts a sense of accomplishment and belonging, needs that

were not met in their learning environment. The lure of the streets was much more

appealing and gratifying than the classroom.

School Differentials

"Families are not totally responsible for the educational status/condition of their

children. Students spend 6-7 hours in school each day; the school's impact – positive or

negative – cannot be ignored or denied" (Ford, 2003, p. 286). The importance of the role

educators can play in minimizing the harmful impact of external factors as expressed by

Hale (2004) is that, "the teacher should be the equalizer. All children should be taught by

the teacher so their futures are not determined by the skills of the parents" (p. 37). Low

SES parents are less likely to adopt the beliefs and behaviors that contribute positively to

children's academic success" (Veronneau et al., 2008, p. 430). Eventually, the boys

become disengaged and drop out. However, this process of detachment does not occur

overnight.

Parental involvement. "The nature of children's and parents' interaction about

academic matters predicts early dropouts" (Stearns et al., 2007, p. 215). Lack of parental

involvement was a characteristic of the single-parent households of the dropouts. The

dropouts could not remember school visitations by their mothers unless it was in response

to a disciplinary issue such as for suspension hearings. After awhile, some of the mothers

even stopped attending disciplinary hearings. This resulted in a lack of awareness relative

to their sons' academic performance. The most concrete example of this was in the case

of dropout Warren who had not attended school for an entire year before his mother

found out.

On the other hand, the family structure of the graduates afforded the opportunity

for parental involvement in school activities. Unlike the dropouts, the graduates discussed

parental visits to their schools, usually by their mothers. Their fathers attended the sports

events. According to Beamon and Bell (2006), there is a positive relationship between the

frequency of a parent's attendance at their child's games to academic performance. There

was also the expectation that school work and chores were to be completed. Common to

the graduates' discussions and descriptions of their homes was that it was the culture in their homes. Fear of reprisal from family members, especially their fathers, motivated the graduates to complete their homework and to stay out of trouble at school.

Any substantive discussion relative to the academic performance of students must include parental involvement. As emphasized earlier, the parents of the dropouts were not proactive in their sons' education. On the other hand, the parents of the graduates were. The degree of parental involvement is one of the interwoven aspects to which I previously referred. Parental involvement is of such monumental importance, but unfortunately, it is not under the auspices of the school system.

Teacher/student relationship. "Positive bonds with teachers reduce the probability of students dropping out, particularly for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds" (Stearns, 2007, p. 214). Like the cliché used about girls looking for love in all the wrong places, perhaps the male dropouts were looking for mothers in their teachers. As Kunjufu (2005) claimed, "The relationship between some mothers and sons need honest assessment . . . It has implications for the associations boys have with their female teachers" (p. 65).

In one such study to which Howard (2008) referred, African American students identified the lack of personal teacher-student relationships as a contributing factor to their school failure. The behaviors they observed in their teachers were a lack of caring and apathy. As highlighted in Chapter II, evidence shows that there is a correlation between the attitudes and expectations of teachers and the academic performance of African American males (Jordan et al, 1996).

This is substantiated by the dropouts' descriptions of an ideal teacher. They all used words such as 'motherly," "caring," and "nice." They spoke highly of their teachers who embodied these traits. Sadly, according to the dropouts, most teachers didn't care. They all were of the opinion that they would have done better in school if they could have connected more to their teachers. The lack of nurturing households seems to have left a void in these young men.

Exclusionary discipline. Specific to the dropouts was involvement in the suspension/expulsion cycle. Although none of the dropouts confessed to committing any offense egregious enough to warrant multiple-day suspensions or expulsions, they had all been suspended and two of them had been expelled. Curtis believed the suspensions to be racially motivated as indicated by his statement quoted in Chapter IV in which he attributed the disproportionate rate of the suspensions to "a crooked system." Graduate Troy also alluded to the same theory in referring to Black boys attending prestigious schools. "They're not going to put up with their [Black boys] mess. It's just not that type of set up."

The graduates had been neither suspended nor expelled. Troy did recall one time when he was almost suspended. He was so afraid of his father's imminent punishment that he literally begged the principal for a different punishment. His request was granted in the form of in-school-suspension. However, as he shared, his father still learned about the incident, and he was severely punished. He never got in trouble enough again to warrant any disciplinary related visits to the office.

