

African American Male Students' Middle School Perceptions and Experiences with
School-based Discipline in Rural Georgia

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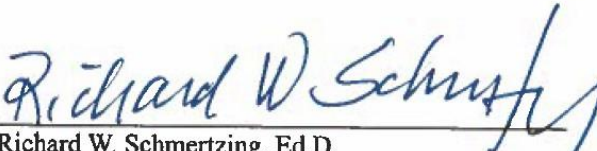
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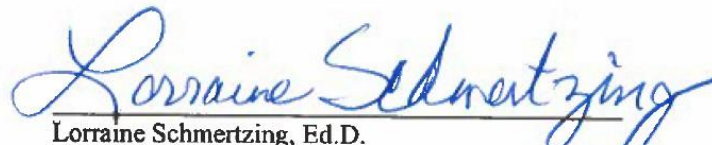
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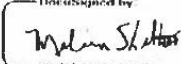
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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of the lived experiences of three African American male students in rural Georgia who experienced at least one out-of-school suspension in the year prior to the study. Using narrative inquiry, each participant engaged in three individual interviews, followed by one focus group. Data were transcribed and analyzed using value and thematic coding. The findings revealed that participants described early school experiences as supportive, but over time, their narratives shifted to reflect feelings of alienation and disengagement from the school environment. Despite these challenges, participants sustained positive self-concepts through strong family support and adaptive coping strategies.

These insights informed the development of the Disciplinary Progression Model, a conceptual framework that illustrates the stages of disengagement and the mechanisms students use to maintain self-worth amid systemic bias. The model highlights intervention points for educators, policymakers, and advocates seeking to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

Grounded in Critical Race Theory, this study reveals the intersection of racism, policy, and student identity in rural education. It provides a counter-narrative that emphasizes student agency and resilience while urging the reform of disciplinary practices in under-researched rural settings.

Keywords: African American male students, school discipline, rural education, Critical race theory, narrative inquiry, Disciplinary Progression Model, student disengagement, educational equity

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LETTER TO THE READERS

To the reader of this work, I thought it was important to give a greater context to who I am as the researcher and my identity. I believe it is critical to understand what forces have formed me and my assumptions. This work benefits from an understanding of my background and experiences, which have shaped my assumptions and motivated this research. While my journey to this topic is detailed in the conceptual framework chapter, I offer this context to illuminate my perspective on African American males in education and the criminal justice system.

My work began as a college counselor for federally funded TRiO programs at Georgia Southern University, where I supported first-generation college-bound students. It was here I developed a strong connection with Black youth, particularly Black males, especially those labeled "troubled" or "hard to reach." I found myself uniquely drawn to these students, perceiving them differently than many adults around me.

This connection persisted after graduation as I continued working with TRiO programs in another part of Georgia. However, witnessing the treatment of these young men by educators and the system fueled a growing unease. This led me, after earning a master's in clinical social work, and gaining experience with youth in the juvenile justice system, to transition into full-time work within the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), group homes, and court systems.

A recurring pattern came into focus: many of these young men entered the system following a history of school-based disciplinary actions. Strikingly, I found little difference in academic ability or potential between the college-bound students I'd

previously worked with and those now in the "rehabilitation" system. The difference lay in their school experiences, which dramatically altered their paths. My work transitioned from using academic transcripts and school records to biopsychosocial and criminal history records, but the underlying issues remained similar. These young men felt disconnected from school, largely because of their experiences with teachers. Yet, their aspirations, as reflected in their vision boards, were remarkably consistent with the traditional American dream: a nuclear family, a nice home, a car—not extravagant displays of wealth.

This realization solidified my commitment to advocating for these young men, particularly those marginalized and labeled as troublemakers. My own experiences as a young Black male in rural Georgia, facing unfair discipline and targeting by white teachers, fostered a deep empathy and understanding. I had to navigate this without advocacy, self-healing along the way; that experience fuels my commitment ("be the person you needed when you were a child").

In conclusion, my professional and scholarly work converge here, driven by a desire to support these young men, elevate their voices through their sharing of experiences, and provide valuable knowledge to readers, practitioners, and scholars. This research represents a lifelong interest, and completing this dissertation has been a true privilege.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Pop died, didn't cry, didn't know him that well. Between him doing heroin and me doing crack sales. With that in the eggshell standing at the tabernacle. Rather the church pretending to be hurt. Wouldn't work so a smirk was all on my face. Like damn that man's face was just like my face. So, Pop I forgive you for all the shit that I live through. It wasn't all your fault homie you got caught. And to the same game I fault that Uncle Ray lost. My big brothers and so many others I saw. Thank God for granting me this moment of clarity, this moment of honesty. (Jay-Z, 2003, Verse 1)

The year 2020 was a year of both revelation and devastation. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered life as we knew it. The pandemic's ferocity resulted in the loss of loved ones, while scientists and the medical community struggled to keep pace with treatment and public education. The political divide between conservatives and liberals intensified with the defeat of then-president Donald Trump. The year also shattered the façade of the United States as an egalitarian and color-blind society as protests against police brutality erupted across the nation, highlighting the ongoing fight for racial justice and equality. The Black Lives Matter movement and other groups rallied against the systemic violence faced by Black citizens, particularly in the wake of widely publicized murders captured and rebroadcast by the media. The importance of in-person

education also became a contentious issue, with conservative-minded individuals arguing that schools were essential for social development and provided working parents with a structured learning environment for their children.

For nearly 50 years, research has consistently highlighted the threat posed by educational institutions to many Black bodies (Black, 2004; Ferguson, 2001; Noguera, 2012; Skiba et al., 2002; Valles & Villalpando, 2013; Welsh, 2021; Wilson, 2008; Woodson, 1933), yet this issue is often dismissed as insignificant. Despite educators' and politicians' assertions that the American system is founded on the values of fairness, merit, and equality, Black males continue to be systematically excluded and left behind in institutions designed to promote upward mobility (Howard & Reynolds, 2013). As hip-hop artist and billionaire business executive Jay-Z illustrated through his lyrics, the struggles experienced by Black men in American society are cyclical and often misunderstood, even by Black men themselves. Jay-Z's lyrics (Jay-Z, 2003) offer a powerful poetic exploration of the plight of the African American (AA) male in American society. His lyrics highlight the shared experiences of his father, himself, his brothers, and others he witnessed throughout his life, describing them as “the same game I fault” (Jay-Z, 2003), hinting at the idea of the entrapment that Black males feel in a racist system. This powerful phrase underscores the systemic nature of the challenges faced by AA males. According to Roland Thorpe Jr., a social epidemiologist and principal investigator of the Black Men’s Health Project, this systemic issue persists today (Petrow, 2023).

In 2008, Davis proclaimed that “It is long past time that the crisis facing young African American males receives a level of attention proportionate to its urgency” (p. 4).

Nearly 20 years later (at the time of this writing), the crisis continues to suffer from a lack of attention. Research by the Brookings Institution (Reeves et al., 2020) revealed that AA males are significantly more likely to face suspension from school, become school dropouts, experience unemployment, serve time in prison, become victims of homicide, father children outside of marriage, be labeled with a learning disability, or be infected with HIV/AIDS than White non-Hispanic males. This stark disparity is undeniably rooted in racism. As Derrick Bell (1992) argued, racism pervades every institution of American society, yet many disregard these systemic problems unless they directly impact the dominant White culture. Education is no exception.

Within the suffocating climate of racism, it is crucial to understand the perspectives of the most marginalized group – the AA male – within the institution of education. A growing body of research points to connections between zero-tolerance policies, low academic achievement, school disengagement, truancy, and involvement in the criminal justice system, often referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline (Ford, 2016; Marrus, 2015; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). Zero-tolerance policies and other public-school policies have had detrimental effects on AA males, leading to rising high school dropout rates, declining post-secondary college enrollment, and increased incarceration rates (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). In 2014, under the Obama administration, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division highlighted disparities in disciplinary policies, issuing a "Dear Colleague Letter" that declared racial discrimination in school discipline a real problem (American Association of School Administrators & Children's Defense Fund, 2014). Johnson and Johnson (2023) found that Black male students continue to face the highest

rates of suspension and expulsion, leading to negative impacts on academic performance, self-esteem, and future opportunities, reinforcing long-standing disparities in education. If these trends continue, society will continue to view AA males as the most criminalized and targeted demographic in the country. It is evident that policies have a profound impact, and in a nation plagued by systemic racism, institutional racism permeates the educational system.

The Georgia Department of Education's (GDOE, 2017) improvement model, despite its purported goal of centering on the "whole child," fails to acknowledge race, culture, diversity, or inclusion in its model of continuous improvement. How can a system that does not consider these critical factors in its improvement models truly improve the "whole child" for all students? It is important to remember that school integration in this nation was never voluntary. Given the disciplinary disparities, it is not unreasonable to believe that racism is deeply embedded within the disciplinary policies of American schools. In my experience, sustained change requires three essential elements:

- Correctly identifying and describing the issues
- Thoroughly confronting the issues with concrete actions
- Involving the parties directly impacted by the need for change

Issues are best diagnosed by examining the inconsistencies and omissions within the system. Therefore, this study explored the experiences of AA male middle school students impacted by educational racism. The study investigated not only the disciplinary policies of schools but also the often intentional and unintentional racist practices that lead to disciplinary actions by school officials. By capturing and amplifying the "immediate, pre-reflexive consciousness of life" (Manen, 2015, p. 51) – lived experiences

– of AA middle school students who face routine discipline, a pathway can be created for educators and other stakeholders to assess and make necessary changes to disciplinary policies and practices. The AA male students who experience disproportionate discipline are the ones whose voices must be heard if effective policies and process are to be developed. The lack of representation of their voices regarding discipline could explain the dismal lack of improvement in achievement rates for these students over the past 40 years. Research on the “discipline gap” (Cornell & Lovegrove, 2013) consistently highlights the overrepresentation of AA students, especially males, in disciplinary practices, office referrals, and suspensions (Monroe, 2009; Welsh, 2021).

This study investigated how three AA middle school students with at least one out-of-school suspension experienced disciplinary practices. The participants were African American male students who experienced school-based discipline more than their peers. All the participants attended school in a rural school in a southern state. The study explored the participants’ experiences and how those experiences influenced them. Critical race theory (CRT) was employed as the theoretical framework to guide the study and interpret the data. In the remaining sections of this introduction, I elaborate on the background of this work, its goals, and its significance.

Background of Study

This work is grounded on the premise that the United States educational system reflects the overall character of American society, which is discriminatory and racist. The background of this study offers insight to the connection between race and education. It is dedicated to presenting the historical context in which education rooted itself in racism and discrimination.

I think it is appropriate to start with the acclaimed father of American education, Horace Mann. Mann (2020) proclaimed:

If ever there was a cause, if ever there can be a cause, worthy to be upheld by all the toil or sacrifice that the human heart can endure, it is the cause of education . . . it holds the welfare of mankind to its embrace, as the protecting arms of a mother hold her infant to her bosom. (p. 7)

Mann's proclamation concerning education illustrated it as the peak of society's hopes for survival and growth. He believed education to be the best tool to ensure America's welfare. Starting with the premise that Mann's ideas on education were solid, and he was an authority on the topic; we can begin to understand why education is critical for AA male students. Mann paralleled education to survival in American society. Thus, if we concern ourselves with the state of AA male students under the current conditions of disciplinary policies, then I believe it is significant to uncover why more AA male students are not surviving in the American educational system and the larger society compared to all other groups.

To the latter point, Kendi (2017) contended "one cannot believe racial groups are equal while believing that racial disparities are not products of racial discrimination" (p. 11). Likewise, I cannot believe that the disciplinary disparities among AA male students stem from fairness and unbiased practices. It is neither logical nor sound to conclude that AA male students are wholly sustained within the education system while at the same time believing they commit more punishable behaviors than their peers, which often result in suspension. I find it reasonable to believe the disciplinary policies and subsequent practices constructed and enforced by school officials, who act as agents of

the system, are discriminatory towards AA male students. Thus, it is my assumption that AA male students are discriminated against in the educational system, which is why their welfare in schools and the larger society is not as healthy as that of other groups. Because of the history of this nation and treatment of African Americans, especially males, I believe exploring this topic under a lens of CRT can add to our understanding of the young men's experiences and the meaning of those experiences in ways that can inform future policy and practice to improve their chances for success in the system and counter the discriminatory path they are being ushered down.

Kendi (2017) recounted how these paths evolved out of the genesis of schools in the American South. He noted that northern White missionaries built schools for their stated purpose of emancipating people so they could control them. The schools were an attempt to "civilize" the students because White northerners believed Black educators and schools were inferior and not educating children the way they needed to be taught. Mann (2020) discussed his beliefs regarding the role of schoolteachers and officials and wrote:

Those who exert the first influence upon the mind have the greatest power. They have power not only to regulate the actions of given faculties, but they can enlarge or belittle the faculties themselves. Hence, favorable or adverse circumstances in the early culture of the mind, though imperceptible at the time, will at last work out broadly into beauty or deformity. (p. 10)

Mann's exaltation of educators' abilities to regulate student experiences illustrates how AA male students can be belittled, while their counterparts are encouraged with confidence. Carter G. Woodson (1933) said it more profoundly: "The same educational

process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor . . . depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro” (p. 12).

Despite the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case outlawing segregation in public schools throughout the nation, the decision resulted in only Black students being bused to White schools and not a two-way system (O'Donnell, 2018). White students were not sent to Black schools because learning from Black teachers in Black communities was considered beneath them. The Black people themselves were considered lesser and thought to be deficient in ability, supporting the stance that learning from Black teachers in Black communities was the deficit rather than a lack of resources. If we think about desegregation of schools as the remedy to make education better for Blacks, then busing Blacks to White schools and not the other way around promotes the idea that only White teachers and schools were capable of educating students in a way that “will at last work out broadly into beauty” (Mann, 2020, p. 10). Thus, the gesture to remedy racism in education was disguised as an anti-racist action, yet worked to promote racist ideas. Kendi (2017) described school desegregation as a continuum of racial disparity. From its onset, the American institution of education promoted racism and began the deformity of school experiences for African Americans, especially males, through belittling them using the corrective arm of discipline.

For all the lip service given to raising levels of equality in schools over the past 2 decades (Grady, 2023; Howard, 2015; Losen, 2013; Rolland, 2011; Royal, 2018), Ferguson’s (2001) illustration in her chapter titled “School Rules” is still representative of how schools operate:

School rules govern and regulate children’s bodily, linguistic, and emotional expression. They are an essential element of the sorting and ranking technologies of an educational system that is organized around the search for and establishment of a ranked difference among children. This is designed to produce a hierarchy: a few individuals who are valorized as “gifted” at the top and a large number who are stigmatic as failures at the bottom. School rules operate along with other elements of the formal curriculum such as standardized tests and grades to produce this ordered difference amongst children. In contrast to the widely held liberal belief that schools are meritocratic and that through them individuals regardless of their social, economic, or ethnic background are able to realize their potential and achieve economic and social mobility . . . alternative perspectives presume schooling to be a system for sorting and ranking students to take a particular place in the existing social hierarchy. (p. 49-50)

In fact, Black students are more likely to be disciplined than their White classmates across all ages and all forms of discipline. The Civil Rights Data Collection reported K-12 Black students represented 15% of the public-school enrollment but accounted for 38% of the total suspensions and were 3.8 times as likely to be suspended as White students (Liu, 2023). In comparison, White students’ enrollment stood at 47% but only represented 39% of all suspensions, less than their representation. Liu (2023) found that Black students were twice as likely to have at least one disciplinary referral as their White peers in the same school. Furthermore, despite students’ neighborhood, prior

achievement, and behavioral outcomes, the conversion rate from referrals into suspensions across all types of referrals was significantly higher for Black students than for Whites (Liu, 2023).

Additionally, Liu (2023) found that racial disparities start at early ages for public school children. In the 2017-2018 school year, Black preschoolers were 18.2% of total student enrollment but 43.3% of total out-of-school suspension and 38% of all expulsions. Middle and high school students lose five times the instructional days due to out-of-school suspension compared to elementary (Jacobson, 2020). Gallegos (2023) reported that many researchers focus on middle school students because there is a huge increase from elementary to middle school. Middle school has the highest rates of school suspensions for students (Thiers, 2023). Consequently, this study investigating the conditions and habitual environments experienced by disciplined AA middle school students is valuable, not only because those students are disciplined more but also because the ages of youth during middle school coincide with significant human development.

During middle school, youth become more independent and form life-sustaining identities. Erik Erikson, one of the early psychoanalysts, believed that people develop over a series of stages, each with a conflict to resolve before the next stage. His stages suggested that middle school adolescents, ages 12 and below, are in “industry versus inferiority” and middle schoolers, ages 13 or above, are in “identity versus role confusion” (Bonior, 2016, p. 126). The conflict between industry and inferiority defines the period when youth start to compare themselves to their peers and others, and tasks adolescents with mastering academic and social skills; if they master the skills then they

feel assured and if they do not, they feel inferior (Bonior, 2016). For the adolescent, 13 and above, identity versus role confusion forces the youth to confront questions such as, “Who am I? What is my path in life, and what place do I have among people I care about?” (Bonior, 2016, p. 126). This stage is where an adolescent may form an identity crisis, making it a pivotal time in the life of an AA male, and an important stage upon which research needs to be focused.

Erikson’s developmental psychology offered insights into this study. Erikson assumed middle school adolescents start to compare themselves to others and whether or not they fit in, no longer just interested in themselves or disinterested in others. Using Erickson’s stages of life, AA middle school males are tasked with feeling confident and forming their identities. They are also faced with school rules and policies that regard their culture with contempt. Unlike their White peers, middle school AA males must learn to navigate the norms of mainstream culture, oftentimes different than their own (Ferguson, 2001). In the attempt to learn the social skills of the dominant culture, it becomes difficult for AA males to master them, which impacts academic mastery as well. They are instead consumed by feelings of inferiority, blocking development of the feelings of confidence or mastery.

In terms of traditional discipline, Dick Grote (2006) explained that “progressive discipline” (p. 5) has been a failure for most American organizations. Progressive discipline is an escalation of disciplining from an oral warning to written warning, to suspension, then termination; the method often used in schools. Grote (2006) argued that American organizations have been using this form of discipline since the 1930s when

work unions created it to eliminate summary terminations in the workforce. He described the process this way:

When they finally concluded that this individual was not going to make it and that he needed to be [terminated], they then initiated the discipline procedure with the goal of building a case just as fast as they could. Since they were now determined to terminate the individual, and since they saw the steps of the discipline system as merely the hoops that the personnel department required them to jump through to get there, supervisors became almost blind to any improvements an employee might make.

(Grote, 2006, p. 8-9)

I believe because the school is both an extension and an institution of American values and beliefs, processes, policies, and procedures will mirror those of the larger society. Teachers and other school officials will act similarly, if not the same. It is my belief that AA male middle school students are “terminated” via suspension from schools without a fair opportunity to make improvements. Adding the factors of cultural differences, race, and gender, the terminations are not necessarily concerning performance but often based on differences.

If school practices for any reason are more discriminatory towards AA males during middle school than primary or secondary, then assessing the basis of that discrimination is critical to enacting change. To uncover the causes behind this discrimination, it is important to understand how it happens. That is, how discipline acts as a discriminatory implement towards AA male middle school students.

To collect more valuable insights on a personal level, I proposed to undertake a qualitative study of inquiry into the lives of 6 - 12 AA male middle school students who had been suspended at least once during their time in middle school. Unfortunately due to reasons that are explained later only three young men participated. I did, however, continue to understand how these participants' lives were impacted by their disciplinary experiences and how the meaning of those experiences led to various beliefs about behavior in, and relationships associated with, including the people, places, and practices governing them throughout the school day. I endeavored to understand how the students made sense of their world, given their history of being associated with behavioral issues. I accomplished this by extrapolating data from their lived experiences, which I understood "involves our immediate, pre-reflexive consciousness of life: a reflexive or self-given awareness which is, as awareness, unaware of itself" (Manen, 2015, p. 51). This research was dependent on the ability to have the participants reflect on their experiences, which are often not reflected upon with prompts. Then, capture those reflections on their experiences and discover what those experiences meant to them. When these students shared their stories, it was the first step in me creating narratives that let outsiders see the way they experienced discipline. In general, they did not elaborate on stories or give enough description to create a full life history narrative on each young man, but they provided enough to create vignettes to help readers see their world from their point of view. These vignettes were based on the stories. Stories that held meaning to them and gave them awareness of self. It was critical that I gave them the opportunity to tell their stories and amplify their voices. I provided assertions related to what can be done in Chapter 6 based on the data. Educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders

have an opportunity to use these assertions regarding the discriminatory effects of what are normally considered to be neutral practices and policies and create a more equitable education for all students.

Because one intent of this study was to produce knowledge that could improve practices in education, it is critical to clarify some goals. Goals are important because they “establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships [and] place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative ” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 54). I will discuss specific goals in the following section.

Research Goals

Maxwell (2013) included research goals as one of his five key components within qualitative research. “The goals of your study are an important part of your research design” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 23). He framed goals in these questions: “Why do you want to conduct this study?” and “Why should we care about the results?” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 3). Maxwell argued that research goals should be influenced by current theory and knowledge. He discussed three types of goals: (a) personal goals, (b) practical goals, and (c) intellectual (or scholarly) goals. The following sections cover each type of goal.

Personal Goals

Personal goals are concerned with the researcher’s own interests (Maxwell, 2013). These goals provide the motivation needed to choose to do the study. Maxwell (2013) closely related personal goals to the motivations of the researcher. That is, personal goals often arise from the personal interests of the researcher. For instance, I am motivated to study this topic because I work with AA male students of this age group and witness

discrimination and biased treatment routinely. Thus, I chose the topic of disciplinary practices toward AA male middle school students because I am personally interested. As an older AA male, I had the displeasure of experiencing the disciplinary practices as an AA middle school student in a rural school setting. I also heard stories from my father, uncles, and older cousins about their experiences. I witnessed my brothers, friends, and cousins of the same age endure school disciplinary inequalities.

Over the last 15 years, I have worked with under-resourced youth within education and the criminal justice system. I counseled my AA male students (in education) and clients (in the court system) while hearing their experiences of the disciplinary practices in school. For me, the commonalities are striking when I reflect on the outcomes that most AA males face in these institutions. I witnessed teacher and student interactions that were unfair and unjust. Repeatedly, I observed how intelligent and mostly well-behaved AA male students slowly disengaged from their school environments. I saw the court system make decisions that seemed to be racially driven. I read records that showed the same general trends of how an AA male child became a juvenile in-custody of the criminal justice system.

Consequently, and plainly stated, my interest in this topic mostly deals with the desire to better understand how the educational system impacts AA male students. I was curious about whether school disciplinary practices push AA male students into the criminal justice system. It was not enough for me to theorize about the topic; I wanted to validate my assumptions or rid myself of them based on data gathered from the experiences of others. Thus, I pursued this investigation to first understand the issue, secondly, to inform the practices, and third, gather data that proves informative to change

the outcomes. Fully understanding that my personal goals overlap with my intellectual and practical goals as Maxwell (2013) pointed out maybe the case, I expanded upon those goals in the following sections.

Intellectual Goals

“Intellectual goals . . . are focused on understanding something—gaining insight into what is going on and why this is happening, or answering some question that previous research has not adequately addressed” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 28). As I mentioned in the prior section, I want to first understand the issue of discipline. I experienced the disciplinary effects as an AA middle school student in a rural school setting as well as witnessed how it impacted other AA male students. I wanted to walk away from this research with a deeper understanding of the issue. I understand that disciplinary practices impact AA male students and often push them into the criminal justice system in one way or another. Yet, I did not understand the nuances of how it happens over time, nor believed decision-makers understood it well enough to change it.

In addition, I wanted to understand if there were any residual effects from the meanings AA male students construct from their experiences with discipline that influenced them to make future decisions that were to their detriment. Given the realities of AA males’ status in American society, it appeared the two connected, but how was not something we understood sufficiently. Previous research stopped short of connecting the racial disparities in school discipline with the attitudes and beliefs that resulted from students’ constructed meaning of the experience and how it influenced how AA male students see other institutions. In short, my intellectual goals were to attain a sense of clarity on how school-based discipline experiences were interpreted by and subsequently

influenced AA male students' beliefs about themselves, their school officials, and societal institutions as well as how they made decisions and behaved based on these experiences and meanings. This matters to me for many reasons. I discuss those practical reasons in the next section.

Practical Goals

Maxwell (2013) defined practical goals as the ones which “are focused on accomplishing something—meeting some need, changing some situation, or achieving some objective” (p. 28). I already discussed the need to inform practices and change outcomes. Working in the juvenile criminal justice system led me to believe it is critical to stop the inequitable migration of AA males from the education system to the criminal justice system. It seemed that, too often, the school system pushed AA male students out too easily and without expecting consequences for doing so. As a program creator in the court system and policymaker on the local level, I aim to create stronger initiatives, policies, and programs to better serve AA male students. My goal was to do more evidence-based intervention and less of the practices that produced negative outcomes; but before I could do that, I needed to hear from the young men themselves. I understand that I sit in privileged places to inform the macro-level outcomes, which could mean better outcomes for the system altogether. Thus, the knowledge gained from this study empowered me to be a better scholar-activist.

Furthermore, Maxwell (2013) presented a harmonious relationship between practical goals and research questions. He stated that “research questions need to be questions that your study can potentially answer, and questions that ask directly about how to accomplish practical goals” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 28). Thus, the primary purpose of

my study was to explore the impact of disciplinary experiences and the meanings AA male students who were living and educated in rural contexts constructed from them. This purpose informed the three research questions formulated to guide this study. With that in mind, I believed it was critical that this study accomplish real benefits for this population and educational practices. I hoped to hear from them how those disciplinary experiences and subsequent meanings influenced their beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making. It was not enough to just walk away with these young men's stories and a new degree in my hand. I wanted to be sure that the answers to the research questions were ones that resulted in posing practical approaches to the issues facing AA male students. Thus, the research questions are established in the next section of the Introduction.

Research Questions

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that research questions guide a qualitative study, identify what to observe, and determine data collection. The participants in this study were AA male students who are entangled in the school disciplinary system in rural areas; and those students who had one or more suspensions within the last year. Throughout the study, I explored the experiences the African American male students had related to discipline in middle school and the meaning they constructed as a result, for it is these meanings that informed their beliefs and in turn influenced their actions. To better understand the issues, the following questions were used to guide this study to elevate the voices of the students and the meanings they assigned to discipline-related experiences.

Research Question 1

What social, familial, and education-related experiences have middle school African American (AA) male students with a prior out-of-school suspension on their record had related to discipline and what meanings do they attribute to those experiences?

Recognizing the emergent nature of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013), it is worthy to note this question was a starting point. Of all the research questions, question one acted as the foundational piece of this qualitative research because it sought to understand how the participants viewed something that was happening to them. At its simplest, this question explored the participants' experiences as they remembered them prior to deeply reflecting upon them. In my role as researcher, I believed these conversations, reluctant stories, and yet-to-be discovered meanings connected to the way they viewed themselves and subsequently their way of being in the world. Thus, the next question was formulated to build upon question 1.

Research Question 2

Believing that experiences mold who a person becomes, I formulated RQ2: What aspects of the context in which they were raised and schooled, begin to influence them and how—their self-identity and self-concept?

This question explored the possibility that disciplinary experiences affect AA male students, impacting their self-concepts, self-actualization, and future well-being. Under this inquiry, self-identity referred to simply how the students view themselves (Bonior, 2016), while self-concept included thoughts, feelings, and attitudes they had towards themselves (Harter, 2012). Implicit in this question laid an assumption that experiences, whether positive or negative, affect self-concept. According to Harter

(2012), developing the self or a self-concept in adolescence involves academic competence and social acceptance, which were two critical factors for this study because AA male students who are disciplined tend to struggle with academics and being accepted in the schools. Harter pointed out that this is the time adolescents develop a more nuanced understanding of themselves while taking cues from their social environment and personal experiences. To add, Jean Piaget coined constructivist as a learning theory suggesting that individuals learn and build knowledge through their own specific experiences (Bonior, 2016). Under this study, I sought to understand how they constructed an image of themselves and even further, how they saw the world as it related to being disciplined. A pivotal question was what are they learning from their school-based discipline—what knowledge did they take away from it? Thus, a third research question was formulated.

Research Question 3

How do experientially based meanings of disciplinary practices influence AA middle school male students' construction of their worldviews in terms of authority, fairness, discipline, family, society, school, and community?

This third question focused on the influence that reprimands through disciplinary procedures had on the AA male students who shared their stories with me. To answer this research question, I explored the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes that my participants developed toward societal structures and systems as they connected to the educational experiences they had. I investigated through their stories how disciplinary practices influenced their worldviews about the systems and structures outside of schools.

Considered together, the answers to these questions added to the body of knowledge of how rural school disciplinary practices influenced AA males beyond the educational setting. Each question led me to investigate my participants' experiences and how their experiences connected to school-based discipline and in some way influenced their beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making. Implicit in these questions were an inquiry into whether school-based discipline impacted AA male middle school students over time. In conclusion, this study sought to understand whether AA male middle school students' disciplinary experiences impacted their school experiences (RQ1), view of them self (RQ2), and the larger societal systems and structures (RQ3). It is my hope that it serves a significant window into the lives and schooling of this often-unheard population.

Significance

If education is, indeed, the safeguard of America's welfare, what is the personal impact to AA male middle school students when that very institution terminates them from participation? Carter Woodson's classic work, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, aids in understanding the significance of my study. Woodson (1933) stated:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not measure up to the standards of other people. (p. 12)

This is a reality that has persisted too long for African American male students who are judged and punished for their being juxtaposed to their peers who are often forgiven and praised.

Currently, over 50 years of research have supported that AA male students were disproportionately disciplined in the school systems: AA students have been punished harsher than their peers (Butler, 2011; Butler et al., 2012; Ferguson, 2001; Owens & McLanahan, 2020; Rolland, 2011; Skiba & Williams, 2014). During the 2015-16 school year (SY), suspension added up to 11 million days of instruction lost; Black students lost nearly five times the number of days, compared to White students (Camera, 2020; Welsh, 2021). During the 2017-2018 SY, Black students made up 15% of enrollment and combined to make up 39% of all suspensions (Liu, 2023). While AA male students were referred for disciplinary consequences more and thus, suspended more frequently and received harsher punishments than their peers, they were not the main perpetrators of disruption in the schools; White male students broke rules at equal or higher rates (Butler et al., 2009; Collier, 2007; Noguera, 2012; Owens & McLanahan, 2020).

This topic is a critical issue because it reveals the multitude of disparities and manifestations affecting many AA males in such an egalitarian society. It is not, however, receiving attention as a critical determining factor to the prosperity of our nation; practically, we must connect this issue to the alarming rate of incarcerated Black males and youth throughout the nation and pave a new direction.

The significance is threefold. At the core, my study focused on the context of education and African American (AA) male students. The educational reality for many

AA males comes with significant costs, both for the individuals themselves and for American society. Scholars have conceptualized the concept of the school-to-prison pipeline, which suggests that the education system often pushes AA males from school into prison (Davis, 2008; McNeal, 2016; Skiba & Williams, 2014). Secondly, while most studies on AA male discipline tend to focus on the perspectives of teachers and administrators, my research prioritized the voices of the young men themselves, offering a critical and often overlooked perspective. Thirdly, of the 135 studies I examined, all but 15 of them focused on urban and suburban settings when examining the issues of school discipline. The issue of disproportionate discipline is pervasive and is not contained in urban and suburban contexts.

I believe AA male students' voices in rural areas are important to understanding the problem and add knowledge to what we currently know about AA male students' disciplinary issues within the context of education. Understanding the full impact of these disciplinary practices requires listening directly to the voices of AA male students, who often experience the harshest consequences of these policies but are rarely included in the research that shapes them. This researcher was committed to hearing from the unheard and uncovered that disciplinary practices were an oppressive force in the lives of AA male students who experienced school-based discipline. The next chapter sets the stage for the work in the form of a theoretical framework.

Chapter II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Niggas from the hood are the best actors
Got learn to speak in ways that's unnatural
Just to make it through the job interviews
If my niggas heard me, they'd say "Damn what's gotten into you?"
Just trying to make it dog, somehow.
(Cole, 2016, Verse 3)

Maxwell (2013) described a theoretical framework as “concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories” (p. 39), which act as the foundation of a research study. The framework, in a practical sense, informs the reader of the underlying beliefs and assumptions of the researcher. It is the section in which my background becomes relevant because it has shaped my interests and motivation towards this work. As the researcher, the concepts, assumptions, and beliefs are held by me. On the other hand, the research needs a theory to provide an academic conceptualization of the researcher’s concepts, beliefs, and assumptions. The theory is what ties my beliefs and assumptions to the academic community and prior works. He claimed, “Theory is a spotlight. A useful theory illuminates what you see. It draws attention to particular events or phenomena, and sheds light on relationships that might otherwise go unnoticed or misunderstood” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 49). In an important way, the theoretical framework bridges the researcher and the research. Maxwell (2013) discussed two ways of thinking about the

theoretical framework: 1) scholars use their research and their lives to enrich each other, interchangeably and 2) theory is like a coat closet in which it is useful for making decisions about what data pieces fit and which data pieces do not by using the theory to select and focus the pieces. That is to say that the purpose of the theoretical framework is to bring together those concepts, assumptions, beliefs, and theories to say something about what is happening in the lived experiences of the participants. Consequently, this section includes my personal experiences, discussions of research related to Black boys and schooling, and an explanation of the theories I believe are relevant to the foundation of my study—racism, racial threat theory (RTT), and critical race theory (CRT).

I believe it is critical to understand the underpinnings of qualitative research from the perspective of the researcher because the researcher is not an inactive or uninterested bystander. In qualitative research, I would argue that the researcher is a motivated participant in the study, as well. The theoretical framework aided me in communicating to the reader the underlying concepts, assumptions, and beliefs that motivated me to undertake this study. Growing up in rural South Georgia, I witnessed racism and discriminatory treatment of Black males in school and the justice system. These males were close to me: my father, uncles, brothers, first cousins, neighborhood friends, and even sometimes ones I physically fought after school. I struggled to understand how the results were colored or slanted towards people who looked like me. Over time, it has caused me to view rules, laws, and systems with profound curiosity and skepticism while developing an unwavering compassion and advocacy for Black males. Consequently, my assumptions are formed by my experiences and the world around me, in which I have seen rules and laws work in unfair and targeted ways against certain people who are

Black and less fortunate than others. Those experiences produced beliefs that school discipline is the beginning of the destruction of Black males and determines the future of too many to a substandard living and even an inescapable fate of defeat and hopelessness. In short, my theoretical framework is the culmination of my experiences in a world that seems too punitive, permanently racist, and inevitably damning to Black males who do not figure it out soon enough.

In the opening of this section, I cited lyrical lines from hip-hop artist J. Cole. In his song, *Foldin' Clothes*, he discussed how as a Black man he wants to live a life of doing the “right thing” (Cole, 2016, Chorus). The meaning behind the song is one of being a part of a home lifestyle that seems “normal” according to American cultural expectations. The most revealing line is “got to learn to speak in ways that’s unnatural just to make it through the job interviews” (Cole, 2016, Verse 2). In the song he described some of the right things as “foldin' clothes, watching Netflix . . . Catching up on our shows, eating breakfast . . . Raisin Bran in my bowl with bananas and some almond milk . . . I never thought I'd see the day I'm drinking almond milk” (Cole, 2016). However, Cole ended the song with a voiceover depicting the life most Black males live to make it in American society. Cole’s portrayal of the right thing is a metaphorical way of expressing a White culture different from his own and the one most Black people, especially males, live.

Similarly, school acts as a literal training ground in which Black students, particularly males, learn how to metaphorically fold clothes. That is, to be the “best actors . . . learn to speak in ways that’s unnatural” to be accepted and successful. *Foldin' Clothes* personified the theoretical framework in this study. I believe, as a result of expectations to

be something they are not, AA male middle school students start to believe school is not a place to form an identity aligned with who they want to be or where they belong, developing nonchalant attitudes towards academics and the school personnel. In layman's terms: They no longer believe that their path in life runs through the school nor is the school the place of people they care for or people who care for them. As rapper Jay-Z (2003) illustrated in his song lyrics, "it wasn't all your fault homie you got caught . . . and to the same game I fault that Uncle Ray lost . . . my big brothers and so many others I saw" or as Cole (2016) rapped, "got learn to speak in ways that's unnatural." Said differently, but with the same sentiments: for many AA male students, learning in the school context becomes a systemic game of chastising Black culture, which leads to discriminatory disciplinary practices against AA male middle school students. In the next section, I will detail my specific experiences that frame and connect my assumptions and beliefs to the research topic, which inform the theories that I discuss towards the end of this chapter.

My Experiential Knowledge

As an under-resourced child growing up in public housing in rural Georgia, located in the cotton belt of the United States, I had fewer opportunities than most of the White kids growing up across the tracks in my small hometown. My father was in and out of jail and my mother was a field laborer who left our home at dusk in the morning to perform laborious agricultural work for local farmers. My mother would "catch" field trucks with other Black men and women going to perform hard labor to support themselves and their families. These people were in the same situation my family found

itself in; at the bottom of the socioeconomic levels of society; working outside of a formal workplace.

Meanwhile, like most kids, my siblings and I enjoyed playing outside, playing video games, and watching popular television shows like Power Rangers, the Cosby Show, Saturday morning cartoons, and other various shows on Nickelodeon. During my younger years, I did not think about the shows on television and how they would later inform my sense of the world, my unconscious feelings of inferiority and my place in society. It was television that showed me a different world— but a world I thought only existed on television. Later, school taught me this television world was very real, across the tracks, near the schools, and away from my neighborhood of public housing.

School, for me, represented crossing the threshold of integration and began to shape my view of the world in which I lived. In other words, at school was the first time I saw, engaged with, and got to know the television world. School forced me to make sense of two worlds; one I only knew by watching on a screen that I could turn off, and the other I knew all too well, my world. Suddenly, those Nickelodeon programs and the Cosby Show became real, and I did not know if I fit into that reality. Those shows did not depict a father in jail, a mother going to work in the fields, and kids helping pay household bills at an early age. However, I was okay with the television world being separate from my own because it was not close to me; and by close, I mean attainable. The Cosby Show displayed privileged Black people, and Nickelodeon shows depicted middle-class suburban White people who, to me, were just as make-believe as the Power Rangers or Saturday morning cartoons. School, on the other hand, resembled the television world more than my own. Classmates more closely resembled characters from

those television shows. They had doctor dads, lawyer mothers, suburban homes, nice cars, different clothes, and spoke proper English like on television; not like me. Before I was conscious of it, the contexts of race and class were shaping me. I would soon find out, as a poor Black child, that my world and that other one did not mix well.

Witnessing my brothers and male cousins encountering disciplinary consequences in school and eventually seeing them entrapped in the criminal justice system was a common experience growing up, reminiscent of the Jay Z lyrics from his Moment of Clarity single. During middle school, I encountered my own subjective experiences with the school disciplinary machine, which I saw as mostly grinding against students with my racial and gender profile. It became clear that school was not safe for Black males like me. I was forced to confront my place and identity within the context of school. My negative interactions with teachers and school officials during middle school convinced me that school was not just a place of formal learning: School was the epicenter of where I became aware of my Blackness and its negative connotations in that environment. Unfortunately, my classmates and I only shared the milieu of school for a considerable length of time.

Ironically, my attempt to mix the two worlds was stirred by the same thing that created one of them—television. In elementary school, the 1960s Civil Rights videos commanded our class time and captivated my mind. As a child, trying to navigate this new world of school and merge it with my own became a diverging challenge, forcing me to interact with my surroundings in the manner of an out-of-body experience: always perceiving and acting and then reacting. It was confusing and terrifying. The videos of the Civil Rights movement in a world before my time depicted a clash between the two

worlds I was trying to merge. One world was that of the poor Blacks battling for our rights, to be viewed as human and not inferior, against the other world of the all-mighty, all-having Whites. Those Blacks in the Civil Rights videos were similar to the people I knew back in my neighborhood—poor and struggling to make gains. The Whites in the videos resembled those whom I was just beginning to encounter in the school environment, and they resembled the Whites in the Nickelodeon shows— “the haves.” Were those worlds of Whites all the same? The haves? The powerful? The oppressors? My answer came soon: The Whites of past and present were all the same.

When I think about my negative experiences in middle school, there are two distinct recollections. In the first, there was a day I found myself panicking in the principal’s office. At the time I did not know that it was the beginning of my awareness of the world, of my unadulterated Black world. Earlier that day, I was hanging around outside the cafeteria with some friends. We were young and carefree middle schoolers with a little time before our lunch period was over. Then Mr. Smith, a White teacher, walked by and said some unkind words to us. I remember saying to him, “I’ll report you.” Much else has been lost in the trauma of the experience, but the outcome was me pondering why I was in the front office, looking up at the White walls posted with school rules and values. Eventually I found myself sitting in a chair across from the principal, who held a referral that recorded my words to Mr. Smith as, “I will hurt you.”

All the pleading and explanations of the truth of what had really happened and what I said did not matter. The principal was adamant that he had to “stand behind his teachers.” I said my friends could come and tell him what I said, but it did not matter. It did not matter what my friends had heard. It did not matter what happened. It did not

matter that Mr. Smith was not and had not been my teacher. It did not matter that Mr. Smith had taught my older brother and had issues with him. Nothing mattered except Mr. Smith's perception and what he wrote. I felt violated but did not know of or by what. Maybe it was my naivete or innocent understanding of the world. Before this, I thought that the world was just and that everyone's words or experiences mattered. To me justice was about hearing all sides of the story. After this experience, I no longer questioned which world was real.

The real world was this—White. The reality: I am Black. In this world, I was not only Black but poor and powerless. That racial and economic combination was not only 6 feet under dirt in American society but was continually being buried alive. I likened it to knowing that you must breathe to live, while knowing you have a limited air source, but not knowing how much air is available or if your current breath would be your last. Suffocating was not a strong enough word to describe it. Throughout middle school, several experiences with teachers and Whiteness taught me this lesson again and again. Each one gave me shortness of breath.

My second defining experience with Whiteness and discipline was when I was accused of shooting the middle finger at a White child in my classroom. The teacher's back was turned as she wrote on the board. The other student, a girl, turned around, stuck her tongue out and made a face at me. I returned the gesture with my face. When the teacher turned around, the girl raised her hand and said that I shot her the middle finger. Before the teacher could respond, the bell rang, and all the students got up to rush out the door. However, the teacher blocked my path of exit and confronted me. She told me I was constantly causing issues in her class, and she did not appreciate me being a distraction. I

protested and tried to defend myself by explaining the girl stuck her tongue out at me, and I did not shoot a middle finger; I only did the same as she did. The teacher looked at me very sternly and said, “I don’t believe you,” and “I should write you up.” At that point, I remember being angry. I could not believe I had to answer for something I did not do. I felt ambushed, trapped, and attacked. I brushed past the teacher and left.