School activities. "Students who are engaged with school through participation in extracurricular activities are less likely to drop out of school than are students who do

not" (Stearns et al., 2007, 214).The dropouts and the graduates differed in their participation in school activities. None of the dropouts played on sports teams however five of the six graduates were very involved in sports. The lack of involvement on the part of the dropouts should not be attributed to a lack of interest or talent as several of them played during their junior high school years as well as with friends in their spare time on neighborhood courts. Their involvement in sports ceased during their transition from junior high to high school.

With his usual sense of humor, Warren explained, "I played in junior high, but high school changed me. It was different I would say 'cuz by the time you get to high school, you know people and then, uh-oh, you doin' different things. No more basketball." While stating the last few words, Warren looked at his high school sweetheart seated next to him, and they both laughed. Dropout Curtis also shared that he ran track and wrestled in junior high school. "I didn't play in high school 'cuz I needed to make money. With money came other distractions . . . women . . . drugs. You just get caught up."

The graduates not only played sports all four years of high school, but most of them played in junior high as well as on summer teams. The graduates' time, both during the school year and in the summer time, was structured by their parents, leaving little room for the distractions. Even so, on the rare occasion that a graduate got sidetracked, there was a supportive circle of family, coaches, and other teammates to get them back on track. All of the graduates mentioned camaraderie among team members as one of the most memorable things about high school.

Similarities

As Cooper and Jordan (2003) stated, "There is perhaps no single criterion greater than the student/teacher relationship . . . the question of who teaches African American boys is as critical to the academic success of these students as what is taught" (p. 390). The extent to which teachers' attitudes influence the academic performance of African American males has been referred to, and/or studied by, numerous authors and scholars (Bireda, 2007; Chunn, 1991; Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Howard, 2008; Kunjufu, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noguera, 2008).

The relationship between African American male learners and their teachers can be a major contributory factor to their achievement or alienation. The fact that both the graduates and the dropouts used similar phrases to describe the ideal teacher is very telling. I did get the impression, however, that some of the graduates expected more from their teachers than the dropouts. A prime example of this was the statement made by Troy in which he declared that he would have performed better academically if he had been challenged by his teachers. Eric, who admitted that he didn't put forth his best efforts, also felt that the teachers should have pushed him to work harder.

The dropouts were functioning at the most basic level, the need to be nurtured. This deficit seems to have been too great a challenge for them to overcome. Similar to the withering of a flower that does not receive enough water, the dropouts' thirst for acceptance, love, and compassion that remained unquenched could only have one outcome. The graduates, supported and well-nurtured in their two-parent households, were not deficient in this area. Therefore, even when they were not challenged by their

teachers, they were still able to succeed. They possessed coping mechanisms learned from the relationships and bonds that were formed in their villages.

Implications

Currently, with the level of transparency afforded by new accountability measures, the outcry from educators is understandable. Is it fair to evaluate the success of a teacher based on the academic performance of their students? Is it fair to use the same system to measure the academic achievement of students from the wealthiest districts with those districts where students fall far below the poverty line? Should we not first address the inequities of our current system?

We should use the knowledge gained to inform all involved in the educational process of African American males. Armed with this awareness, we can provide these learners with the supportive network and coping mechanisms needed to overcome the obstacles they will most certainly face. As stated by Cass and Curry (2007),

> Analyzing causes and effects, and understanding the links among all these factors, requires separating them into subject areas, systems or knowledge areas. That is how data are gathered and kept, professionals are trained, programs are funded, budgets are made and services administered. But we must not lose sight of the whole child. (p. 17)

If we are to prosper as a nation, we must embrace the message of the "village proverb." That entails working together as a society to ensure the proper development of the whole child to which Cass and Curry (2007) referred. Boddie (1997) said, "Wherever the connections among family, education and economic institutions are weak, disengagement persists. The ravages of disengagement, however, are taking a most

deleterious toll on the communities of African American adolescent males" (p. 34).

Based on the literature review and current statistics, it is obvious that we have severed the

connections between the entities of family, school, and society for Black boys.

Many of the environmental factors that impact the academic performance of

these students are intertwined. This state of fusion makes it difficult to excise any one

factor but, if family, school, and society work collectively, we can equalize learning

opportunities for African American males in the public school setting. Unfortunately, the

ability of some entities to respond is problematic, and the probability of such a

collaborative effort is highly unlikely in the very near future. However, as our brothers'

keepers, we can address the injustices that exist within our sphere of influence. In so

doing, we increase the likelihood of success for Black boys.