Later, I was in the principal’s office, eyes fixated on those White walls again. This time I was sure of what it was about. However, this time, the implication was much worse. This time I was accused of assaulting a teacher. The accusation took my breath away. All I could think about was the word, “assault.” My gentle brush past the teacher was being characterized as a brutal assault. I tried to tell my version of events. My accuser did not have to answer. Her word was taken as true and with merit, without question. My words were not considered at all. It mattered not that it was a different principal and a different teacher. The results were the same. More significantly, this experience taught me another reality that packed me another foot under the dirt. I am a Black male, and my physique and physical presence became a factor as to how a gentle brush was made into an all-out assault. The principal made this clear to me. Thus, my punishment was out-of-school suspension or S.T.A.R.—a military boot camp program for “disciplining” kids as an alternative to normal suspension. Bootcamp included isolation from the regular school schedule, 6 AM military drills, a shaved head, black jogging suits labeled “S.T.A.R.,” marching in formation around the school for everyone to see, and eating lunch standing up at the table in front of our friends—not exactly an environment conducive to learning.

These stark representations of bias and the resulting treatment not only stoked anger within me but also contributed to my evolving sense that the worlds I was forced to try and balance were not fair. My real world was often deprived and uncomfortable; and the other, White world, instead of offering a respite, was a source of anxiety, insecurity, and even shame. Experiences in both realms have shaped my personal development and approach to higher education, social connection, and civic involvement.

Theoretical Framework

Based on my firsthand experiences, race relations, especially in the South, have not improved since the Civil Rights Movement to eradicate racism. In my hometown, virtually every area of everyday life remains overwhelmingly divided: neighborhoods, church memberships, social activities, civic organizations, and politics. Public areas are, for the large part, the only shared spaces, which occur from necessity (supermarkets and centers of business) or mandatory requirements (government buildings such as schools, jails and prisons, courthouses, and workplaces). I find this to be the case in many rural communities, where blending cultures or going beyond one's own is rarely made a priority. If there is a racial mix of people, Whites usually make the decisions and run the show. I have witnessed that this imbalance of power is rarely challenged and if so, the challenge is usually unsuccessful, especially in the critical institution of education where racial inequalities can have devastating effects on AA students. Hence, I aimed to investigate the assumption that White dominant culture acts to inform disciplinary procedures and practices, which adversely impact AA male students - maintaining and promoting racism in the school system.

Racism

Expressions of racism continue to be pervasive in American culture. It is difficult to identify an area of society that does not bear the vestiges of the divisive system that seems to be a thread deliberately implanted in the fabric of the nation. Smedley (2012) wrote:

Racism, as defined by Jones, is a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on phenotypic properties (i.e., skin color and hair texture associated with “race” in the United States) that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, unfairly advantages other individuals and communities, and ultimately undermines the full potential of the whole society through the waste of human resources. (p. 933)

According to Berry (2005), in the school context, racism exists in two primary forms: individual and institutional. Individual racism includes failure to recognize students as gifted, judging cultural differences as inappropriate behavior, and misdiagnosing students as having ADHD. Institutional racism includes intended and unintended standard operating procedures that favor the dominant race over another (Berry, 2005). Research supports race-based inequalities in the disproportionate number of AA male students being disciplined (Berry, 2005; Danilova, 2018; Ferguson, 2001; Smedley, 2012). In the next section, I share multiple researchers' and scholars' findings related to individual racism to demonstrate not only what I believe, but also how significant it is for young Black boys. In the next section, I share multiple researchers'

and scholars' findings related to individual racism to demonstrate not only what I believe, but also to demonstrate how significant it is for young Black boys.

Individual Racism. Racial stereotypes stemming from an unconscious “complex causal process” affect judgments about “character, culpability, negative traits, and deserved punishment,” which impacts both the criminal justice system and school system in terms of punishment, resulting in racial disproportionality (Wald, 2014, p.3). As cited in Collier (2007), Good and Brophy concluded that teachers formed perceptions and beliefs about students based on their “race, socioeconomic status, sex, speech patterns, appearance, and parents, which led to different behavior towards different students” (p. 18). Ross (2023) asserted that teachers’ perceptions shape practices in the classroom and the learning environment. Collier (2007) researched how perceptions and beliefs of schools impacted AA male students, classroom management styles, and the disproportional disciplinary outcomes of AA male students. He found that school officials’ perceptions were important because those expectations and perspectives framed how teachers responded to and constructed educational treatment for AA male students. According to Woodson (2013), the act of disciplining is subjective in both its imposition and interpretation. Although each teacher functioned within a context of behavioral guidelines set by the school district, within their classrooms, teachers overwhelmingly used their own perception to interpret students’ behaviors and whether each was disrespectful, inappropriate, and deserving of some type of discipline (Woodson, 2013).

Through the lens of racism, subjectivity begs an exploration of how teachers’ individual acts lead to racist effects. Egalite et al. (2015) reported that Black students were not treated as favorably compared to their White peers in teacher-student

interactions; and when teachers and students did not share a common race, teachers were 33% more likely to perceive the student as inattentive and 22% more likely to report the student as not completing homework assignments. Under the 1995 study, Egalite et al. found that teachers' characteristics of race, gender, and ethnicity were likely to influence subjective evaluations of their students (Egalite et al., 2015, p. 6). They further noted that White teachers evaluated both Hispanic and Black students as less attentive than their White peers (Egalite et al., 2015, p. 8). All the aforementioned speak to the subjectivity of teachers deciding which behaviors warrant discipline and the disproportionate results of such decision-making.

After investigating the issues of disproportionate disciplinary numbers of AA male students in an urban middle school with a population of 727 students and 58% AA population, Swift (2021) concluded that the problem revolved around the reality that most educators are not culturally aligned with AA male students. It follows that teachers often misinterpreted AA male students' behaviors as offenses to the school disciplinary policy. Some researchers have insisted that teacher's subjectivity could be uncovered with their use of the word "defiance" - the most common reason AA students are referred to the office for discipline (Grady, 2023; Skiba et al., 2002; Wald, 2014). "In other words, regardless of a school's official disciplinary policy, the more subjective the category of offense—i.e., insubordination, disobedience, disruption, defiance—the greater the risk that bias (either explicit or unconscious) will seep into the process" (Wald, 2014, p. 3).

Because over 50 years of research support the existence of racial disproportionality in school discipline, individual racism from teachers and other school officials could offer insights to those results. Significantly, teachers are agents in the

educational institution and their actions largely determine the outcomes of the system. If Jones' definition of racism is applied, "a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based phenotypic properties . . . that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities" (Smedley, 2012, p. 933), then individual racism by teachers is a critical component in this study. Individual racism is important because this form of racism, unconscious or not, may act as a factor in the racial disproportionality of discipline. During the research, participants were asked about indications of racism in their interactions with teachers, school officials, and peers. By observing racism as a factor, we can start to make assumptions about what is going on underneath statistics related to school discipline.

Consequently, implicit racial bias allows the conversion from individual racism to institutional racism. In practice, one individual teacher or school official deciding disciplinary consequences for an individual student from generalizations or stereotypes defines implicit racial bias operating in school. Thus, perceptions concerning Jerome's actions are not merely about Jerome but also about Jamal's actions, and Jeremiah's or the image conferred from the viewing of local morning news depicting an AA as bad and criminal. When teachers and schools adopt these biases and apply them to approaching their students' individual actions, then the racism is no longer just individual, it is institutional. That is the essence of the conversion from individual racism to institutional racism within the school context.

Institutional Racism. Research found various instances of how racism operates at individual levels, but also at "internalized, institutional, and structural levels" (Smedley, 2012, p.934). Results from the Implicit Association Test (IAT) reported that

both Blacks and Whites associate Black faces with more violent and aggressive concepts than they do Whites (Wald, 2014). Results from the IAT indicated 80% of Whites and even 40% of Blacks lean towards a pro-White bias in which Blacks were associated with “negative attitudes such as bad and unpleasant,” and “negative stereotypes such as aggressive and lazy” (Wald, 2014, p.3). When people operate under these notions, it is referred to as implicit racial bias (Ford, 2016).

Ford (2016) discussed implicit racial bias as the unconscious attitudes about groups of people, which influences behaviors and decision-making. He asserted it as being the most insidious form of racism because it happens on an institutional level through systems that treat people as inferior. I believe Ford is linking individual racism to institutional racism here. If we think of teachers and school officials as having implicit racial bias towards AA male students, then when they make the decision to discipline students, the decision itself is racially motivated. If teachers and school officials perceive AA male students as inferior due to racial bias, then their behaviors towards them will be unfair treatment on disproportionate levels. Ford tasks it as the most insidious because it happens systemically on a large scale and without thought.

Racial Threat Theory

Racial threat theory supports the premise that more punitive measures are given to AA students because they pose a threat to the predominant White culture— Whites feel threatened and produce more punitive policies (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). It helps to explain how individual racism converts to institutional racism. When Jerome’s, Jamal’s, and Jeremiah’s behaviors are all defined outside of the norm of White culture, stricter rules will follow for all students of the same perceived race and similar appearance

because their behaviors are feared to also threaten the White culture or “White” way of responding. It activates implicit racial bias.

It is an assumption of this study that if any institution in a democratic society of diverse racial groups superimposes its racial biases and culture onto another, then it is acting according to institutional racism. Because the influence of the White dominant culture and the political power of Whites are so heightened in America, policies reflect their attitudes and beliefs on any given issues, education included. I believe teachers' and school officials' acts of bias lead to racial disparities in discipline of AA male students because they begin to codify their beliefs into disciplinary practices; subjective, and then on an institutional level through stricter disciplinary policies. In this way, the individual bias and racist thoughts of teachers and school officials combine to arrive at discriminatory discipline policies affecting AA male students. For instance, if teachers who operate from racial biases believe that particular actions of AA students should be a school offense, then they will first be labeled as defiant or disobedient, if there is not a neatly defined violation in the code book for the act in question. But later, if the teachers and school officials decide that they had enough of this behavior, they oftentimes will make the specific action a violation.

What is the effect if the teacher’s perception of the behavior is from a racist viewpoint, antithetical to the fact of it being accepted behavior in the culture of the student and causes no harm to the school, peers, teachers, school personnel, or themselves? Ferguson (2001) mentioned how AA, at baseline, are more animated than Whites. Therefore, if a teacher verbally reprimands an AA student and their response is a clapping of hands or smacking of lips, unlike the White culture, then a referral for

defiance or disobedience occurs not from the behavior but from an ignorance that devalues the student's culture. The latter is an example of radical schooling theory.

Pierre Bourdieu, one of the lead thinkers of the radical schooling theory argued that schools embody the class interests and ideology of the dominant class, which has the power to impose its views, standards, and cultural norms as superior, known as culture capital (Ferguson, 2001). The radical perspective assumes that educational institutions are organized around and reflect the interest of the dominant groups in society; and that the function of the school is to reproduce the current inequities of our social, political, and economic system (Ferguson, 2001). Ferguson (2001) also concluded that the larger social hierarchy is recreated by the school; perception of manners, style, body language, and oral expression influence the application of them to the bottom rung of the social order. Simply stated: when the system institutionalizes collective individual beliefs from racist thinking, it is then institutional racism because the system has normalized and given it permanence. At that point, neither the agents themselves nor their individual beliefs matter anymore because the codes have made the prevalent beliefs the standard operating procedure. It is then said to be systematic in that if a teacher, principal, parent, or student seeks to challenge it, the system is not the issue, that individual is. Using the Jerome/Jamal/Jeremiah example, it does not matter whether either or all those individual students exhibit a particular behavior, it is deemed to be wrong. The system does not stop to question if the commonality is due to racial differences or behavior. The system has said it is wrong, so it is wrong now and could be wrong 20 years from now when Jerome's son is sitting at the same school desk.

Critical race theory

Lynn and Dixson (2013) argued that race must be the centerpiece of academic analyses. Critical race theory (CRT) remains the paramount theoretical lens academia has used to study inequalities in various domains. CRT emerged in the 1990s as a scholarly approach to discuss race “as both the cause of and the context for disparate and inequitable social and educational outcomes . . . in both the law and education” (Rabaka, 2013, p. 70). Over time, CRT lent itself to other facets of the academic world and scholars have sought to use it as an application to their research (Rabaka, 2013). As a theory, method, and an analytical framework, CRT provided a timely and desperately needed tool for researchers and practitioners to explore race within America’s institutions (Howard & Reynolds, 2013).

CRT theorizes that racism is embedded in every facet of American society and is so endemic that often it is insidious and is hidden under seemingly objective information and race-neutral politics (Collier, 2007). CRT has been used to explore classroom management, as well as disciplinary and student placement practices in education in recent years (Berry, 2005; Blaisdell, 2005; Collier, 2007; Lynn et al., 2010; Smedley, 2012; Swift, 2021). The tenets of CRT, as they apply to education, assert that American schools are permeated by racism and White privilege is used to preserve school inequities using social stratification (allowing one racial group to act as the standard for all) (Butler, 2011). CRT provided a framework to understand the impacts race has on processes, discourses, and structures in American institutions and offers conceptualization of applications of racialized practices in the institutions; especially education (Swift, 2021). Lynn and Dixson (2013) explained the application of CRT in education:

The expansion of CRT into education is significant because it has helped to illuminate the ubiquitous nature and “permanence of race” in the U.S. (Bell, 1992). Indeed, despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that officially ended de jure racial segregation in education and other public facilities, public schools in most U.S. cities remain mostly separate and mostly unequal Beyond just the critique of racial segregation in public schools, scholars have sought to uncover the ways that race manifests itself to create oppressive educational experiences for students of color (and their families) in seemingly “race-neutral” contexts relative to pedagogy, policy, and curriculum. In this way, CRT scholars in education sought to show the inextricable relationship between educational inequity and race. CRT scholars in education call into question schooling practices that perpetuate Whiteness through expectations for student behavior and narrowly constructed curricular content, among other factors. CRT scholars in education have also sought to challenge and expand our understanding of research methods and methodologies such that we can capture, analyze, and represent racialized educational inequity. Thus, CRT scholars in education have made significant contributions to the field of education writ large. (p. 3)

It is my position that the school disciplinary system is one of the most oppressive ways in which race bias has manifested itself in the educational experiences of students of color, especially AA males. The disciplinary policies of schools are designed to be race-neutral but have inequitable results. Under the implications of this study CRT,

because of the racial analysis it provides, allows for an understanding of the inequalities that AA male students face in disciplinary practices.

Through a CRT lens, Swanson pioneered the term “structural intersectionality” (Howard & Reynolds, 2013, p. 242). Structural intersectionality refers to the creation, operation, maintenance, and synthesis of various systems and structures in society that maintain privilege for some groups or individuals while restricting or denying the rights and privileges of others (Howard & Reynolds, 2013). Structural intersectionality also encompasses the political, economic, representational, and institutional forms of discrimination, oppression, exploitation, and domination, highlighting the connectedness of systems and structures in society, and helping individuals to understand how each system affects or impacts others (Wilson, 2008).

In the context of this research, I used structural intersectionality to examine how the institution of education has allowed White students the rights and privileges of free expression of self and culture while denying those to Black students. Disciplinary measures are used to control and coerce Black students to conform to the White dominant culture. The latter connects to the larger society because schools are the training fields that condition children to the larger society’s acceptable norms and practices. Thus, the process produces forms of discrimination, oppression, exploitation, and domination of AA students while promoting the dominant White culture.

For the purpose of this study, structural intersectionality informed the experiences of AA male students being both male and Black. As being male is usually a position of privilege in American society, being Black is not. An important component to this study was to answer the question of how being Black in the context of school compounds with

other factors, such as gender, class, and geography, to produce the disproportionate discipline endured by AA male students. How does being male and Black compound those factors for AA male students but not others? The advantage of CRT permits such an analysis.

According to Howard and Reynolds (2013), a CRT analysis of the educational systems provides:

Both structural and cultural factors that play out in detrimental ways for Black males that must be further analyzed and addressed if we are to disrupt patterns of school underperformance Black males experiences . . . further investigation of how identity is shaped within school contexts for Black males which take into consideration race, gender, class, and place is essential for educational researchers and practitioners to understand if they are to effectively engage them in the learning process. (p. 233)

In this research, I explored the middle school experiences of AA males who are entangled in the discipline system and the role racism plays in the context of their rural schools. It was critical to understand how AA male students interpreted racism under school disciplinary policies and practices of school officials. Also, structural, and cultural factors were critical to analyzing how AA male middle school students were subjected to disciplinary practices. I interpreted how AA male students who are disciplined in school make sense of their world through their narratives; how their discipline experiences influenced their attitudes and beliefs towards their school officials, the school, and other institutions. This study sought to explore the relationships between race, school discipline, and attitudes and beliefs of AA males who are disciplined. The use of CRT

best informed my study because it explained how racist practices in the school system shape AA males' identity and beliefs towards officials and institutions.

Summary of Theoretical Influences

This study was motivated by my collective experiences of growing up Black, male, and poor in the agriculturally based South and of working in education and the court system. My experiences as a Black man yield insight into the world of inequalities in education and society at large. Through my work as an educator and social worker, I have seen AA male students adversely impacted by racism within the school system and pushed into the criminal justice system. Witnessing the manifestation of race and racism throughout those experiences and within those contexts provides me with an opportunity to explore the experiences of AA males under the theoretical frame of CRT.

According to social labeling theorists, the decision to discipline a child depends on the student's behavior, the context in which the behavior was observed, and the tolerance level and attitudes of teachers and administrators (Wheeler, 2013). If all those factors are part of the equation of the decision to discipline a student and prior research supports that AA male students do not violate school rules more often than their White male peers (Austell, 2008; Lynn et al., 2010; Peterson, 2021; Shollenberger, 2013; Skiba et al., 2013; Wald, 2014), then how do those factors translate into inequalities in discipline? The latter highlighted the assumptions of this inquiry, which suggested that disproportionate disciplining occurs from a context in which AA male students are identified as deserving punishment because of their culture being less tolerable, in favor of pro-White culture. For the purpose of this research, aforementioned theories helped further construct the assumptions that the education structure plays a pivotal role in

sustaining the pro-White culture through disciplinary actions, at the cost of AA males and their social acceptance.

I aimed to capture the lived experiences of AA male middle school students who are impacted by the disciplinary practices in rural Georgia schools. I believe the narratives and words of my participants can better inform practices and begin to break down and dismantle racism and oppression in school environments. The next section delves into a discussion of race, racism, and its structures and histories as well as previous research that explored the connections between AA male students and disciplinary practices in American schools.

Literature Review

This study investigated the effects of middle school disciplinary experiences on AA male students within rural settings. The literature review focused on works related to the purpose of the study and concepts important to the theoretical framework. Those concepts include racism, perceptions of AA students and their teachers, and self-concept. In discussing the concepts that informed this study, it was critical to first review literature that provided historical context. Only a review of relevant history could rightfully explain the creation of the racist structures in American society, which bled over into the institution of education and its practices. The following sections offer colonial history, laws, contemporary history, educational policies and practices, and implications of the compounding factors as they relate to race and racism.

Historical

“History is not the past, it is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history” [James Baldwin] (Menakem, 2017, p. 3).

Throughout classic history, laws and policies have served the purpose of oppressing Black people. Throughout American history, laws and policies have subjected Blackness to forms of subservient existence and brutality (Kendi, 2017). This section travels through the history of how Blackness, especially Black and male, became the target of racist policy over time. It provides insight into how the school, acting as an agent of the larger American society, also devalues and degrades the Black body.

In his powerful and groundbreaking book of an anti-racist account of American history, *Stamped from the Beginning*, author Ibram Kendi (2017) argued Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and early religious beliefs were the origins of racist thought. He voiced that classic religious thought believed “God ordained the human hierarchy . . . humanity is divided into two: masters and slaves . . . the Greeks and the Barbarians” . . . Ethiopians were the “burnt faces” (Kendi, 2017, p. 17). Kendi (2017) said racist ideas were nearly two centuries old when Puritans used them in the 1630s and institutionalized American slavery. He detailed “the principal function of racist ideas in American history has been the suppression of resistance to racial discrimination and its remitting racial disparities” (Kendi, 2017, p. 10).

Before American slavery, a brief period existed in which racist ideas were not as operable against only Black bodies and not along color lines. In the beginning of American history, laborers were not only from Africa, but European countries as well; they were known as bondsmen or indentured servants who were employed by wealthy landowners for a specific number of years and then given freedom and money or land (Menakem, 2017).

Despite the African slave trade originating in 1441 with a quest from Portuguese Prince, Henry the Navigator (Dennis, 1984), into the New World, the Native American Decimation and European Colonial Era (1500 through 1610) began to inflict punishment on red bodies and bodies of color (Menakem, 2017). The period of slavery or “Enslavement Era” (Menakem, 2017, p. 73) in America existed from 1619 to 1865. During this period Europeans, especially Englishmen, became the dominant colonizers of the New World. The slave system in America was initiated and then perpetuated for labor and economical ends (Dennis, 1984).

Dennis (1984) illustrated that the slave trade from Africa to the Americas had four stages: 1) capture and conditioning in Africa by rival tribes at war with each other; 2) the selling of the captured Africans to the European for “guns, whiskey, and ivory” (p. 20) at posts along the coast of Africa; 3) the “Middle Passage” (the voyage across the seas, which would last from 8 – 10 weeks) (p. 22); and 4) seasoning in the West Indies for “three to four years” (p. 24), where Africans were trained to be slaves by Europeans or already-seasoned captives. During the Middle Passage, some Africans attempted to kill themselves or each other, but the Europeans did everything they could to decrease the deaths, even breaking their teeth to force feed them. A loss meant they lost money; the Africans were profitable cargo (Dennis, 1984). “In the 16th century, 887,500 slaves were imported; in the 17th, 2,750,000; in the 18th, 7,000,000; and in the 19th, 3,250,000” (Dennis, 1984, p. 25). Menakem (2017) described the evolution of the Enslavement era as:

Colonists created Whiteness, which enabled them to soothe the dissonance among White bodies; delegitimize, dehumanize, and totemize Black ones;

to create a culture of [White supremacy]; and to build institutions, processes, and relationships that maintained this culture. The White body became the standardized, normal body; other bodies, especially Black bodies, were defined as aberrant or substandard. (p. 73)

The implication from Menakem's assertion is that nearly everything, from practices to policies, becomes institutionalized from an interest. This form of racial institutionalization is evidenced by a process of legal decisions aimed at maintaining a White status quo.

Alexander (2020) believed that European imperialism is to blame for the classification of different races. Both Kendi and Alexander proposed that racism in America became necessary to justify slavery. Kendi (2017) implied that American practices, and later policies, evolved from political self-interests, not from racist ideas. Alexander concurred by asserting "the idea of race emerged as a means of reconciling chattel slavery" (p. 28). In America, chattel slavery meant that Africans were property and not human; race assigned value to people of different colors. As follows, people of color were considered inferior, less close to the human race and more akin to the animals; they were the savages. Race became the way Europeans justified their brutality towards people of color. Alexander (2020) detailed that racist ideas and slavery came about only after the demand for labor outgrew the system of indentured servitude and bondsmen. Both Kendi and Alexander agreed that in the Europeans' minds, humans had dominion over animals (the savages), and they were to enslave and work them as they sought. As plantation farming expanded, the need for land and labor to harvest tobacco and cotton did as well. Two by-products of this expansion emerged: (1) "a social system that

legalized terror against Black and White bondsmen” (Alexander, 2020, p. 29), and (2) a justification of that terror through racist ideas.

History of Legalization of racism through Policies, Laws, and the Courts.

Menakem (2017) explained that the dominance of Whiteness was institutionalized through the Virginia legislature as early as 1691. Kendi (2017) cited that on the eve of the American Revolution, early enlightenment thinkers such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson expressed beliefs along the lines of “a beautiful body will be all the more beautiful the Whiter it is” (p. 86). While both Franklin and Jefferson had racist views, they both believed that slavery would debase the young nation’s existence (Kendi, 2017). Thus, when the U.S. Constitution was drafted in 1787, the language itself was deliberately colorblind (the words slave or negro were never used), but the document was built upon a compromise regarding the prevailing racial caste system” (Alexander, 2020, p. 32). That compromise came in the agreements: to only extend slavery for 20 years, that it should not be prohibited before 1808, and passing a law that required states to return fugitive slaves to their owners (Dennis, 1984).

“By 1790, the total investment in slaves was \$104, 639, 000” (Dennis, 1984, p. 55). Ironically, on March 26, 1790, the first Naturalization Act passed and declared citizenship to “free White persons [of] good character” (Kendi, 2017, p. 121). “In practice, only White, male property owners could naturalize and acquire the status of citizens, whereas women, non-White persons, and indentured servants could not” (Immigration History, 2019, para. 1). Blacks and other racial groups were notably excluded from the Act. Meanwhile, poor Whites had no rights because they did not own

land, but they were considered more favorably in society than Blacks; this perpetrated a racial caste system as Blacks were no longer permitted to own land (Menakem, 2017).

During the pre-Civil War era, states in the North carried a set of laws known as the “slave codes,” which discouraged slaves from migrating to their states. For Blacks already living in the North, the laws served to deny them basic rights such as voting, education in public schools, and equal protections and treatment under the law (Litwack, 1961). The end of the Civil War brought about the freedom of four million enslaved people (Public Broadcasting System, n.d.). Former slave states, known as the Southern States, passed what became known as the “Black Codes,” which were modeled after the slave codes in the North (Foner, 1988). Southern States used Black Codes to undermine legislation passed to give former slaves rights under the new amendments. It became undoubtedly clear that the former slave states had little intention of giving freed slaves their rights (Public Broadcasting System, n.d.).

“In 1865, [Benjamin G. Humphreys, the governor of Mississippi, equivocated in his inaugural address] the views of many Southerners when he said, ‘Ours is and ever shall be a government of White men’ . . . the purity and progress of both races require that [the] caste [system] must be maintained, and intermarriage between the races be forbidden” (*The New York Times*, 1865, para 2). Thus, the purpose of the Black Codes was to maintain White supremacy by controlling the now-freed Blacks and keeping them as low wage laborers while restricting their freedoms. For example, some states enacted vagrancy laws, under which freed Blacks could be arrested for minor infractions and sentenced to time in hard labor (Foner, 1988). Both Mississippi and South Carolina passed Black Code laws before the end of 1865 (the year the Civil War ended) with other

Southern states to follow (*The New York Times*, 1865). While Black Codes varied from state to state, the laws standardized a second-class citizen status for Blacks. Most restricted property and business ownership limited the ability to move freely through public spaces, created penalties for not working, and diminished the rights of Blacks to be treated equally in the justice system (PBS, n.d.; *The American Yawp Reader*, n.d).

Black Codes were the attempt of Southern states to use federalism under the United States Constitution to assert states' rights and deny those of Blacks. The codes were designed to preserve a system and legacy of White supremacy. However, the Black Codes were just the first set of laws to codify racism in American institutions after the Civil War. The laws would be strengthened by the federal courts through landmark Supreme Court cases.

The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was introduced by senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts in 1870 (U.S. Senate, n.d.). In the wake of the Civil War and after passage of the Reconstruction amendments (13th: abolition of slavery, 14th: citizenships to all persons naturalized or born in the U.S., and 15th: right to vote for AA men), the bill would go further and extend freed slaves' access to accommodations, theaters, public schools, churches, and cemeteries while also making the use of race as a factor to keep citizens from jury selections illegal. All lawsuits regarding the issue of race and the new amendments would be brought before federal, not state court (U.S. Senate, n.d.). On February 27, 1875, the Civil Rights Act passed, but not before eliminating one special provision: the one which prohibited segregation in public schools. Just as U.S. history documents, the advancement of Blacks would be short-lived. The Supreme Court ruled the law unconstitutional in 1883, citing that "the Thirteenth Amendment only bars slavery

and involuntary servitude . . . refusing to allow Blacks to use hotels, restaurants, or other public accommodations is not a “badge of slavery” (U.S. Senate, n.d.). This decision paved the way for the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case (Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896).

In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court found that separate but equal facilities for Blacks and Whites were constitutional (U.S. Senate, n.d.). Homer Plessy challenged the Louisiana state law of “separate but equal” when he protested a railroad having separate cars for Blacks. He claimed it was a violation of his constitutional rights (Dennis, 1984). Justice John Marshall Harlan was the lone dissenter on the Court, stating:

There is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens.

There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind. There is no place for isolated schools by race, religion, and socioeconomic status that can be justified as a benefit to the education of students. (Dennis, 1984, p. 108)

The other Justices, however, viewed it differently and created the “separate but equal” doctrine, which would fuel Jim Crow laws regarding public transportation and drinking fountains, in stores, post offices, libraries, and public schools (Dennis, 1984).

The Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896 codified White Supremacy on the federal level with the Supreme Court’s support of the “separate but equal” doctrine, similar to the Black Codes and the slave codes before them (Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896). However, the Black Codes were state- specific and did not institutionalize racism and White supremacy to the degree of the “separate but equal” doctrine. The Ferguson decision essentially neutralized the Reconstruction amendments and gave former slave states a license to continue racism and White supremacy. It granted authorization from the federal government that racism and

White supremacy could be indoctrinated throughout every institution in American society; education being the most insidious breeding ground.

After *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), Jim Crow laws were sanctioned in the South; public transportation, stores, post offices, drinking fountains, and libraries were segregated (Dennis, 1984). Jim Crow was a return to the permanent order of White supremacy, just like the system of slavery before it. It became the Southern states' response to Black gains during the Reconstruction period (Alexander, 2020). Blacks had gained access to political power with 113 elected Black politicians in Louisiana, and 50 in South Carolina (Dennis, 1984). The Reconstruction period saw the overturning of the Black Codes and the establishment of many laws protecting freed slaves such as the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments, and the Civil Right Act of 1866 (Alexander, 2020). Southern White lash, a term defining a strong White resistance to Black progress, became apparent. The Ku Klux Klan began terrorizing Blacks and intimidating them. Poll taxes, literacy tests, stuffing ballot boxes, hiding voting sites, and arbitrary arresting before election day were all tactics used to prevent Blacks from practicing their voting rights (Dennis, 1984). Jim Crow policies encouraged a culture of White supremacy while punishing and brutalizing Blacks.

Meanwhile, out of the Reconstruction period emerged a focus on Black education and Black civic organizations. Under President Ulysses S. Grant, between 1869 and 1877, several land grants were given to states to form educational institutions of higher learning for Blacks: Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) such as Morehouse College, Fisk University, Howard University, Atlanta University, Virginia Union, Spelman, and Clarke College (Dennis, 1984). The Freedmen's Bureau, established

by Congress in 1865, spent millions of dollars aiding and educating Blacks through opening schools with government funding. In 1881, Booker T. Washington modeled Tuskegee University as an institution of vocational and practical training for Blacks. However, many saw him as endorsing Jim Crow (Dennis, 1984) because his methods seemed to condone maintaining separation through a form of White supremacy where Blacks stayed in their place and took on whatever rights and dignities Whites thought they should have. It became known as the Washington way, regarded by many, especially W.E.B. DuBois, as reducing Blacks to trades as the only occupational choices. DuBois became a figurehead at Atlanta University and spearheaded the 1905 Niagara Movement, known as a radical group for rejecting Washington's view of Black inferiority. Later, in 1910, members of the Movement formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (the NAACP). The NAACP challenged the legal standings of Jim Crow by taking cases of Black petitioners to court (Dennis, 1984).

By 1945, the massive convergence of Black migrants to the North, the growing political power of Blacks in the North, and the increase of membership and influence of the NAACP resulted in some weakening blows to Jim Crow. Alexander (2020) explained:

In 1944, in *Smith v. Allwright*, the Supreme Court ended the use of the all-White primary elections; and in 1946, the Court ruled that state laws requiring segregation on interstate buses were unconstitutional. Two years later, the Court voided any real estate agreements that racially discriminated against purchasers. In 1949, the Court ruled that Texas's segregated law school for Blacks was inherently unequal and inferior in every respect to its law school for Whites. In 1950, *McLaurin v.*

Oklahoma, declared that Oklahoma had to desegregate its law school. Thus, even before Brown, the Supreme Court had already begun to set in motion a striking pattern of desegregation . . . Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was unique, however. It signaled the end of “home rule” in the South with respect to racial affairs. Earlier decisions had chipped away at the “separate but equal” doctrine, yet Jim Crow had managed to adapt to the changing legal environment, and most Southerners had remained confident that the institution would survive. Brown threatened not only to abolish segregation in public schools but also, by implication, the entire system of legalized discrimination in the South. (p. 45)

Despite his personal and political stances, President Eisenhower executed the Court’s Brown v. Board (1954) decision, mostly because television was becoming popular in American homes and the U.S. was promoting democracy around the world against Communist nations. The national agenda of White supremacy did not parallel the international one of freedom (Dennis, 1984). However, not all states were willing to abide by the court’s decision. A 14-year-old boy by the name of Emmett Till was murdered for supposedly catcalling a White woman in Mississippi in 1955. The lynching was so horrendous that Till’s face was unrecognizable during his open-casket funeral. He became one of the “most notorious victims” of the Whitelash to desegregation (Kendi, 2017). While Blacks being murdered was not unheard of, Till’s killing struck a beat in the hearts of both Black and White America. With the aid and support of sympathetic Whites, Black leaders devised new strategies to evoke the conscience of the nation, nonviolence and civil disobedience. A pastor from Atlanta, Georgia, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

encouraged nonviolent actions such as boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, and mass marches (Dennis, 1984). By 1956, the boycotts were going strong and college students (forming the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee- SNCC) were staging sit-ins in segregated stores and public places throughout the South. That same year, the Supreme Court struck down Alabama's segregation laws, specifically bus segregation (Dennis, 1984).

The Southern States were reluctant to recognize Black civil rights. "On March 12, 1956, nineteen US senators and seventy-seven House representatives signed a Southern manifesto opposing the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision . . . hatred and suspicion where there has been . . . friendship and understanding" (Kendi, 2017, p. 365). In 1957, Arkansas' governor, Orval Faubus, attempted to block nine Black teenagers' admission into Central High in Little Rock by posting the State National Guard as a barricade. It took the Supreme Court, a presidential proclamation, the Army, and other federal forces to defend these students' entrance into the school (Dennis, 1984; Kendi, 2017).

By the late 1950s, the tide was turning in favor of civil rights. In 1958, Black leaders met with President Eisenhower and pushed a new civil rights bill to Congress (Dennis, 1984). However, it would take Dr. King being jailed in Georgia, help from John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign of 1960 to get King released, King's public recognition of Kennedy's efforts, President Kennedy's death, a massive march on Washington D.C. by 250,000 people, and President Lyndon B. Johnson's support of the bill before it was passed in 1963 (Dennis, 1984). W.E.B. DuBois summed up the era as "the slaves went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery (Kendi, 2017, p. 369).

The Conservative Revolution and Election of Ronald Reagan. Over time, Black organizations proved to be entities with a measure of political power and influence. Many Blacks switched from the Republican party to the Democratic party. As a result, the Republicans sought a new path forward to gain control (Alexander, 2020; Dennis, 1984; Kendi, 2017). The Republican presidential candidate of 1964, Barry Goldwater, championed an aggressive approach to riots and fears of crime, branded “Black crime,” making it easier to justify racist policies against Blacks in the name of law and order (Alexander, 2020). Civil rights were seen as a threat to law and order, and demonstrations were met with escalated violence from those opposing the Civil Rights Movement (Kendi, 2017). Many scholars refer to this as the Southern Strategy, by which the Republican Party revived itself through uniting northern and southern anti-Black (and others of color) racists, war hawks, and fiscal and social conservatives (Kendi, 2017). Presidential candidate Richard Nixon aired a television advertisement depicting Black neighborhoods as urban ghettos full of Black criminals, violence, and a problem in America. A 1968 Gallup poll concurred, reporting 81% of respondents believed Nixon’s campaign slogan, “Law and order has broken down in the country” (Kendi, 2017, p. 410). The Republican party had an increasing ideological base amongst its ranks.

The conservative revolution began to reach its full potential with the election of Ronald Reagan as the 40th president. Reagan embodied the White resentment and frustrations planted by the conservatives over the prior decades and masterfully exploited it to produce racist speech like “welfare queens” and “criminal predators” (Alexander, 2020). As a California candidate for Governor, Reagan promised to “send the welfare bums back to work” (Kendi, 2017, p. 424). Good timing and the social temperature of the

nation rewarded Reagan with the presidency. Poor and working-class Whites abandoned the Democrats due to the party's embracing of the pro-Black civil rights agenda (Alexander, 2020). Reagan's policies ushered in an era of governmental terror and discrimination to people of color through local law enforcement.

Reagan made good on the Southern Strategy through a sweeping anti-drug campaign. In October 1982, his administration officially announced the nation's War on Drugs (Alexander, 2020). Less than 2% of the nation saw drugs as the most pressing issue of the times, but the inner cities were fighting their own war of economic collapse (Alexander, 2020; Kendi, 2017). As summarized by Alexander (2020), "joblessness and crack swept inner cities precisely at the moment that a fierce backlash against the Civil Rights Movement was manifesting itself through the War on Drugs" (p. 65). On October 27, 1986, supported by Democrats and Republicans, Reagan signed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act into law. Kendi (2017) claimed the bill was the most racist bill of the decade, citing huge disparities in sentencing times between cheap crack (used mostly by Blacks and the poor) - 5 years for 5 grams; and expensive cocaine (used mostly by Whites and the wealthy) - 5 years for 500 grams. Alexander (2020) argued, "[crack] was a godsend to the Right...it could not have appeared at a more politically opportune moment" (p. 67). As policy goes, the money will follow; budgets of all levels of law enforcement ballooned over the next decades, especially from 1981 to 1991. The Department of Defense, \$33 million to \$1,042 million; DEA, \$86 million to \$1,026 million; and FBI anti-drug allocations, \$38 million to \$181 million. Unfortunately, programs for drug treatment, prevention, and education were left to crumble. The National Institute on Drug Abuse budget was reduced from \$274 million to \$57 million from 1981 to 1984, and the

Department of Education cut to \$3 million from \$14 million (Alexander, 2020). With this new fiscal direction and fortified war chest, the War on Drugs and policies against crime became the nation's answer, no matter who was president or which party was in control.

The Bipartisan Adoption of Racist Policies. Bill Clinton, a Democrat who succeeded the Reagan era, continued the conservative drumbeat against crime. In his 1994 State of the Union address, Clinton endorsed the idea of a federal edition of the Three Strikes laws, which were first passed in California (Alexander, 2020). This bipartisan crime bill, championed by both Republicans and Democrats, was passed by the House and Senate in 1994 (Alexander, 2020). The bill mandated life sentences or maximum time for anyone who committed three felonies, despite the crime, non-violent offences included. It authorized more than \$16 billion for state prison grants and expansion of state and local police forces. Under the Clinton administration, prison populations increased more than during any other president's tenure in American history (Alexander, 2020; Kendi, 2017).

Meanwhile, some states passed their own Three Strikes laws, imposing a life sentence for anyone convicted of almost any third offense and transferring power away from judges to prosecutors (Alexander, 2020). Despite their controversial nature, these laws have persisted. Currently, a person convicted of their third "strike" gets life imprisonment without parole in Indiana, Georgia, Louisiana, Montana, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin; despite research showing that these laws continue to help cause increased incarceration and recidivism rates, trial costs and burdens on the court system, aging prison population, threat to law enforcement officers, and ultimately increases tax burden (Joshi, 2021).

Statistics from the California Department of Corrections report Three Strikes laws disproportionately affect minority populations. More than 45 % of inmates serving life sentences are AA (Stanford Law School, n.d.). Three Strikes policies are analogous to school disciplinary policies where often AA males are the most adversely affected. Broad national policies reinforce and shape, through a continuous revolving loop, local behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs about and towards individuals. It is not a stretch to offer that Reagan's trickle-down policies were more effective regarding criminal policy and racist impacts than in economics. The target of those policies, intended or not, became Black males and the communities in which they lived. National policies are the start of all other institutional policies and play a role in the cultural setting of those institutions, education being no exception. The criminal policies of the nation, states, and local government also inform those of the local schools. The people who support these policies are found in our schools; the people affected by them are in our schools. The fear, attitudes, and beliefs cultivated in Black males by these policies do not remain in our segregated neighborhoods, but are carried with us, within us. It is an assumption of this study that those fears, attitudes, and beliefs inform the policies and practices of the educational setting and are reflected in the disproportionate number of disciplined AA male students. Thus, it is important to spend time discussing how those policies became operable in and towards individuals over time. Essentially, the brutality towards Emmett Till in 1955 would become commonplace and legal. A discussion of the cases of Rodney King, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Ahmaud Alberry follows.

Applications of Racist Policy on the Black Male

Niggas from the hood is the best actors
We the ones that got wear our face backwards
Put your frown on before they think you soft...
Niggas from the hood is the best actors
Got learn to speak in ways that's unnatural
Just to make it through the job interviews.
(Cole, 2016, Verse 3)

Rodney King. In the thick of tougher criminal laws roaring through the nation, Rodney King, a middle-aged AA man living in Los Angeles (LA), took the national stage. In 1991, King, who was on parole for robbery, led Los Angeles police on a high-speed chase while driving under the influence (Krbechek & Bates, 2017). Once stopped, King was ordered out of the car and reportedly beaten for 15 minutes by officers with hand blows, kicks, and batons while more than 12 other officers watched; King's injuries resulted in "skull fractures, broken bones and teeth, and permanent brain damage" (Krbechek & Bates, 2017, para. 7). The beating was broadcast on local news networks and later expanded to national television. It was a modern-day Emmett Till scenario for all to view. However, on April 29, 1992, a mostly White jury decided the four LAPD officers' brutality and public lashing of a Black man was legal (Kendi, 2017). The jury consisted of 12 residents from "the distant suburbs of Ventura County — nine Whites, one Latino, one biracial person, one Asian" (Krbechek & Bates, 2017, para. 8).

The trial was televised, and public response was immediate. The officers' acquittal struck a match to the combustible climate of racial and economic inequality in the city; a riot commenced and raged uncontrollably for the next five days (Krbechek & Bates, 2017). While it is beyond the scope of this study to dissect how LA created conditions that allowed government-sanctioned brutality against Black people, it is critical to understand that LA's façade of progressiveness is similar to that of the schools. At the time of Rodney King's public beating, the city elected its first Black mayor, Tom Bradley. Despite the progressive move, the Black community continued to feel the brunt of policing practices more than any other. The latter point is significant because school systems often hire Black administrators when the population is significant AA, but the outcomes in discipline go unchanged. To say that the punishment side of school discipline in America rests with Blacks would be an understatement. In current times, we witness the unapologetic airing of Black males being unfairly punished and beaten over traditional media outlets and social media. The list of Blacks, especially males, publicly subjected to this unfettered brutality and punishment, sadly, continues to grow. Trayvon Martin. "Nothing jumped-started the traveling exposition of the post-racial lie better..."