Family

The single-parent household, like a pebble thrown into a pond, has a ripple effect.

As such, the significance of this ripple effect should be neither trivialized nor ignored.

According to Jennings (2012), "Much of the variance in student achievement is explained

by home and family factors" (p. 8). I agree with Mandara (2006) that efforts to improve

the function of the family unit must be directed towards changing parenting behavior

instead of focusing on demographic factors. Parents can change the manner in which they

interact with their children, but the race and gender of these learners cannot be.

I agree with Slaughter and Kuehne (1991) that the existence of shifting parental

norms necessitates further research. By acknowledging the importance of the impact of

the one-parent household on Black boys' education and designing policies to address the

impact caused by those changing societal roles of mothers and fathers, we can then

provide the necessary support system to ensure that these learners have the same educational experiences and opportunities as their counterparts.

One way to provide support is to increase programs that educate parents. As we know, the participants repeated cycles such as they experienced in their upbringing. It is also apparent that, as adults, the dropouts were not only cognizant of the error of their ways, but they were desirous of a better future for their own children. Unfortunately, they have limited access to resources by which to ensure a better future for their children. It is incumbent upon other family and community members to create the village that will serve as the supportive network for that child.

We need more positive Black male role models to counter the hustler lifestyle that pulls so many boys away from school. A preventive measure such as closely monitoring African American males will give them less opportunity to respond to the lure of the streets that clearly have a detrimental impact on their lives and ultimately on society as a whole.

School

Several inferences were drawn from the exploration of school factors. These conjectures warrant serious scrutiny given the ramifications of ignoring them. As stated by Sizer (2004), "as the culture changes, the shape of public education should change with it" (p. xvii). America has gone through many changes, but the structure of this nation's public school system has remained the same. Critical to that understanding is an awareness of their history and their culture, both from the past as well as current practices. Schwebel (2003) stated that, "to comprehend the consciousness and behavior of Black children and determine their capacity for learning it is not enough to examine

the children in the context of the family and community. One must view them in historical context" (p. 132).

Historically, the legacy of African American males relative to education is one of deliberately restricted opportunities. As described by Cass and Curry (2007), "the slave system was not designed to produce independent, self-reliant citizens. It was aimed at controlling every aspect of the lives of their enslaved laborers" (p. 121). It is the assertion of some that this culture of control still exists. For example, Fenning and Rose (2007) attributed the disparities in discipline to teachers' fear of a loss of control to poor students and students of color who purportedly "challenge their authority more often [than others]" (p. 545).

The discussion by Ogbu and Simons (1998) relative to the reaction of these minority students provides the reader with a better understanding of the conflict between these students and school authorities. Ogbu classified minority groups into "autonomous, voluntary (immigrant), and involuntary (nonimmigrant) minorities" (1998, p. 164) and asserted that voluntary minorities who came to this country for a better life engage in the schooling process more positively than involuntary minorities with a history of enslavement.

Similar to Ogbu's position is that of Harris III, Brown, Ford, and Richardson, (2004) who speculated that students from cultures that came to this country unwillingly, are more likely to exhibit oppositional social behavior. They are "subsequently labeled as dangerous or as troublemakers" (Fenning & Rose, 2007, p. 537). It is my contention that the precipitating cause of the push factors in school is educators' lack of cultural awareness. This unawareness results in a learning environment that devalues Black boys.

As articulated by Wimberly (2007), they "develop trust and respect for their teachers when their cultural identity is supported in the classroom" (p. 15). As such, there is a need for culturally relevant or cultural responsive teaching (Cooper, 2003; Graham & Bridwell, 2007; hooks, 2004; Jordan et al., 1996; Schwebel, 2003). Ladson-Billings (2004) explained that, "culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 18). Howard (2008) described "culturally congruent" or culturally relevant teaching as "an attempt to create a schooling experience that enables students to pursue academic excellence without abandoning their cultural integrity" (p. 136).

Bensman (2000), Sergiovanni (1994) and Meier (2004) endorsed schools as communities, villages if you will. Within this structure, the mutual respect between the members is integral to its functioning for the good of all. As indicated by the literature review, African American males perform better as a result of positive relationships within the academic setting. As stated by Wimberly (2002), they "learn more effectively and can more fully experience the numerous resources" (p. 14) when there is a strong student-school relationship.