Trayvon Martin. "Nothing jumped-started the traveling exposition of the post-racial lie better than what happened on February 26, 2012" (Kendi, 2017, p. 501), when neighborhood watchman, George Zimmerman, harassed, chased down, and fatally shot a 17-year-old Black teenager, Trayvon Martin, in Sanford, Florida. Trayvon lived in Miami Gardens, Florida with his mother, Sybrina Fulton; he was visiting his father due to being on a ten-day suspension from school (Cable News Network, 2013). After returning to his

father's community from a store run, Trayvon encountered Zimmerman who questioned his presence in the community. Trayvon attempted to run from Zimmerman, but he was persistent, ignoring a directive from the police dispatcher not to chase Trayvon (Kendi, 2017). Zimmerman and Trayvon eventually fought, and Zimmerman ended Trayvon's life by shooting him in an alleged act of self-defense (Kendi, 2017; Cable News Network, 2013). It took over six weeks to bring charges against Zimmerman, after federal and state interventions (Cable News Network, 2013). Zimmerman's legal defense team painted Trayvon as a "thug" and the jury exonerated Zimmerman with racist justifications such as Trayvon was the thug and predator in the situation, and he did not belong in the predominantly White neighborhood. The term "thug" is the new "n-word" (Kendi, 2017, p. 502).

Tamir Rice. Ta-Nehisi Coates' work, *Between the World and Me* (a publication of a letter written to his fifteen-year-old son), Coates writes "You have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect" (2015, p. 9). On November 22, 2014, Tamir was in Cudell Park Recreation Center (CPRC) in Cleveland, Ohio, playing with a black toy gun that resembled a real gun. Around 3:11 p.m. someone called the local police stating that a "guy with a pistol was pointing a gun at multiple people on the playground at the CPRC " (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020, para 7). According to records, "the caller gave a detailed description of the individual, stated that he was probably a juvenile, and that the gun was probably fake, but he also described the scene as very frightening" (para. 7). The 911 dispatcher translated the call as Code 1, the highest priority (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). Tamir stood at five feet, seven inches and 195 pounds. Once on the scene,

one of the two police officers, Timothy Loehmann, immediately jumped out of the car and shot and killed him. Both officers reported that Tamir reached for a toy gun, but two eyewitnesses report not seeing Tamir motion for a gun (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). Loehmann was not charged, cleared by a grand jury, but fired from the Cleveland PD for falsifying his application. He is on the White Sulphur Police Force in West Virginia at the time of this writing (Menakem, 2017). Tamir's shooting provides an understanding of how the Black male body is viewed and treated. The caller suggested that Tamir was "probably" a juvenile, and the gun was "probably" fake. None of those facts mattered once the officers arrived on the scene. Just like in schools, the Black boy's body was seen as older, threatening, and deserving of immediate control before any questions or probes. Too often, the use of strong sanctions precedes any surfacing of sanity, or as Menakem (2017) put it, "the White body experienced reflexive fear . . . [and] destroyed the Black body" (p. 89).

Philando Castile. On July 6, 2016, Philando Castile, a 32-year-old cafeteria worker at J.J. Hill Montessori Magnet School, was shot by Minnesota police officer, Jeronimo Yanez. Yanez pulled Philando over on a traffic stop for a nonworking working brake light. Philando's girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, was on the passenger side and her then-4-year-old daughter was in the back seat (Joles, 2017). Yanez asked for Philando's driver's license and insurance. Philando announced to the officer, "Sir, I do have to tell you I do have a . . . firearm on me" and that he had a permit. Yanez replied, "Okay, don't pull it out" (Joles, 2017). Diamond told the officers, "He's not" (Joles, 2017). Yanez repeated himself and then fired seven shots into the car (Joles, 2017). Diamond cried out to Yanez, "You killed my boyfriend!" (Joles, 2017).

The shooting was broadcast throughout the nation as the girlfriend live-streamed it on Facebook. Viewers of the video described the officer as “frantic” and declared he “shot [Castile] unnecessarily” (Nelson, 2018). One year later, officer Yanez was acquitted of all charges, including second-degree manslaughter and two counts of dangerous discharge of a firearm (Nelson, 2018). Officer Yanez walked away from police duty with a \$48,500 settlement from the department (Joles, 2017). After six years, “nothing is reassuring to tell the hundreds of children at the school where Castile worked for more than a decade . . . there was no reason for his killing” (Nelson, 2018, para 5). Like the ones before and the ones that will follow, this incident follows the trend of AA males facing harassment, brutality, and fatal consequences from police and other authorities who racially profile them. The school system treats AA males similarly because many American institutions carry the same beliefs, behaviors, and practices; their aim being the intimidation and elimination of the Black male.

Ahmaud Arbery. Another gut-wrenching forced brutality against a Black man occurred on February 23, 2020, when Ahmaud Arbery was murdered while jogging in a South Georgia suburban neighborhood (Fausset, 2022). Ahmaud’s life was ended at the age of 25 by the ill intentions of three White men. He was a former high school football STAR in the city of Brunswick (Glynn County, Georgia). After attending college, he returned home and lived with his mother (Fausset, 2022). Ahmaud often took runs through Satilla Shores, a nearby suburban area. Friends and family reported that he was an avid jogger who prioritized his health and worked to stay in good shape (Fausset, 2022). During his jog on that February day, he was chased down by three White residents of Satilla Shores (Georgia Bureau of Investigation, 2020).

Gregory McMichael was a former Glynn County police officer and investigator who claimed that Ahmaud looked like a man suspected in several break-ins in the area. He called Travis McMichael, his son, to help confront and detain Ahmaud (Georgia Bureau of Investigation, 2020). According to the police report, the men carried a .357 Magnum handgun and a shotgun with them as they chased Ahmaud in their pickup truck while trying to cut him off (Georgia Bureau of Investigation, 2020). William Bryan, 52, also assisted the McMichael's by filming and joining the chase (Fausset, 2022). During the encounter, Travis McMichael shot and killed Ahmaud (Georgia Bureau of Investigation, 2020).

The Arbery case attracted national attention and invigorated discussion about race and justice and Black lives, especially Black males. During the trial, many racist slurs were used to justify the brutal slaying as Ahmaud's mother sat by and wept. Fausset (2022) wrote:

Laura D. Hogue, a lawyer for one of the defendants, said that Mr. Arbery had become "a recurring nighttime intruder — and that is frightening and unsettling. Jason Sheffield, a lawyer for Travis McMichael, suggested that Mr. Arbery's presence in [an unoccupied, under construction] house constituted burglary — a felony — and that his client therefore was justified in trying to detain him (para 45).

Hogue also made an undignified assault on Ahmaud in her closing; one which set the news media ablaze. Hogue shamelessly claimed, "turning Ahmaud Arbery into a victim after the choices that he made does not reflect the reality of what brought [him] to Satilla Shores in his khaki shorts with no socks to cover his long, dirty toenails"

(Waldrop, 2021, para 3). Charles Coleman Jr., a civil rights attorney and former prosecutor responded by stating: Hogue took the opportunity to portray Arbery as a "runaway slave . . . Her word choice was intentional, her descriptions were unnecessary. And the description ultimately is inflammatory . . . It was an attempt to sort of really trigger some of the racial tropes and stereotypes that may be deeply embedded in the psyche of some of the jurors (Waldrop, 2021, para 12).

Despite the verbal assaults on Ahmaud, justice prevailed. The Glynn County jury deliberated for nearly 11 hours before handing down the verdicts (Waldrop, 2021). All three men were found guilty of state crimes on many counts. The McMichaels received sentences of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, while Bryan received 30 years with the possibility of parole (Fausset, 2022).

Understanding how racism is employed in the larger society as in the above cases, even in the extreme forms, sheds light on how it is practiced in micro settings such as schools. Schools are no exception to spreading and operating from negative stereotypes (Horsford & Grosland, 2013). Stovall (2020) believed that classrooms serve to preserve hierarchical powers and perpetuate White Supremacy.

Black Males and Education

African American male students encounter significant obstacles that impede their academic achievement (Losen, 2015). One of the most pervasive challenges continues to be disciplinary practices within educational settings (Grady, 2023; Losen, 2015; Skiba & Williams, 2014). Research over recent decades consistently highlights that African American male students face higher rates of suspension and expulsion compared to their White counterparts (Danilova, 2018; Ferguson, 2001; Losen, 2015; Skiba & Williams,

2014). Skiba and Williams (2014) extensively documented the disproportionate application of discipline among African American male students, while Losen (2015) identified racial bias and stereotyping as contributing factors to this disparity. Ferguson (2001) argued that the achievement gap for African American male students stems from systemic inequalities in school resources and community support.

In School. School disciplinary policies, particularly zero-tolerance policies, have contributed to the overrepresentation of AA male students in suspension and expulsion (Kemp, 2024; Skiba & Williams, 2014). While these policies have an appearance to maintain order and safety, oftentimes the outcomes are severe consequences for minor infractions, disproportionately affecting minority students (Losen, 2015). As a result of the punitive nature of Zero-Tolerance Policies, alternative schools have emerged as potential solutions. These schools offer more flexible school environments and disciplinary approaches and provide support systems that aim to address the needs of students sent there (Losen, 2015; Skiba & Williams, 2014). Yet, they still segregate students, mostly AA males, from regular school and attaining educational achievements.

In confronting these challenges faced by AA male students in education, understanding the effects of these policies and exploring alternatives is critical to addressing the issues. Research and evaluations are essential for promoting equitable educational opportunities and addressing disparities in the disciplinary outcomes faced by AA male students. Thus, I want to briefly discuss Zero-Tolerance policies and their use of alternative schools in the next section.

African American Male Students Under Zero-Tolerance Policies. Similar to the overt laws governing the larger society, the educational system has incorporated its

own racist policies, namely, zero-tolerance. Tracey Shollenberger (2013), in the review of school suspension and outcomes, explained:

Since the 1970s, several broad shifts have occurred in the way student behavior is managed in U.S. schools. Corporal punishment has declined, zero-tolerance policies have proliferated, and schools have adopted surveillance strategies once reserved for the criminal justice system. (p. 42)

Toldson et al. (2013) reported that “elevated public awareness and perceptions of violence have increased schools’ reliance on suspensions, zero-tolerance, and other exclusionary disciplinary policies” (p. 118). The term “zero tolerance” was coined in 1988 when Attorney General Edwin Meese gave United States Customs agents the authority to impound boats or vehicles that they suspected of having illicit drugs on board. “Following the federal government’s actions, in 1988 school districts in California and New York began adopting zero tolerance policies” (Collier, 2007, p. 54).

The intent for the discipline policy under zero tolerance was to protect students from firearms and drugs, but the reality is it has been used to proliferate racial bias and the personal interpretation of school officials (Valles & Villalpando, 2013). Skiba et al. (2013) indicated that “race appears to be the strongest and most consistent non behavioral predictor of school discipline” (p. 144). AA students receive more office referrals, out-of-school suspensions (OSS), and expulsions due to zero-tolerance policies (Danilova, 2018). African American students’ suspension rates are much higher than the national average of their peers; 30 % of AA male students and 19 % of AA female students are

suspended annually while this outcome is not explained by the seriousness of the behavior or the offense (Shollenberger, 2013). Cornell and Lovegrove (2013) described:

When school authorities learn of a threat, they often apply a zero-tolerance model of discipline that typically involves immediately removing the offending student from school. A zero-tolerance approach means that all students receive harsh consequences regardless of the seriousness of their intentions. Although the suspension is intended as a corrective measure that motivates students to improve their behavior, there is abundant evidence that it does not achieve that purpose ... Because Black students are more likely to be suspended than White students, they disproportionately experience the negative consequences of this counterproductive discipline strategy. (p. 191-192)

It is consequential that both Valles and Villalpando (2013) and Cornell and Lovegrove (2013) illustrated zero-tolerance as having the same effect that the history of the U.S. criminal policy did; that is, racist and devastating impacts on African Americans. For instance, zero-tolerance's intended purpose did not meet the practical outcomes. The intent was to be color-blind, but the outcomes are of negative and racial consequences to AA, especially males. Ironically, the trends of state adoptions of the policies also paralleled the spread of criminal policy.

The state of Kentucky passed a Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Community Act in 1994, which led to the adoption of broad zero-tolerance policies and in turn, increased the number of students removed from schools with the students becoming younger each year (Vanderhaar et al., 2013). Valles and Villalpando (2013) reported zero tolerance have

not kept schools any safer and even with tougher and more disciplinary policies, it has not resulted in decreased crime, but the policies have “created damaging trends for many already deeply entrenched disparities in communities” (Valles & Villalpando, 2013, p. 260).

Researchers suggest there is evidence of disproportionate implementation of discipline policies such as zero tolerance and out-of-school suspensions directed at male students of color, specifically African American males.

(Valles & Villalpando, 2013, p. 262)

According to Grady (2023), zero-tolerance policy is now used for many different misbehaviors, becoming the typical response to school rule-breaking, which has increased suspension rates. “The zero-tolerance policy puts African Americans at a disadvantage; unlike their counterparts, they often are not given another chance to stay in school” (Bell, 2015, p. 1261).

With an increased use of zero-tolerance policies, suspensions, and expulsions, similar to incarceration rates, have dramatically increased (Collier, 2007). For example, in Chicago, six years of zero tolerance policies resulted in 150 times more expulsions, going from 100 students in the year 1993 to 1,500 students in the year 2000, with an overwhelming amount of the students being African American males (Collier, 2007, p. 7).

Discipline policies such as suspension and expulsion-including "zero tolerance," are based on the perspective and assumption that individual students are the problem. (Austell, 2008, p. 8-9)

Because fear is used as a motivating factor behind the increased use of zero tolerance policy, it can be seen as an overt response to a violation regardless of the

situation or the risk (Losen, 2013). Nonetheless, just as with the apparent fear of the AA male in the larger society, schools sought ways to use these policies to remove students, despite the seriousness of their behaviors.

Alternative Schools. In the early 1980s, the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention began promoting alternative schools based on the belief that schools could play a role in reducing youth crime. In theory, alternative schools exist to provide optional learning environments for students who are struggling in traditional schools. "Two basic subsets of alternative schools have emerged to serve students deemed at risk of failure: (a) one for students experiencing academic difficulty and at risk of dropping out, and (b) the other for students described as dangerous or disruptive" (Losen, 2015, p. 234). In 1998, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicated that there were 3,850 public alternative schools for at-risk students; by 2002, NCES identified 10,900 public alternative schools (Losen, 2015). In the early 1990s, 640,000 American students were enrolled in alternative schools. Currently, nearly 800,000 students are enrolled in alternative schools (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022).

In contrast, school crime and safety showed a decrease from 10% to 6% between 1995 and 2001, and was down 4% in 2011 (Losen, 2015). The use of nonpunitive protocols has been shown to reduce suspension rates over zero-tolerance suspensions (Losen, 2013). In a survey of 325 principals on their attitudes towards zero-tolerance, the results indicated that OSS rates and expulsion were lower amongst principals who believed those practices were less necessary in promoting a positive school climate (Skiba et al., 2013).

Research supports that alternative schools have only “exacerbated inequities rooted in race, poverty, and special education and heightened segregation by race and disability” by removing students (Losen, 2015, p. 235). Several decades of research document that exclusionary discipline is consistently applied disproportionately to Black students and that disciplinary alternative schools might be used increasingly for punishment, exclusion, and tracking of African American students deemed too disruptive and dangerous (Losen, 2015). In addition, researchers have questioned whether alternative schools are effective as interventions because they tend to “isolate, concentrate, and exclude students deemed too disruptive or dangerous” and “contribute over time to the school-to-prison pipeline, particularly for students of color” (Losen, 2015, p. 233). This has resulted in major disparities, with Black boys being overrepresented in alternative placement for disciplinary reasons (US Government Accountability Office, 2019). Kho and Rabovsky (2022) reported that 19% of AA male students are in an alternative school while school enrollment is 15% as compared to White males being 9% below their enrollment representation in regular school. The latter is critical, as prior-mentioned statistics reveal that White male students violate school rules at the same rate as AA male students.

It is imperative to consider societal and educational policies in terms of how they affect the experiences of AA male students in the school environment. It would be a failure to discuss these policies in a vacuum or without consideration of their effect on the people subjected to them. It is my belief that we cannot just view policy as Black and White but also as the shaper of culture, norms, attitudes, and beliefs.

Prior Research on African American Males' School Experiences

Kendi (2017) offered that “consumers of the racist ideas have been led to believe there is something wrong with Black people and not the policies that have enslaved, oppressed, and confined so many . . . ” (p. 10). When we regard school discipline in a manner similar to Kendi’s work, we can start to see how the educational institution has mirrored its larger societal norms. As per previously highlighted in literature, the educational institution has sought to place blame for the disproportionality of discipline on the shoulders of AA students, their families, or communities rather than systemic or policy issues. These beliefs have contributed to the complacency of relying on disciplinary measures to address AA students’ behavior, rather than examining the policies and practices of the institution.

Within the confines of this study, it is an assumption that teachers’ and administrators’ beliefs and practices play a significant role in the disproportionate outcomes of school discipline. In prior research, researchers presented evidence to support this idea. The next section will discuss teachers’ and administrators’ beliefs regarding AA students to demonstrate one of the study’s underlying assumptions that school’s racist practices stem from the beliefs of school officials to produce disproportionate disciplinary results.

Teachers’ Belief and Practices. According to Steinberg et al. (2013), demographics such as location, race and gender of students, and poverty levels matter in relation to the school’s safety; but what matters more are the relationships students and their parents have with the teachers and officials inside the building. Yet, teachers and administrators view AA male students’ educational failures as the fault of the students,

their families, and their communities. “When it comes to misbehaviors that are questionable, teachers are more than likely to rely on stereotypes that guided their decision-making.” (Ross, 2023, p. 7). In contrast, much of the research on the subject indicates that “this may be due, in part, to the fact that many teachers lack the needed experience and training to effectively meet the needs of students from various backgrounds” (Peterson, 2021, 2005, para 16). In a supplemental paper discussing racial disparities in school discipline, Wald (2014) highlighted an ethnographic study that concluded White female teachers do not treat AA students as positively as they treat White students and AA male students received the least positive treatment of all. Along with Lynn et al. (2010), Wald (2014) reported that prior studies support that teachers attributed external factors such as problems at home to behavior issues of White boys while signaling internal factors, such as poor self-control, as the cause of Black boys’ misbehaviors. Under the analysis of prior research, Wald explained “the more subjective the category of offense – i.e., insubordination, disobedience, disruption, defiance – the greater the risk that bias (either explicit or unconscious) will seep into the process” (p. 2).

Lynn et al. (2010) conducted a qualitative study with 50 school officials (teachers, administrators, and school counselors) to understand teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives on the persistent academic failures of AA male high school students. The high school had a 99% AA population in one of the wealthiest Black counties in the nation. The researchers conducted interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations over 18 months. Quoting Derrick Bell (1992), prominent critical race legal scholar, the researchers expressed that due to the desegregation of U.S. schools, “African American children’s culture and language were misunderstood and pathologized as deficient, and

these students were ultimately framed as oppositional” (p. 291). Drawing on prior examination, the researchers concurred with earlier works, which suggested “most high schools are an arena of risk and failure because most high schools do not provide a supportive and safe context for [AA males] to learn” (p. 293). The study revealed that in many suburban schools, “teachers often view their [AA] students as 'urban' and therefore tend to associate them with negative connotations of the term, such as dangerous, disorderly, and unmotivated (p. 293). Lynn et al. (2010) concluded that 80% of the teachers believed that the AA male students were primarily responsible for their own failures and provided three main reasons: (a) behavior and attitudes about school, (b) community influences, and (c) lack of parental commitment to student success.

In a qualitative study to understand how teachers define appropriate and inappropriate behavior, Austell (2008) found that teachers are fully aware of the definitions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors; however, when asked to reflect, it appeared that some had never thought about whether they called on more males than females. Others realized that they called on males for several reasons, one being a strategy to control behavior. Through in-depth interviews of nine urban middle school teachers (one White male, two White females, two African American males, two African American females, one Hispanic, and one Haitian female), Austell’s findings suggested that the personality and character of teachers play a major role in the behavior of AA male students, and cultural experiences play a formal role in the relationship between race and discipline. Some teachers stated they were raised in predominantly White cultures and had limited experiences and interactions with African Americans; not even the AA teachers felt prepared. Most teachers reported AA male students’ behavior as

active and hyper, with them needing to be engaged and given hands-on type activities. Austell noted that White students were referred to the office more frequently for more serious offenses while AA students were referred for subjective reasons of being disrespectful, loud, or not following the rules. These descriptions highlight how teachers perceive AA male students differently, maybe negatively, and support the beliefs that their behaviors are outliers and need to be improved through discipline. Yet, Austell (2008) refuted the idea that disproportionate discipline is due to AA students acting out more or being from poor households and contended that the disproportionality arises from bias and discrimination in the system as opposed to characteristics of the AA students themselves. This aligns with the premise that classroom interactions between AA students and teachers of a different culture can lead to unfair disciplinary practices when the school official operates under an assumed duty to uphold a system that judges the AA culture as insufficient for the context and interest of that system.

Monroe (2009) researched how effective teachers perceive AA students' behavior. Controlling for race (of teacher), the guiding question was "What perceptions do effective African American and White teachers hold of student behavior in an urban, predominately African American middle school?" (Monroe, 2009, p. 324). Other significant questions: (a) "How do such teachers approach student discipline in their classroom?"; (b) "What factors account for such teachers' perceptions and professional practice?"; and (c) "What similarities and differences exist among such teachers?" (p. 324). Interviews and observations of four teachers (two AA females, one White female, and one White male) comprised the findings of the study. Each teacher was interviewed twice for a time ranging from between one to two hours. Within the study, an AA female

teacher stated that her closest relationships were with students of the same race; with White students, she felt that “you just have to really . . . watch what you say sometimes . . . it is taken differently . . . [but with] African American kids, you know, I’m just like their parents at home . . . as opposed to the White kids” (p. 340). Monroe’s study highlighted the assumption that race is a factor within the educational context from the perspective of an AA teacher. She emphasized, “the teachers in this study challenged deficit explanations for the discipline gap by demonstrating how educators’ perceptions, attitudes, and decisions mitigate perceived disruption and mute unfortunate outcomes that are associated with behavioral concerns (e.g., poor use of instructional time)” (p. 341).

It is important to note the sharp contrast between Austell’s (2008) study in which teachers were not conscious of their classroom management techniques to eliminate or decrease disciplinary outcomes and Monroe’s (2009) examination of effective teachers and their awareness of having to understand the racial composition of their classrooms and students. Monroe concluded that “teachers play a critical role in eliminating disproportionality in school discipline and previous tendencies to underexplored practitioners’ voices and experiences have ill served the educational community” (p. 341). I concur with Monroe because I believe it is important to understand how teachers’ beliefs and practices affect AA students, especially the males, given the disproportionality.

Collier (2007) used a qualitative methodological study to explore the perceptions and beliefs teachers have about AA male students and how their beliefs intersect with classroom management and disciplinary outcomes. She interviewed and observed four teachers, ages 32 to 38 years old (one African American female and three White females)

in an inner-city middle school. In her research, she cited literature claiming that teachers and the educational institution do not take their share of the problem in teaching AA students because teachers' deficit beliefs about AA students' families, motivations, and limited skills acts as a deterrent to believing AA students can be taught. She relayed that the deficit beliefs "perpetuate[s] the status quo, which is the acceptance of White culture and ideologies as a normalized state of affairs, because the paradigm relinquishes control, blame, and responsibility of teachers and the institutions for the underachievement and over-punishment of African American students" (p. 19). Under examination were two questions: (a) "what are the perceptions and beliefs of teachers about the circumstance of African American male students with respect to achievement, discipline, incarceration rates, and other social/political/economic indicators?" and (b) How do these perceptions and beliefs intersect with classroom management strategies, classroom interactions, and relations with African American male students?" (p. 20). What she found was similar to prior research regarding race and perception. She illustrated an observation in which after recess, a teacher asked her elementary-aged class to line up. A White female student skipped to the line and socialized with her classmates and was not reprimanded, while a Black male student playfully stomped to the line and was harshly reprimanded and threatened. The boy's behavior began to reflect a withdrawn mood and sad demeanor. Collier named her work after this observation, entitled "Salley can Skip, but Jerome can't Stomp" (p. 28). To follow up, Collier quoted Irvine (1990) acknowledging, in the context of schools, "cultural misunderstandings between teachers and students result in conflicts, distrust, hostility, and school failure for African American students" (p. 42). She noted that AA male students are not given the opportunity to make mistakes as other students

because their behaviors are seen as more fearful, dangerous, and deserving of more correction and punishment.

To the latter point, Collier's findings implied teachers' practices, beliefs, and perceptions of AA male students' interface to produce unfair treatment, alienation of AA male students' culture, and malice of care for AA male students. One of the teacher-participants, with 15 years of experience, relayed that some of the AA male students were "unteachable." Collier observed that racist thinking towards AA male students is so normalized that a White female teacher could speak this to her, being a Black woman (as the researcher). Another White female teacher, with 10 years of experience, insisted that the problem with AA students is they had no expectations at home like she did, growing up with high expectations. This teacher-participant judged her AA students' dress, talk, walk, and even body piercings as the issues with them learning in school. The remaining White female teacher, with four years of experience, expressed that the students were a "great group of kids" (p. 97) and reported not having too many problems with them. She relayed that the school structure did not fit well with the AA male students. Lastly, the lone AA teacher in this study's views were different. This teacher-participant saw the problems with AA male students as "multi-layered," suggesting that the problems does not lie solely with the AA students, "their parents, or their communities," but "race, racism, and unequal institutions are a huge factor in the failure and underachievement" (p. 91).

The interesting analysis from the Collier study remains that the longer the teacher's tenure, the more they seemed to hold negative beliefs about the AA male students; none of the other studies provided detailed statements from the teachers to draw

similar analyses. It can be argued that negative beliefs of the longer-tenured teachers were more profound than those of the teachers with less experience. The latter is an interesting observation, because if the institution is one which forces conformity to the pro-White culture, then teachers who have remained in the institution become better agents to propagate racist beliefs. It makes sense that they would have a more negative perception of AA students.

Within the context of this study, it is important to mention that racist actions are not always easily identifiable: the behavior could be categorized as either overt (consciously racist behavior) or more insidious, it could be subtle – covert - (subconsciously racist behavior). It is important to explore whether AA male students, themselves, are aware of both overt and covert racism in their teachers when given the chance to share their lived experiences. This was a focal point of the study. The study sought to uncover whether teachers’ behaviors impact how AA male students view school officials, themselves, and structures outside of education when those students are entangled in the institution of education and come under the authority of officials through disciplinary measures.

AA Students’ Perception of School and the Officials. Researchers have sought to gain an understanding of AA male students’ perception (Bell, 2015; Hargrave et al., 2016; Lynn, et al., 2010; Rolland, 2011). Most literature investigates academic achievement when looking at AA students’ perception. Very little research has sought to understand AA students’ perception in relation to their disciplinary issues. Nonetheless, the literature is useful to ascertain how AA students think and feel about their schools and teachers. Bell (2015) reported that AA male students’ “feelings about school were often

... tied to how teachers saw them” (p. 1267) and that they cared about their teacher’s perception of them.

Bell (2015) employed qualitative research to explore how AA males feel about their school experiences. During a community event, the researcher conducted interviews with 18 AA middle school students in the eastern North Carolina area; defined as a rural area. During the event, the researcher approached the participants’ accompanying adults and after confirmation of parent relationship or legal guardianship, the nature of the study was explained, and permission was given to interview participants. Statements of voluntary participation and right-to-withdraw at any time were given beforehand, as well as parental consent forms. The interviews were in semi-structured form. The researcher used coding and axial procedures to arrive at emerging themes for data analysis. He also used member checking and peer reviews as safeguards for validity and against researcher’s bias. The themes of (1) feelings about school and (2) feelings about teachers were prominent. Many AA students liked school for social and academic reasons but not their teachers. They viewed teachers as “mean” and “controlling” (p. 1265), while feeling policed, which created negative feelings towards their teachers and school in general. Some of the most notable statements by participants were: (a) “I am good most times in school . . . ain’t dropping out. You know they [teachers] want us to,” (b) “It’s hard being in school when you are not wanted,” and (c) “School can be good . . . I feel that my teachers make it worse” (Bell, 2015, p. 1265).

Using action-based research, a White male teacher in an urban middle school (Oakland, CA) conducted research to find out how his AA students experienced and defined racist behavior by him as a White male teacher (Melvin, 2004). He had an AA

female teacher to interview 15 of his AA students. The interview questions asked the students' definition of racism, whether they thought there was racism in school, and what their attitudes were regarding White teachers. This researcher reported, "While it has been important to me to research and investigate my own White identity, I found it equally important to research development of identity formation amongst African-Americans, particularly in the adolescent age" (Melvin, 2004, p. 10). He cited Beverly Daniel Tatum's work from her book, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* (1999), to explain how AA kids start to explore their own racial identities; specifically stating, "Black youths develop racial awareness at an early age because of the messages they received from society" (p. 10). The conclusion revealed that students identified racism as a form of mistreatment from teachers, that the White male teaching style did not meet AA students' idea of teaching, and AA "students are emotional about racism" (p. 37) and want to share their thoughts (Melvin, 2004). Melvin's study is relevant to the concepts under review in this study because his research findings support the underlying assumptions that AA students hold perceptions and beliefs regarding race as a response to the teachers in their classrooms.

Similar to Melvin (2004) investigation, Woodson (2013) found three themes from participants' meaning of their discipline experiences: (1) "the nature of racism in the lives of participants;" (2) "the politics of negotiating self-expression and emotion;" and (3) "evaluating authority and legitimacy in learning environments" (p. 4). Woodson researched "Black students' lived experiences of school discipline through the stories they tell about getting into trouble" (p. 2). Using critical race theory as a framework within a phenomenological study, the purpose was to understand how AA students

interpreted and responded to rules, authorities, and school discipline. The study took place in the state of Michigan in which AA students represented slightly over 10% of the population, they represented over 27% of the suspensions. Specially, Saginaw was chosen as a location; “a former manufacturing center with a little over 300,000 residents . . . the 2000 U.S. Census, the population was 47.02% White and 43.26% Black” (p. 3). Woodson reported that “2002-2010, the Federal Bureau of Investigation listed Saginaw as the most violent city per capita” (p. 3). The researchers used Triumphant Church, with membership of 1,300 members, to conduct student focus groups with 19 AA third grade students, divided randomly into two groups, one of nine and the other of 10 students. All 19 participants had White teachers. The observations and student interviews were also used over a period of six months to collect data. They believed that the cultural and social context of church plays an important role in the AA community. “Triumphant Church was of particular interest for this study due to the children’s ministry, renowned throughout the denomination for the effectiveness of volunteer recruitment, rigor of staff training, and caliber of religious and social activities facilitated” (p. 3). One significant reporting from the study discusses how an AA student named Elijah perceived his teacher profiling him for wearing a Hip-Hop artist shirt but not a White student for wearing a rock artist, Kid Rock, shirt with a Confederate flag. The participant said,

“That teacher hates me. She just hates me and everything I try to do. So, everything I do she says, “that’s a violation. That’s a violation.” But I heard about Kid Rock and how he likes slavery. So, if he can wear a shirt about slavery, that should be a violation” (p. 5).

Rolland (2011) focused on AA high male students and their perceptions of factors contributing to academic success. He chose six students, three juniors and three senior students attending a rural high school in Georgia. He collected data over the Spring semester of 2011 through participant interviews. All participants were asked 16 questions to explore their perspective on the contributing factors of academic achievement and the challenges they faced as AA male students. “Among factors influencing student success were: (a) supportive parents, (b) caring teachers, (c) positive school environment, (d) peer support, and (e) community initiatives” (Rolland, 2011, p. 1). Beyond understanding their culture and not labeling them, the participants’ perceived challenges were (a) “lack of after school community activities,” (b) “negative stereotypes,” (c) “lack of self-initiative,” (d) negative images,” and (e) “lack of belief in self.” In the discussion of challenges, one of the participants explained how he perceived negative comments impacting AA male students:

Basically, I think [what] will hinder people from success is someone telling you that you can’t. Saying you can’t do this, or you can’t do that. Because most of the time we hear that enough and if you hear it so much, you start to believe it and if you believe it, then you won’t do your best and make something of yourself (p. 91).

Significantly, while Rolland study investigated high school AA males and the topic of academic success, it is so important to include regarding AA males’ perspectives. It is important because the students are AA males living in a rural community, which is the focus of this study and the participants have survived the middle school years, and are succeeding or excelling academically. Thus, to have AA high school students’ perception

of the challenges being similar to their younger peers in comparison to discipline is monumental in understanding the issue of school treatment of their population. Next, the context of the study was in rural Georgia, which is the context in which I studied the disciplinary impacts on AA middle school students. Last, the quoted participant draws out a centerpiece of my study when he asserted “Saying we can’t do this or . . . that . . . Because we hear that enough . . . you start to believe it . . . and if you believe it, then you won’t do your best and make something out of yourself.” This participant was describing a phenomenon I believe is co-occurring with AA male students in school. Through his own lived experience, he drew a connection between the treatment in schools and what happens to AA males when they are subject to those unfavorable conditions. If we understand that school discipline acts as extreme conditions upon AA male students who have been subjected to similar situations in which the participant described, then a fair examination should involve questioning whether or not discipline begins to shape AA male students’ self-concept or in layman terms, “won’t do [their] best and make something out [themselves].”

Within this section, diverse research yields similar findings. The studies involved (a) how AA middle school students in a rural area felt about school in a basic qualitative study (Bell, 2015), (b) how AA students perceived their White male teacher and racism in an urban middle school using action-based research (Melvin, 2004), (c) how third grade AA students respond to school rules, authorities, and discipline in a urban school district in a phenomenological study (Woodson, 2013), and (d) how academic-successfully AA male high school students perceive their academic success and challenges in a basic interpretive study (Rolland, 2011). According to the research, it is evident that AA male

students are not treated fairly in schools whether they are excelling academically, in elementary, middle, or high school, or urban, suburban, or rural areas and they are aware of the treatment.

However, two areas of research remain limited. First, AA males' perception of their discipline in rural areas, specifically. Next, how unfair discipline impacts AA male students. It is an assumption of this study that AA male students are subjugated to unfair treatment through discipline, and it modifies their engagement with schools and their belief about themselves. The latter is greatly unexplored by the body of research. Nonetheless, the next section will discuss self-concept to explore possible leads to understand what happens to AA male students within the school environment.

School and the Impact on AA Male Self-Concept. The culture of the school is grounded in the White Middle-class values and demands such as how to talk, write, dress, and interact and AA must adopt the cultural capital of the dominant culture (Swift, 2021). The education structure operates to sustain the White cultural norms and oppress other cultures (Swift, 2021). Some scholars have connected higher Black dense schools with the "oppositional culture" in which students oppose academic achievement to protest the White culture or "acting White" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The literature is clear regarding the cultural disconnect with AA male students. Consequently, it was an assumption of this study that during their academic journey in school, AA male students are no longer negotiating their self-expression or emotions but rather their place in the school context. Under this study, I aimed to understand if the selected participants due to their disciplinary experiences, had perceptions of themselves that do not fit in school and if they believed they belong outside of school.

Research supported disengagement from school if AA male students perceived negativity about themselves or their racial group within a school environment (Bell, 2015). In a meta-analysis of school discipline research, Rocque and Paternoster (2011) expressed that punishment could act as a negative experience that creates hostility towards White authority, which then produces school disengagement and later criminality. Berry (2005) explained that “race, perceived racism, and/or cultural dissonance negatively affected the participants.” He conducted a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of two AA male middle school students who excelled in mathematics, specifically Algebra. Employing critical race theory as a framework, he used student-participant interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews to understand how the students viewed racism and limitations they encountered to achieve their success in mathematics, a usual anomaly in academic success for AA male students. Each of the students were interviewed three times and each student was observed in their Algebra class at least once a week for four consecutive weeks. While Berry’s research focused on academic success, he captured the concept of self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy was evident in their stories. At some point in their experiences, they developed the belief that they were good mathematics students and that they could do mathematics. Both participants had a teacher or parent who helped them realize that they were good at mathematics, which helped foster self-efficacy. In addition, being placed among the "smart kids" served as a motivating factor to achieve (p. 60).

Here the concept of self-efficacy is critical because it speaks to the connection between treatment and its effect on the students. The aim of this study is not to necessarily look at students’ self-efficacy as it relates to academic success but self-

concept as it relates to disciplinary impacts. Self-efficacy involves ability, self-concept defines how the AA male students see themselves. Berry presented a positive effect when AA male students perceive their teachers and the school environment as supportive and caring. The outcome is academic success. I wanted to study the opposite impact. That is whether the AA male students who do not perceive their teachers and school environment as supportive and caring arrive at the opposite end of success; disciplinary actions, which succumb to school disengagement, suspension and later, an attitude that school is not for them.

Investigating whether there is a significant relationship between student-teacher interactions and academic self-concept, Hargrave et al. (2016) reported that student-teacher interactions were associated with AA males' academic self-concept. The quantitative study included 154 African American male high school students in an urban area in the Southeastern region of the United States. The participant breakdown was 11.5% freshmen, 51.9% sophomores, 27.9% juniors, and 9% seniors. Students who received free and reduced lunch, 82.4%. The researchers provided take-home surveys to the participants and rewarded them with a cash amount of \$20 for the return. The Pearson's correlation coefficient ($p < .05$) and hierarchical multiple regression were used to examine the relationship between the two variables. The researchers found that negative experiences and accessibility were predictive of academic self-concept for AA male students. Of 10 different types of interactions, negative experiences were the strongest correlation to self-concept; the other eight were (1) career guidance, (2) off-campus interactions, (3) approachability, (4) validity, (5) accessibility, (6) respectful interactions, (7) connectedness, and (8) caring attitudes.

It is important to highlight that “off campus interactions,” “respectful interactions,” “caring attitudes,” and “connectedness” define social variables. Because Hargrave et al. measured social variables between students, their teachers, and school, the implications make a connection between discipline (negative experiences) and self-concept beyond academics. In the confines of this study, Hargrave et al. (2016) heightened the assumptions behind this study. I am making the assumption that discipline is a negative experience. Hargreave et al. (2016) found that negative experiences impact academic self-concept more than the other social variables. Under the evidence that AA male students are disciplined more than their peers and negative experiences are more impactful than positive ones, then an assumption can be drawn that discipline impacts self-concept beyond academics.

To date, I have not found any studies that focus solely on the AA male middle school students, discipline, and self-concepts in rural schools. Many of the studies concern urban areas under a discipline inquiry, the academic success of AA male students, or racial disparity in school discipline. Furthermore, I endeavored to provide some insights into the gaps from prior research and inform the body of knowledge. This research was conducted with the intention of expanding the body of knowledge of racial disparity in school discipline by situating it in a rural school and informing how discipline impacts the psyche of AA male students’ self-concept. I believed there was a connection.

The latter was the focus of this study. The goal was to understand how discipline impacts AA male middle school students’ self-concept. While current research has addressed a variety of impacts on AA male students, there was limited research on the

specifics as to how discipline impacts self-concepts beyond academics. I was concerned about AA males' views about themselves given the school-to-prison pipeline and negative quality of life statistics. The trend is AA male students are disciplined more, become disengaged from school, are suspended, enter the criminal justice system, and later, many remain unemployed and cycle in and out of prison. Within that continuum, I wanted to understand what AA male middle students believe about themselves. What stories do they tell themselves? What happens in the continuum?

Summary

As a vital institution, schools play an indisputable role in the direction of the larger society. Yet, there are gaps in research understanding school discipline in the context of the educational system. Most research focuses on suburban or urban schools. Additionally, researchers have mainly focused on the voices and experiences of teachers and principals in defining the phenomenon. The perspectives of AA students can provide more insight into the phenomenon and can inform better disciplinary practices. I believe an understanding of what happens to AA male middle school students under the disproportionate disciplinary practices is worthy of study, especially in areas in which racism has a well-rooted foundation, the rural South.

AA males remain a unique group in which the educational system has struggled to provide equal and equitable results. Thus, understanding their perceptions, values, and voices is critical to solving the issues that face educational disparities. The Georgia PTA (2022) website stated:

The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) oversees primary and secondary public education in the state of Georgia. Its mission is to

provide leadership, guidance, and resources to help schools meet the educational needs of all students and prepare them for success in the global economy (para 1).

“All students” are inclusive of AA male students in suburban, urban, and rural areas. We must commit to understanding the issues in all geographic locations thoroughly.

In her book, *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, Austin Channing Brown described her experiences as a Black person of privilege growing up and navigating the world between her different roles of blackness and the White world. Brown (2018) questioned “How could I know if beneath other amicable interactions, the stereotypes and biases of those in power were operating against students who looked like me?” (p. 44). This study hinges on answering the question by exploring the lived experiences of AA male middle school students. I believe “Dismantling the narrative of black educational inferiority requires a powerful counter-story” (Horsford & Grosland, 2013, 162).

Because dismantling the narrative of AA male students as the problem, instead of the schools, this study aimed to elevate the co-researchers’ voices. An understanding of how they perceive their interactions with their school officials was just as important, maybe more, to confronting the issues AA males face in school. For those reasons, a basic interpretive qualitative study was used as a methodology to capture data. It was my belief that this method allowed for a better understanding of what is happening underneath the surface and the interactions between AA male middle school students and their teachers. Information in the next section expounds upon this belief.

Chapter III

METHODS

In this dissertation, I examined the familial, social, and educational experiences had by three middle school African American students who dealt with out-of-school suspension (OSS) related discipline in rural Georgia. Employing a basic interpretive qualitative research design (Merriam & Associates, 2002), this study explored the students' middle school experiences and the meanings they ascribed to them, focusing on how these meanings shaped their beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making.

This chapter outlines the methods and process used to address the topic. Subsequent sections detail participant selection, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and data presentation. Finally, I will address validity, ethical considerations, and the strategies implemented to mitigate potential risks.