Not only should the culture of students influence pedagogy, but the relevancy of gender issues should be considered as well. A possible recommendation resulting from this study is that teachers would benefit from training or professional development on male learning styles which transcend race (Kunjufu, 2001). The differences in how males and females participate in, and respond to, the educative process is well documented (James, 2007; Saunders et al., 2004; Schwebel, 2003). Educators and practitioners would

be remiss if they failed to recognize the impact of gender differences on academic outcomes.

The negative experiences of African American male drop outs, as indicated by Saunders et al. (2004), caused them to perceive the school environment as hostile and unwelcoming. Though there are harmful factors external to the school, "the school itself should be able to reduce the dropout problem by reforming the conditions that push students away" (Jordan et al., 1996). Although this places a tremendous burden on schools, "it is the only organization where a relationship between meaningful people and children can take place on an ongoing basis and compensate for the difficult conditions that interfered with their [development]" (Cass & Curry, 2007, p. 131).

Society

"For a real investment to be made by society at large, Black men must be seen as a vital asset to society and tied to the growth of local economics" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 33). In Chapter II, a brief overview of the origin of this nation's public school system was provided in order to determine its success in addressing the needs of Black boys. As stated by Ford (2003), "decades of denial to an equal education cannot be overcome easily or quickly" (p. 285). Arguably, any efforts toward redressing the inequities caused by the years of rejection are stagnant at this point. The literature review seems to show that not only has the public school system been unsuccessful in meeting their needs, its structure has been one of the principal deterrents to the success of these learners. Black boys did not fail; society failed them.

The phenomenon of African American male learner does not occur in a vacuum. It is not exclusive to the African American community for the ramifications permeate

through society as a whole. Scholars and researchers such as Garibaldi and Bartley (1989) and Jordan et al. (1996) have highlighted the societal impact such as increases in unemployment, crime, and drug use, as well as social unrest when children drop out of school. The long term effects cannot be disputed. Society will continue to be adversely affected if we continue to fail to make the fundamental changes necessary to address the underlying issues.

African American males are marginalized, subjected to the limits and boundaries imposed on them by mainstream, and labeled as "the not-normal" (Winkle-Wagner, Hunter, & Hinderliter, 2009, p. 3). Their academic experience has been one of neglect, underachievement, and hostility. The alienation of the African American male has been so egregious as to cause some to believe that they will eventually become an endangered species (Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Garibaldi, 1992; Hopkins, 1997; Laing, 2003).

The Village

This is the story of my brothers, for my brothers, by my brothers. The beginning of their story cannot be changed, but it should not be disregarded. To do so, as described by Ford (2003), "asks the victims to "get over it and move on" or "let bygones be bygones". Forgetting the past is unacceptable. The past informs the present" (p. 285). We are past due for a different ending. As suggested by Cass and Curry (2007),

> Research shows that if a child has one or a few of the factors discussed earlier, while potentially harmful, there's a good chance that the child's resiliency and some intervention by a teacher, a counselor, a mentor, a relative, a pastor or some other adult offering encouragement, assistance and guidance can save that child. (p. 18)

The aforementioned individuals of family, schools, and society have a responsibility. We are our brothers' keepers. As Cass and Curry (2007) stated, "the story for American Black boys can have a different ending if society focuses its efforts on their education and development" (p. 2).

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APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

<div align="center">

CONSENT FORM

(Participant Consent)

</div>

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Kimberly Taylor is completing research for a doctoral dissertation from Ashland University in Educational Leadership. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have experience regarding the topics of this study.

B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You will participate in two interviews. They will be face to face interviews which will last for a period of approximately 90 minutes.

2. The interviews will be audio taped and transcriptions made as necessary. Both will be maintained in a secure location.

3. You will be asked to share documents, artifacts or photographs relevant to your educational experiences as a participant in this study. (The researcher will not retain the original records, but may reproduce them in film or electronically.)

4. Your name will be kept confidential and will not be shared on the research report.

5. You are free to decide whether or not you want to participate in this study.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

1. At the beginning of the interviewing process, you might feel shy about sharing information about yourself. You can ask me any questions you may have about this study.

2. As I observe or interview you, I will take notes. This might make you feel uneasy. However, the notes will be used to help me understand your experiences and will not be attached to your name.