Research Design

A fundamental premise of qualitative research is that individuals construct their reality in interaction with their social worlds and that by using qualitative research methods, researchers can uncover those individuals' experiences and use them to inform assertions about various processes and/or phenomena, providing meaningful contributions to the body of knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because it was crucial to explore and examine the experiences and beliefs held by the participants, a basic interpretive approach was employed. This approach allowed for following the data

wherever it led and making meaning of it. Merriam and Associates (2002) aligned the basic interpretive approach with “constructionism [because it] is not discovered but constructed” (p. 37). This study used this approach to explore the experiences related to the research question and undertook a process of collecting data, examining it, and constructing sound conclusions accordingly.

Consequently, the nature of the basic interpretive approach resulted in a process of taking previous un-reflected upon experiences (also, referred to as lived experiences by Manen (2015) through an interactive analysis of the data, constantly making interpretations and rethinking as new data and thoughts came to mind to construct meaning of those experiences. To this point, Merriam and Associates (2002) offered that “the meaning of an experience is constructed by an individual interacting with other people” (p. 37). Thus, the participants’ experiences were gathered using Seidman’s (2013) three-interview approach with each participant. This approach allowed for exploring their interactions with their family, friends, teachers, peers, and the wider contexts where they lived. Simply put, the fit of the basic interpretive method with my research interest existed in the ability to come away with new insights about how discipline changes AA male students as it suggested a way to discover what other social interactions influence AA male middle school students’ beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making.

Given the social conceptualization of this research, it was vital that participants were chosen who represent the experiences I wanted to capture and explore. The goal was to understand the lived experiences of AA male middle school students whose social interactions involved school-based discipline. Therefore, I will continue by unpacking the

details of how participant selection occurred and the complications confronted when trying to recruit the hoped-for, six to eight participants.

Research Participants

Participant selection followed Maxwell's (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) guidance, ensuring deliberate sampling to obtain the information most relevant to the research questions and that could not be obtained by other means. Maxwell (2013) suggested that sampling, a participant selection method, should be deliberate to provide information most relevant to the research questions and purpose. This information cannot be obtained through any other means. Patton (2014) wrote, "what you sample is what you have something to say about" (p. 244). Prior studies (Ferguson, 2001; Howard, 2015; Lynn et al., 2010; Rolland, 2011; Wheeler, 2013; Woodson, 2013) used between four to six student participants in studies with a similar focus area. Therefore, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stressed, it became my responsibility, as the researcher, to decide the criteria most important in choosing the participants and sites to be studied.

Originally, I hoped to have six to eight participants; however, recruitment efforts only resulted in four who agreed. As a result, the voices elevated in this study were to be those of four African American male students who had a previous suspension during their middle school years in rural Georgia. Unfortunately, one of those could not follow through with the time commitments, yet the other three volunteers continued as collaborators in this work. Although more was preferred, the three were manageable for collecting data, analyzing that data, and a solid beginning to answering the questions creditably.

According to Smith and Harper (2015), evidence supported that Black students had significantly higher rates of disciplinary referrals in middle school compared to their non-Black peers, with the peak of suspensions occurring in seventh grade. Students suspended in high school were usually suspended in middle school; one-third were in sixth grade, and roughly half were suspended in either seventh or eighth grade (Losen, 2013). Primarily, I selected participants who are African American male students with a prior suspension in middle school because at least one out-of-school suspension was a starting criterion for choosing participants. Out-of-school suspension usually indicates a history of school-based discipline (Kim & Losen, 2015; Skiba et al., 2002).

For the selection of the site, the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) defined rural schools as “areas designated by the Census Bureau . . . that do not lie inside an urbanized area or urban cluster” (p. 85). When seeking a rural location, I searched for areas that were not considered urban or suburban. The chosen location did not lie inside an urban cluster.

The aforementioned criteria are grounded in what Patton (2014) defined as purposeful sampling: “strategically selecting information-rich cases to study, cases that by their nature and substance will illuminate the inquiry question being investigated” (p. 264). Patton (2014) further explained that “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study” (p. 264). In short, this sample provided the best chance to explore lived experiences to answer the research questions and provide the most relevant information to make sense of the experiences that influenced participants’ views, beliefs, and attitudes.

Participation in this study was voluntary. I began recruitment by asking a sports-based community program in rural Georgia to recommend participants for the study. I called the CEO and gave him the details about the study, including the need to interview African American male students who had been suspended from middle school about their experiences.

Once I received final approval from the Institution Review Board (IRB) at Valdosta State University (Appendix A), I emailed the CEO of the sports-based program with specifics about the study (Appendix B). I followed up with a call to ask him to provide a list of parents and students who met the study's criteria. I received contact information for nine parents. I reached out to these nine parents and relayed the details of the study. Due to the study involving minors, I stressed to the parents and guardians that the child would have to agree to the study and be available for the interviews and focus group. It was important to me that the participants showed interest in this study because I wanted to arrive at a credible study. After the conversation with the nine parents, two of the parents did not follow up with me after a few calls to them, two indicated that their child was not interested in doing the study, and one was not available due to his football schedule. For the remaining four, I met with the parent and provided a package, which included (a) recruitment flyer (Appendix C), (b) parent invitation letter, (c) parent/guardian consent form, participant assent form, and a screening survey (Appendix D) to obtain permission to conduct the study and answered any questions they had. I left the packages with them and picked them up when they let me know they had signed them and agreed to the study. Once I received all the signed forms, I reviewed the screening survey to make sure that the child met the criteria. All four of the young men did. Thus, I

called the parents to set schedules to meet for the interviews at a time chosen by the parent and child. Some of the parents and children selected days to meet, and others agreed to the first one and scheduling out the remaining interviews over time. Once the interviews were scheduled, I began to conduct them.

As a result, I was presented with Batman, a 15-year-old male in the eighth grade and currently in alternative school; Tarzan, a 12-year-old male in the seventh grade who loves to work out and play sports; and Flash, a 14-year-old male in the ninth grade who loves playing basketball. The study benefited from having a range of ages from middle school to high school and alternative education because it allowed me to examine different levels of maturity and experiences unique to each participant. Batman having the most experience with school and alternative school. Tarzan just starting to experience middle school. Flash right out of middle school and first year in high school, all participants attended the same middle school in rural Georgia and had a previous suspension. Being familiar with the school and area from my job-related travels, I was hopeful I could connect comfortably with the young men and build a meaningful research-participant relationship. See Table 1.

Table 1*Participant Profiles*

	Grade	Age	Current School	# of out of school suspension	Family Dynamics	Hobby
Batman	8 th	15	Alternative	4	Live with mother and 5 siblings	Playing the game and listening to music
Tarzan	6 th	12	Middle School	3	Live with mother, grandmother, uncle, and younger sister	Watching YouTube videos of sports and playing with neighborhood friends
Flash	9 th	14	High School	2	Live with mother and 2 siblings	Playing Basketball and sleeping

Research-Participant Relationship

Establishing a trust-based, equitable relationship with participants is paramount in qualitative research (Seidman, 2013). This study prioritized this relationship, recognizing that factors such as race, class, gender, and age significantly influence the dynamics between researcher and participant. As an older, middle-class African American male, I shared aspects of identity with participants while simultaneously possessing characteristics (age and class) that could potentially create power imbalances.

Transparency regarding my background (as a former middle school student, educator, counselor, and professional working with young men) and genuine interest in their educational journeys fostered an atmosphere of cooperation, engagement, and trust. This approach proved invaluable in eliciting honesty and insightful stories that could be shared as vignettes to help characterize each participant's experiences from his vantage point.

My awareness of this potential bias informed my approach throughout the research process.

To mitigate the potential influence of my age and perceived authority, I consistently emphasized the collaborative nature of the study, framing participants as co-researchers. This collaborative ethos was reinforced through member-checking, empowering participants to validate the accuracy of their shared experiences and assert agency in the research process. Further, I explicitly emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, enabling participants to comfortably establish boundaries. Participants were also invited to select their own pseudonyms, fostering a sense of ownership and reinforcing the anonymity crucial for honest self-disclosure. The meaningfulness of the chosen pseudonyms to each participant further reinforced this sense of control and respect.

Scheduling flexibility further promoted equity and respect. Interviews and the focus group were coordinated in consideration of participants' and their mothers' availability and preferences. This approach minimized potential negative attitudes and actively mitigated power imbalances, prioritizing participant autonomy over parental involvement whenever possible. The aim was to build a strong foundation of trust and cooperation directly with the participants, rather than relying primarily on their parents as a go-between. This strategy significantly contributed to the overall success of the study.

Furthermore, the following methodological components of the study contributed to building our collaborative relationships. The methods employed, involving exploratory, substantive, and reflective interviews, were specifically designed to elicit rich data from collaborators that was directly relevant to the research questions (Maxwell,

2013; Patton, 2014). The use of researcher memos served as a critical tool for addressing my potential biases and organizing thoughts throughout the data collection and analysis phases in a way that continued to support the collaborative relationship rather than interjecting a power dynamic. This systematic reflective practice enhanced the credibility of the research by enabling me to provide the young men with prompts from their own stories and safeguarded against researcher bias and subjectivity, directing our conversation.

After reading Maxwell (2013), Merriam and Associates (2002), and Patton (2014), I believed that it was critical to the relationship with the participants to minimize my influence on the accounts they shared from their experiences. Namely, I believed it was my responsibility to safeguard the data from biased influence and promote accurate accounts from participants to the reader. I wanted to minimize subjectivity. While subjectivity is not inherently negative (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Patton, 2014), the potential for reactivity (Maxwell, 2013)—the researcher's influence on participants' responses—needed to be considered.

Given the inherent subjectivity of qualitative research, where the researcher is the primary instrument (Maxwell, 2013), careful consideration of potential biases was critical. While eliminating all biases is impossible (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2014; Seidman, 2013), transparency and a proactive approach to mitigating their influence were central to this study's rigor. My personal and professional experiences—as an African American male who experienced school discipline firsthand, and as an educator and criminal justice professional witnessing racial disparities—presented a potential source of research bias. My belief in the existence of systemic, structural, and subconscious biases

leading to discriminatory discipline and legal outcomes (supported by decades of research by Butler, 2011; Collier, 2007; Davis, 2008; Ferguson, 2001; Grady, 2023; Howard & Reynolds, 2013; Noguera, 2012; Skiba et al., 2002) required careful attention. To mitigate this, several strategies were employed: consultation with my research committee and peer reviewers, member-checking with participants for validation of interpretations, and rigorous self-reflection documented through memos. These strategies served to challenge my own assumptions and ensure a more objective and honest interpretation of the data while allowing the participants to be true collaborators and not just subjects to my own biases.

Addressing subjectivity, as Patton (2014) and Merriam and Associates (2002) highlight, required acknowledging the researcher's influence on data collection and interpretation. The use of open-ended questions (Seidman, 2013), coupled with a mindful approach to interviewer verbal cues (“uh huh,” “OK,” “yes”), aimed to minimize this influence. Careful transcription and analysis of these cues provided opportunities to refine interview techniques for subsequent sessions. These methods highlight a commitment to rigorous qualitative research practices, acknowledging both the challenges and opportunities inherent in the researcher-participant relationship.

Seidman (2013) emphasized that establishing an equitable process is essential for building trust between participants and interviewers. He discussed how factors like race, class, and gender can influence this relationship, underscoring the importance of awareness in navigating these dynamics. Thus, I was mindful of the factors that played into the relationships I formed with the participants.

Given my shared race and gender with the participants, I recognized that factors such as class and age became particularly relevant in our interactions. As an older African American male from a middle-class background, I was mindful of how my age could influence participants' perceptions of me having authority and/or being judgmental. To counteract this, I consistently reminded participants of their role as co-researchers, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the study. Oftentimes, I rephrased my questions by using their words or changed my tone to reflect an open and nonjudgmental space. I would say, "this is your story, you can be real." I used this to remind them of the ownership of their own experiences and their stories. Employing member-checking also empowered them to validate the accuracy of their shared experiences, reinforcing their agency in the research process. I asked them, "Is this correct or do I have this right?" Moreover, I upheld ethical standards by emphasizing the voluntary nature of their participation, ensuring they felt comfortable setting boundaries.

Furthermore, I created an atmosphere of cooperation, engagement, and trust by sharing with them my interest of the study and my background as a middle school student, educator, counselor, and professional experiences working with young men like them. I was increasingly transparent about the research goals and my genuine interest in learning about their educational journeys. I found this to be paramount in eliciting candid experiences from the participants. In addition, I invited my participants to select their own pseudonyms, fostering a sense of ownership in the research process; knowing pseudonyms would be used in my write-up further encouraged honesty by assuring anonymity. It is critical to note that each of the participants seemed to like their pseudonym, and it held some meaning for them.

Lastly, I sought to involve the participants in scheduling interviews and focus groups as another strategy to promote equity and respect their autonomy. I did this to minimize the potential of negative attitudes by prioritizing their availability and preferences. In addition, I mitigated power imbalances and cultivated a mutually respectful relationship through coordinating their interviews with them as well as their mothers. These measures collectively aimed to establish a foundation of trust and cooperation with them as opposed to relying on their parents, laying the groundwork for a fruitful study and researcher-participant relationship. Careful consideration was given to how data collection would occur.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues should be considered in every aspect of the research (Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). Because qualitative research uniquely concerns itself with more intimate relationships with the participants, ethical issues are concerned with research integrity (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2014; Seidman, 2013). That integrity is reflected in Seidman's (2013) discussion of Aristotle's "well and rightly" philosophy, which stresses "good works" or (1) "the method of our work interacts with the virtue of our work," (2) "researchers' first responsibility is to their research participants," and (3) "the moral step is implicitly recognizing, acknowledging, and affirming the dignity of our participants" (p. 157). Maxwell (2013) concurred:

Whatever your methodological and political views, remember that what is a "research project" for you is always, to some degree, an intrusion into the lives of participants in your study. A primary ethical obligation,

therefore, is to try to understand how the participants will perceive your actions and respond to these. (p. 92)

I understood there was a risk of creating beliefs based on my experiences rather than truly understanding the participants' beliefs. Thus, I adopted an attitude that as the researcher, I am an instrument to gather, analyze, and write their stories and beliefs. An instrument is used to complete a specific task as opposed to an author who tells stories according to their desires. To the latter point, I was very careful not to subject the participants to my beliefs or thoughts. This was critical because I did not want to have the participants think that their experiences suggest that school is bad or are against them, instead, I wanted to understand what their experiences were and improve their chances of staying in school and succeeding.

Because I carefully considered the selection process and relationship with the participants to ensure an ethically conducted study, conducting meaningful research also meant putting no interests above that of the human participants. Seidman (2013) maintained "there are some guideposts that may help interviewers avoid ethical conflicts" (p. 93). One of the first ethical guides mentioned by Seidman (2013) is the belief that subjects are "participants," which means their participation is voluntary. He discussed not "bending their arms," not overpromising, and not trying to persuade them (p. 155). The next guide is listening, the most important skill in interviewing. Thirdly, Seidman (2013) cautioned the use of "leading questions" (one that is defined by influencing "the direction the response will take") (p. 102), is an ethical concern as well. He warned that the interviewer should always remember that they are interviewing to explore the lives of the participants and not to prove themselves right.

To follow those guideposts, these are the steps I took. During every interview, I read the consent statement and reminded the participants that their participation was voluntary. For interviews, I asked participants “how would they like to be addressed,” and where they would like to sit, kept the scheduled time for the interviews and study, and avoided leading questions (Seidman, 2013, p. 155). I also repeated what the participants said during their interviews to make sure that I heard them correctly and asked questions if their statements were not clear as to what they said or meant.

Additionally, I challenged myself and requested sessions with my committee and peer, Dr. Frazier, if I thought that I was using my subjectivity in any way to interpret the data. The first session I had with my research committee was about the caution of using leading questions. Last, I used the next interviews to make sure that I understood what the participants meant.

I adhered to all expectations and regulations provided by the Institutional Review Board. Thus, I maintained confidentiality by using pseudonyms of their names, anyone they mentioned, and the city and landmark locations they shared. I shared with them and their parents that the research was done in a way that the teachers and school would not learn of their identity and retaliate against them.

Data Collection

For this dissertation, I used three major forms of data collection: interviews, research journal, and a focus group. As the researcher, I conducted interviews and a focus group and maintained a research journal to write reflexive memos and brief notes as the primary data collection strategies. Interviews and the focus group enabled me to explore the participants’ experiences, while the research journal allowed me to reflect and make

meaningful insights for a better understanding of what is happening within the school setting for AA middle school males over time, as the research study progressed. I hoped that these methods would help us discover together the meaning and significance of their experiences.

In the efforts to uncover meaning from my participants, I used qualitative data-gathering techniques to explore participants' experiences through the stories they provided, beliefs they shared, and settings they encountered throughout their daily lives. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument to gather data (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2014), and I did that to the best of my ability. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained,

Qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data. Humans are best suited for this task, especially because interviewing, observing, and analyzing are activities central to qualitative. (p. 5)

Understanding the notion that Merriam and Tisdell (2016) made, interviews and focus groups were the most logical choice in collecting the data. Each data collection strategy, including the research journal by memoing, is explained, and what happened when using the methods is addressed in the upcoming sections.

Interviews

To extract meaning from participants' stories, beliefs, and settings, I employed Seidman's (2013) three-interview approach. According to Patton (2014), "an interview is an interaction, a relationship" (p. 427). Patton (2014) underscored the value of interviews

in understanding aspects beyond direct observation, particularly gaining insight into participants' thoughts and perspectives. The interviews aimed to provide a "full and revealing picture" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126) of participants' experiences, challenging the prevailing narrative of disciplinary disproportionality often associated with AA male students. Although that was the goal, it was very difficult to solicit descriptive stories of "full" pictures. They often shared glimpses into significant experiences and with prompting, I was able to get stories that enabled the construction of vignettes for each young man in which windows into their world were provided (see Chapter 4).

Researchers primarily use interviews as data collection strategies in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Patton (2014) explained interviews are done to "find out things we cannot directly observe and to understand what we've observed" (p. 426). Interviews are a way we can begin to understand how participants construct their world, something we can only discover by talking with the participants themselves. Interviews advance the gathering of "data that are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126). Because all three of my research questions (Appendix E) were centered around the participants' experiences and the meaning they attributed to those experiences, the interviews were done in an order intended to elicit the meanings attached to their experiences in the final interview of the sequence.

Because human interactions in real time, like interviews, allow for the exchange of ideas to evolve somewhat naturally, Seidman's (2013) three-stage interviewing technique using in-depth (semi-structured) interviews with participants, provided for a mutual exploration between me and the collaborators to explore context and meaning

(Seidman, 2013). To provide some structure and focus on each interview,

Seidman (2013) emphasized:

The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experience.

The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their

experiences within the context in which it occurs. And the third

encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experiences

hold for them. (p. 35)

I did follow the sequence he outlined and intended to align to recommendations of 90 minutes per interview; however, he suggested reducing interview durations with younger participants if needed. Since my participants were minors and my professional experience with the participant population made me suspect that 90 minutes would be a challenge to some if not most, especially those who struggle with focus and concentration. I took liberties with the time when meeting together and followed the protocol of prior researchers (Bell, 2015; Collier, 2007; Rolland, 2011) and paced interviews based on participants' engagement. My interviews were a minimum of 30 minutes and averaged around 45 minutes. See Table 2.

Table 2

Dates and Times of Interviews

Participants	Interview 1		Interview 2		Interview 3	
	Date	Minutes	Date	Minutes	Date	Minutes
Batman	08/17/24	35:16	08/20/24	48:02	08/24/24	40:41
Tarzan	08/21/24	40:16	08/24/24	43:37	08/25/24	39:38
Flash	08/25/24	36:02	09/08/24	56:32	09/19/24	1:14:16

I used prewritten interview questions and an interview question guide

(Appendix F) as a tentative plan going into the first set of interviews. It is

important to note that the interview question guide (Appendix F) provided a guide for interviews and was not used as a rigid script while conducting interviews. As the interviewer, I used participant responses to ask follow-up questions, or I built upon responses from prior interviews to formulate questions for subsequent interviews. This approach allowed flexibility to encourage participants' partnerships in the research.

I also asked open-ended questions during the interviews. Seidman (2013) suggested that open-ended questions allow “participants to take any direction he or she wants,” (i.e. “what was that like for you?”) (p. 102-103). Allowing participants to take the direction they choose offered greater participation and engagement in the process. Open-ended questions encouraged my participants to share their thoughts more freely than just relying on yes-no answers.

The first interview focused on participants' backgrounds and early life stories, seeking to understand their experiences in their homes, communities, and schools. I employed open-ended questions, prompting participants to share their upbringing, early experiences with discipline, and perspectives on school. While eliciting detailed accounts proved challenging initially, participants shared glimpses into their home and school lives.

After conducting Interview 1 with four participants, I was concerned about the lack of depth and detail of the data collected. To address this, I engaged a peer check-in with Dr. Frazier—a previous doctoral cohort member and editor recommended by my committee. I discussed my uncertainties about obtaining rich data and the potential for leading participants through excessive probing. Dr. Frazier recommended transcribing the interviews to identify gaps and potential insights.

I further sought guidance from the research committee Chair and Researcher (Dr. R. Schmertzing and Dr. L. Schmertzing—respectively), expressing my concerns about bias and leading participants. They emphasized the iterative nature of qualitative inquiry, emphasizing the importance of sharing the study's purpose and asking specific questions about participants' lives.