3. There is no deception involved in the research.

4. **Confidentiality**: Only I, Kimberly Taylor, and my doctoral dissertation chair will have access to your study records and recorded media. To protect your identity, pseudonyms will be used in the study findings for this dissertation and in any report or publication that may result from this study. The raw data will be kept in a locked cabinet until the expiration date approved by the Human Subjects Review Board at which time it will be shredded to further protect your right to confidentiality. **Note that information disclosed that concerns harm to you, the participant, another person or another person's property is not protected by researcher-participant confidentiality.**

D. BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide may help others to understand the experience of the African American male learner. It is possible that your insights will contribute to efforts to address educational needs specific to African American males as learners.

E. COSTS

There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study.

F. PAYMENT

You will not be paid to participate in the research.

G. QUESTIONS

You have talked to Kimberly L. Taylor about this study and have had your questions answered. If you have further questions, you may contact her at 3257 Washington Boulevard, Cleveland Heights, OH 44118, Phone: (216)832-1419. If you have comments or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the researcher. If, for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact the Human Subjects Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 and 5:00, Monday through Friday, by calling or writing…

Randy Gearhart, Chair Human Subjects Review Board

Phone: (419)207-6198

Fax: (419)289-5460

Email: rgearhar@ashland.edu.

H. CONSENT
You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status.

I, _____, have had all my present questions regarding this study answered. I clearly understand the procedures and expectations for participation in this study. I agree to participate. In testimony thereof my signature is hereby affixed.

_____   _____

Date   Signature of Study Participant

_____   _____

Date   Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

APPENDIX B

PERMISSION TO AUDIOTAPE

African American Male Learners

Researcher: Kimberly Taylor

Permission to Audio Tape

I, _____, as a voluntary participant in

Kimberly Taylor's study grant my permission to be interviewed and observed. I grant

Kimberly permission to audio tape these interviews and observations for the collection of

data for her research on African American male learners.

I understand that studies of sufficient quality may be submitted to scholarly journals, to

professional conferences or may become published books. I understand I will not be

named in reports of the results of the research. If I feel my rights have been violated I will

contact Dr. Randall Gearhart, Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board, at (419)289-

6198. I understand that I may withdraw from being included in the research results, with

my written request to Dr. Piirto.

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX C

QUESTION PROTOCOL: INTERVIEW 1

Researcher: Kimberly Taylor

Interview 1 Protocol

1. Do you consider yourself to be an African American male?

2. Describe your immediate family.

3. What was it like growing up in your household?

4. Discuss the educational experiences and/or accomplishments of your parents and any siblings.

5. Discuss the value of education in your family.

    Was there a difference between how female and male family members were treated as it pertains to academics?

    Describe the family member who had the greatest impact on your academic performance.

6. At the time that you entered high school, what were your dreams for the future?

7. Discuss the role, if any, that each of the following played in your success, or failure, relative to graduating from high school.

    Race

    Gender

    Family

    Teachers

    Peers

8. Tell me stories about your school years.

What did you like most about school?

What did you like least about school?

Describe any extracurricular activities that you were involved in.

If you could do your high school years over again, what would you do differently?

9. Tell me stories about any major obstacles that you encountered from elementary through high school.

    How did you overcome those obstacles?

    What, if any, were the effects of those obstacles on your development as a person?

    What, if any, were the effects on your development as a member of society?

10. If an African American male high school student asked your advice about how best to successfully make it through school, what would you say?

APPENDIX D

QUESTION PROTOCOL: INTERVIEW 2

Researcher: Kimberly Taylor

Interview 2 Protocol

1. You have been included in this study because you have experience with this topic.
    Discuss the difference(s) between your educational experiences and the
    experiences of those who are <u>not</u> African American males. To what do you
    attribute the differences?

2. What are the characteristics of the ideal teacher? Explain your answer.

3. How do you think your middle and/or high school teachers would describe you?

4. The last time we spoke, I asked you to gather artifacts and/or documents that
    might give more insight into the person you have become. Please tell me the
    significance of each.

5. If you have any children, how do you support them in their educational
    endeavors? If applicable, do you treat your children differently based on their
    gender? If so, elaborate.

6. If you have any sons, do you think they will face the same challenges as you?
    Why or why not?

7. There are many alternatives to traditional public schools that were either not as
    popular or did not exist during your high school years (charter schools, single
    gender schools, home schooling, online schools). Would one of them have been
    better suited to your needs as a learner? If so, explain

8. Please complete the following statement: An African American male
    learner will have a better chance of graduating from high school if he…?