Following these consultations, I restructured my plans for the second interview, which Seidman suggested focus on detailed accounts of present experiences. Participants were encouraged to recount their most recent disciplinary experience, offering insights into the context that shaped their experiences. A specific prompt, "Share with me a specific incident where a disciplinary experience affected your relationships," prompted participants to discuss their emotions and connect with these experiences on a deeper level than I saw in the first set of interviews. One goal of Interview 2 was to connect the participants' past disciplinary experiences with their current beliefs of schooling. For RQ1, I asked participants to recount a memorable day (either positive or negative) they had in school. For RQ2, I guided the participants to discuss how that memorable day influenced their thoughts and feelings about themselves. For RQ3, I explored potential influences of the participants' view of the world, attempting to uncover any attitudes and beliefs the participants held.

The third (and final) interview aimed to foster reflection and meaning making. I attempted to connect participants' experiences with their previously expressed beliefs, exploring if these attitudes and beliefs influenced their understanding of specific events. The focus on meaning-making aimed to explore the future implications of participants' views and attitudes. The primary goal of interview three was to connect participants'

experiences with their beliefs by prompting them to recognize the influence and significance the event had on their beliefs, and make meaning for those beliefs, given their disciplinary issues within the context of the institution of education. For RQ1, I asked my participants to reflect on their experiences in school and discuss how they see schooling or how they understand education as a value in their lives. For RQ2, I inquired about how those disciplinary experiences shaped the participants' understanding of themselves. For RQ3, I, as recommended by Seidman (2013), focused on how those disciplinary experiences shaped the participants' understanding of the world and its structures. Interview 3 was the most reflective in ascertaining the meaning the participants attached to their experiences. This approach, through careful attention to the participants' perspectives and the intricacies of the interview process, allowed me to navigate the challenges of qualitative inquiry and gain valuable insights into the experiences of AA male students in middle school.

Following established qualitative practices, all interviews were audio-recorded using a Sony Digital Voice Recorder ICD-PX370. Consent forms were provided, emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time. I advised the participants that the interviews were being recorded each time. During the interviews, I wrote notes on topics for which I wanted to follow up on later or use when I transcribed the interviews. The notes I took during interviews also helped when I wrote post-interview memos. Merriam (2009) emphasized that memoing should take place soon after interviews to provide more accurate details, feelings, and thoughts of both the researcher and the participant. The next section details how I wrote and organized the notes.

Research Journal

Maxwell (2013) cautioned against solely relying on interview data, emphasizing the potential oversight of critical information, while advocating for the use of research journals to complement interviews. He believed that research journals enable researchers to develop new questions and perspectives. Maxwell (2013) proposed journaling and memoing as tools for documenting reflections, observations, and insights throughout the research process.

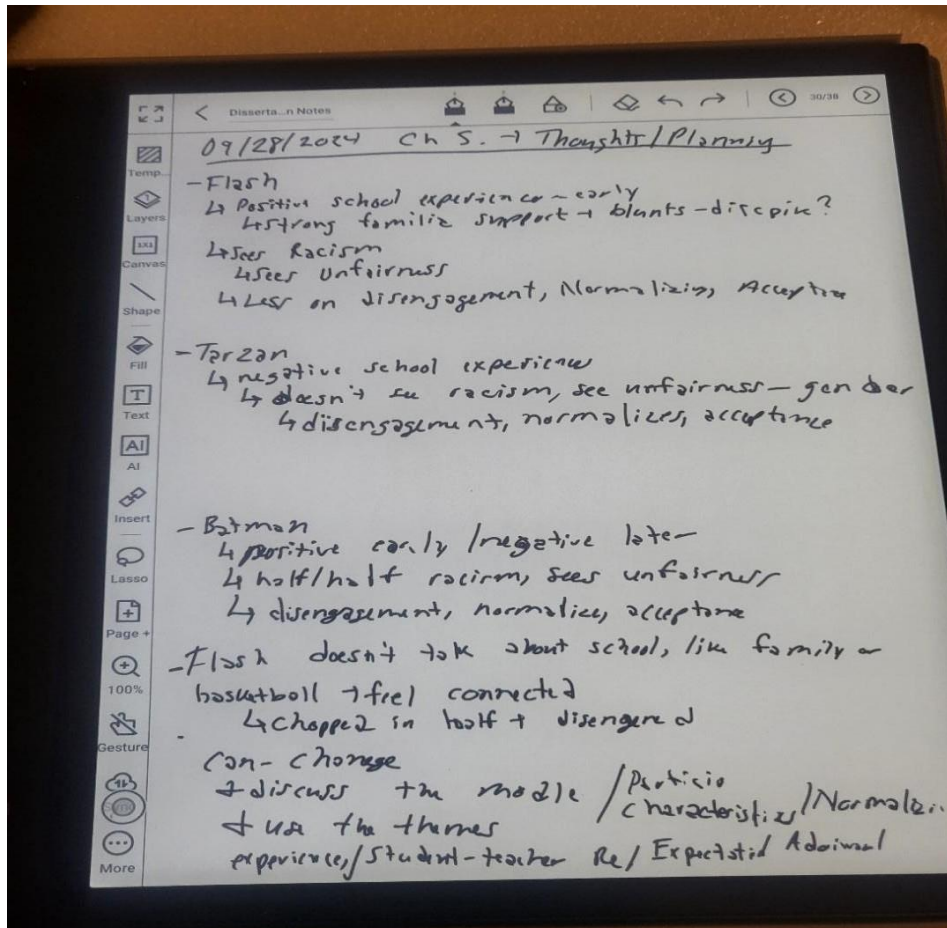
In addition, Maxwell (2013) believed that researchers should engage in ongoing dialogue with themselves. He recommended using research journals to contain them, as they foster serious reflection, analysis, and self-critique. This iterative process of reflection, analysis, and critique aids in uncovering biases and subjectivity. Consequently, I used a 9” by 12” sketchbook and a digital writing pad (an Onyx Boox Note Air 2 Plus) to write research notes while interviewing and memos, organized it by date and subject, then used it to analyze my thought process regarding the data. This practice facilitated tracking my evolving perspectives and biases over time, enhancing transparency in decision-making. The research journal assisted me in knowing when to follow new probes or new questions in the following interviews, discuss how my biases were leading to assumptions, and helped determine codes, patterns, and connections from the interview data.

I organized my journal into several categories that represented different types of entries. There were three categories: (1) interview notes, (2) attitudes and beliefs from each participant (ex., Batman's Attitudes and Beliefs, Tarzan's Attitudes and Beliefs, Flash's Attitudes and Beliefs), and (3) memos. The interview notes were notes I wrote during the interviews with the participants. They were labeled by date, time, and which interview, such as Batman's second interview. The memos reflected thoughts that I had either after the interview or while thinking about the data or writing about it. The attitudes and beliefs category noted statements that each of the participants made, informing me of their thoughts or beliefs about topics.

I wrote interview notes while participants were sharing their stories. The notes helped me ask follow-up questions during the interviews and remember some unspoken, meaningful body language or pauses while answering questions or talking. For instance, there were times when participants took longer to answer questions. If this were the case, then I wrote the interaction in the notes to probe later to see if it had any implications when reviewing and analyzing the transcripts. Specifically, I would write down in the journal words that reminded me of possible ideas to think about for data analysis. One of those notes was about race, due to the participants sharing that race does not seem to shape their experiences in disciplinary actions. I wrote it down after a few instances where participants seemed to be either reluctant to share or answered in vague ways. Figure 1 is the memo I wrote after the participants shared their stories during their first interviews, and questions on race were asked.

Figure 1

Memo on race after the first round of interviews



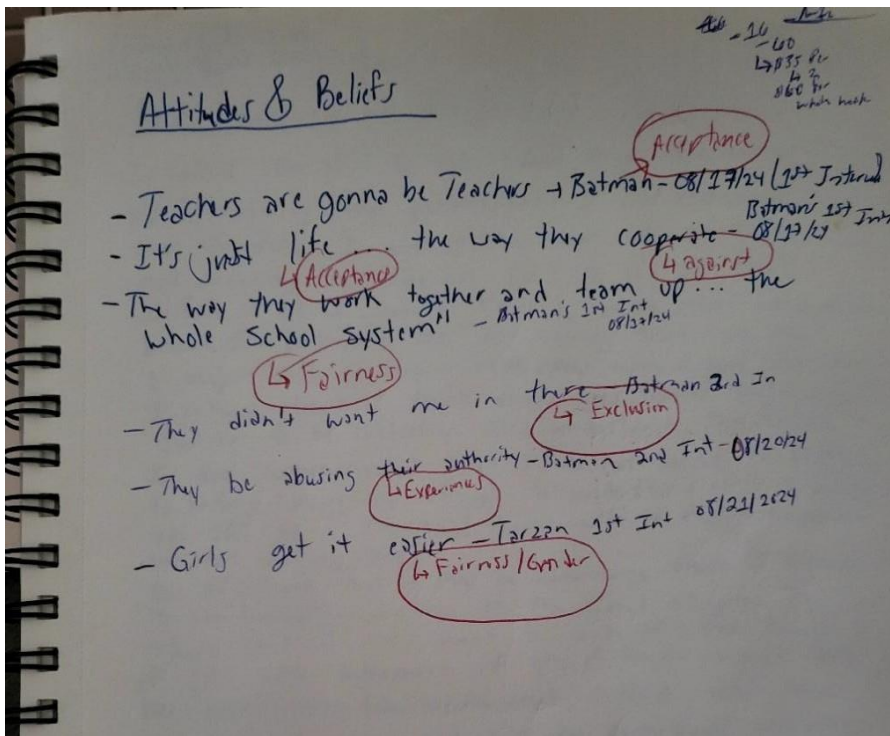
After going back through and looking at the notes on race, I decided to search for the words of Paul Laurence Dunbar's (1913) poem, "We Wear the Mask." The thought that I further explored was whether the participants did not elevate race in their experiences because of having majority Black teachers. Whether teachers wearing the mask of White Supremacy and hiding its operations by not only passing—using their professional status to assimilate to White culture— what seemed to be color-blind policies but also passing themselves as members of the in-group. This led me down the rabbit hole to explore that maybe

a rural setting does not mean that there is more or less racism, but whether that racism is covert or overt.

Next, I used my research journal to write some prevailing attitudes and beliefs that I heard from the participants. The attitudes and beliefs notes were regarding words and phrases the participants made that I thought would be helpful in understanding what was going on and how they were thinking about the topic. Figure 2 shows how I used the memos to process their words over time. The data are written outside of the statements, and some values are written in red ink and circled.

Figure 2

Attitudes and Beliefs from interviews



These memos were generated as a result of me re-reviewing the interview notes, reading transcripts, and listening to the audio recordings of the interviews and the focus group. These notes were critical in organizing codes and themes and making connections

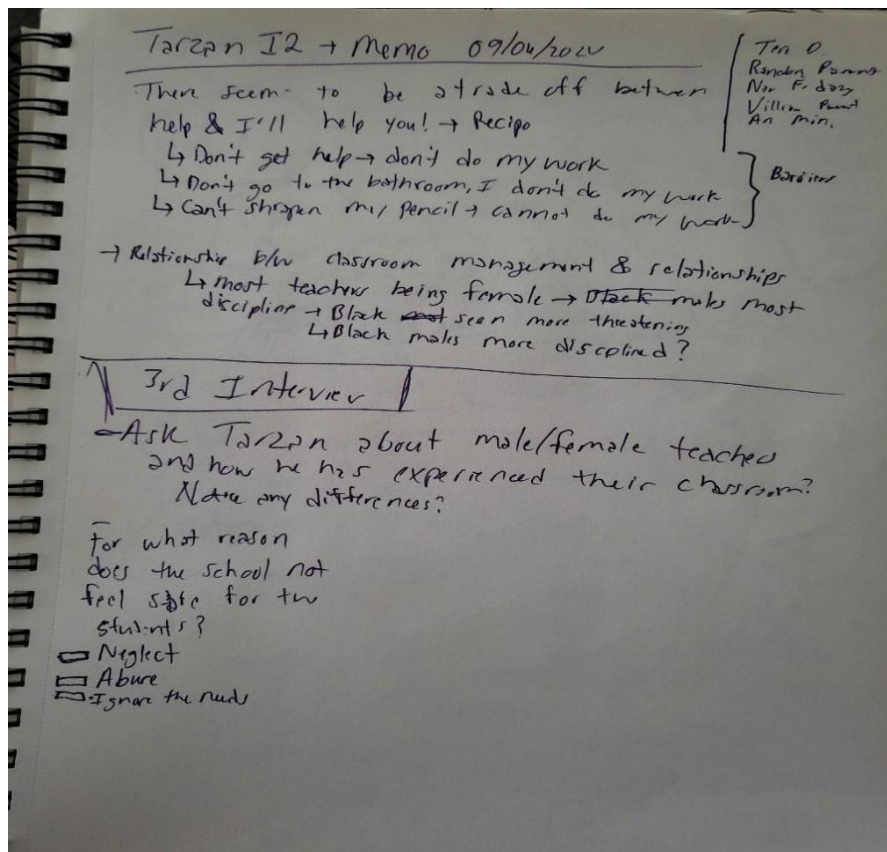
to the data. An example was that “teachers are going to be teachers” by Batman in his first interview.

For the memos, there were several instances in which I recorded my thoughts. I wrote memos for all things that had to do with thinking about the data. For instance, after I had conversations or interactions with the participants or my committee, I wrote memos to process those conversations. These were often useful in helping me understand how I thought about the data or what was going on in the research.

These notes incorporated the types of notes Merriam (2009) instructed should take place soon after interviews to provide more accurate details, feelings, and thoughts of both the researcher and the participant; reflective memos as Maxwell (2013) mentioned. Maxwell thought that reflection leads to analysis and then self-critique; it is a process. That process gave me more questions than answers. For instance, after memoing after Interview 2 for one of the participants, I recalled his statements from Interview 1 and was able to say that this participant may operate in a transactional way with teachers; he stopped doing work in classrooms where teachers did not show care and support for his needs. Figure 3 is from Tarzan’s interview. It provides a statement he made about not getting help with work, and his reaction was not to do work, creating a perpetual cycle.

Figure 3

Memo after Tarzan's Interview on transactional behavior



Memos also allowed me to recognize the point about color-blindness of the operations of White Supremacy. After a participant made a comment that Black female teachers treated him worse than White teachers, I asked, “Are we living in a post-racial and color-blinded society, or is it less seen by younger generations?” In addition, memoing helped me develop some of the initial coding categories. After I wrote down an interaction during the interview, I would write what I thought that meant. When the participants voiced statements like “there is not I can do,” it triggered me to think they felt powerless or hopeless. I took those accounts further and held them up against my own thoughts and feelings and sought to see if I could find other statements to support

those ideas. Thus, memoing allowed me to analyze my thoughts and feelings about the data, which then provided the opportunity for me to critique those thoughts and feelings and led me to consider and analyze my own biases and subjectivity.

What I found was that constructing their narratives thoroughly and credibly asked me to drill deep into the answers that the participants provided during interviews and challenge them to discuss, sometimes, uncomfortable past experiences. At times, I asked the participants to think and reflect on either the questions I asked them or statements that they had made during interviews. The latter provided me with insights into participants' experiences and some initial understanding of their influences, values, attitudes, and beliefs.

In addition, a better understanding came from reflecting on the data and provided context for participants' experiences when I was working on individual vignettes. Simply taking the time to think about the participants' shared experiences, both pre-analysis reflections and later data analysis techniques, gave me a better way of understanding their experiences. Consequently, I took at least 30 minutes after each interview to write memos of how I was thinking about the experiences that the participants shared.

For brief memos, I wrote notes in the digital journal when a thought came to mind about the data or presenting it. For instance, on September 24, 2024, I wrote the question, "What was the 'reason opponents of de-segregation wanted to keep Blacks out of school?'" This came after thinking about the participants' perception that female students were not treated the same as they were. This

question led me to write out how the data spoke to White Supremacy as enduring in school disciplinary policies and manifesting the same way that the efforts to keep Blacks from integrating into White schools did. Ultimately, it led me to the sentiment of the then U.S. president citing that Black male students were the reason Southerners did not want their children integrated, essentially targeting Black males. As a result, I better understood how the CRT tenet of permanence of racism applied to the research data. These notes provided an opportunity to better understand the data as it is constantly being thought of and re-thought. They were helpful for me to organize my thoughts in this way because the date and topic allowed me to go back and analyze how I was thinking about the data at a fixed point in time. This gives way to what is referred to as an audit trail.

The primary goal of the audit trail is documenting methodological choices, analytical decisions, and interpretations to aid in tracing the researcher's thought process, according to Creswell and Miller (2000). They emphasized its role in ensuring transparency and accountability in the research process. Thus, my goal was to maintain an audit trail to document decisions, data interpretations, and reflections throughout the study, allowing others to trace my thought process and interpretations. These memos and my audit trail were beneficial in planning the focus group I conducted with the participants after their interviews.

Focus Group

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) contended that focus groups “are appropriate to be used when this is the best way to get the best data that addresses your research questions” (p. 7). Patton (2014) stated that focus groups are interviews with a small group of people on a specific topic and are used in qualitative inquiry to collect data. “Focus group

interviews are typically homogeneous . . . involve open-ended interviews with groups of five to eight people on specially targeted or focused issues . . . that affect them” (Patton, 2014, p. 283).

After all, three participants completed their three interviews, they all participated in a 90-minute focus group. I used the interview questions and memos to create questions I wanted to further explore from their collective experiences. Some of those questions were around relationships with teachers, racism, and disciplinary practices, especially the STAR program (Appendix G). As stated in the language of the research consent form (Appendix H), the focus group helped me better explore the participants’ experiences.

According to Patton (2014), one advantage of focus groups is that they can obtain a “variety of perspectives and increase confidence in whatever patterns emerge” (p. 475). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) mentioned that they are a good fit for research involving people talking about their daily lives and experiences. Since I worked with a minority population, it is important to reference Patton’s (2014) belief:

By bringing together people who share a similar background, focus groups create the opportunity for participants to engage in meaningful conversations about topics that researchers wish to understand. This ability to learn about participants’ perspectives by listening to their conversations makes focus groups especially useful for hearing groups whose voices are often marginalized within the larger society. Focus groups are thus widely used in the studies of ethnic and cultural minority groups. (p. 477)

To Patton's point, the focus group added benefit to the research because the participants shared similar identities and common experiences with one another. The participants talking with one another led to richer information because they related to one another's experiences better than me discussing prior research and my past experiences, which both had little context for them.

One of the most telling advantages of conducting the focus group with all three of the participants was their willingness to engage in the discussion with one another where they seemed reluctant to do in one-on-one interviews. At times during the focus group, the participants talked about their in-class experiences in greater detail with teachers they knew or with whom they had experience. In addition, they talked about racism and their shared experiences as Black males more freely together than in the one-on-one interviews.

During the focus group, I found Patton's observation that focus groups tend to be more enjoyable than interviews because "they draw on our human tendencies as social animals to enjoy interacting with others" (p. 478) to be the case. During the one-on-ones, each of the participants highlighted that they liked to socialize with their friends. This pleasure aided in them being very elaborate about some of their experiences as Black students and students who have experienced disciplinary practices in school. They challenged and reaffirmed each other's experiences and gave insights into some of the data I had noted from the prior individual interviews. It granted me an opportunity to observe them interacting and subsequently helped me make better connections across their previously individually collected data.

In addition, the focus group was cost-effective because, within a specified amount of time, I obtained information from all three participants instead of only one—a notion first pointed out to me by Patton (2014). At the same time, I wrote notes as the recording was occurring, and they talked with one another. The more data I gathered, the more trustworthy my study became. Thus, focus groups helped address data gaps from one-on-one interview data.

Originally, I intended to conduct 3 focus groups, but only conducted the one because the participants' schedules were demanding, with the time coinciding with the beginning of the school year and start of the football season—two of the participants played for the school and the program that helped me identify them. Nonetheless, the one focus group was sufficient because it was a follow-up to the three interviews done before it. Likewise, Patton (2014) suggested that a good stopping point is when no new data is emerging. Thus, I am confident that the focus group added to my research because I used it after all interviews were complete, and the data from the focus group reinforced prior data. If I had used only one-on-one interviews or focus groups alone, then I think there would be some concerns, as the data would not have as rich.

While focus groups offer advantages, there are a few disadvantages. First, Patton (2014) discussed that a group works best when the participants are strangers to one another. This was a particular concern of mine because I used an organization where the participants interacted with one another prior to my study. I mitigated some of the effects about which Patton was concerned by making sure expectations were given and understood before the group began. I shared with

them that they were not to share what others shared outside of the group, and they needed to protect each other's identities. I started the groups by using the statement: "This group is for members to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about their experiences. I asked that the information not be shared outside the group and that everyone respect each member's confidentiality in this way."

Using three different data sources (interviews, a focus group, and a memo journal) strengthened the reliability of the data and the credibility of the study. However, the data-gathering techniques would have been ineffective without a suitable plan for data analysis. In summary, the advantage of employing three distinct data collection methods depended on the ability to make connections among the different data sources. The true value came from the capacity to draw conclusions about the participants' experiences. Consequently, the data analysis section follows.

Data Analysis

Going into the data analysis process, I aimed to understand the participants' experiences and tell their stories in a way that amplified their voices, not my own. I used three types of strategies to make meaning of the data. First, I used categorizing techniques to find the commonalities and patterns in the participants' experiences. I took the raw data and put it with other data pieces that seemed similar at the time and labeled them with a word or phrase significant to the research topic. I was not at the point of having it make sense or understanding what was going on. Secondly, reduction techniques were employed to reduce categories and start to form workable connections across the categories. Here, I set aside the categories that were either not repeated or consistent throughout the data and focused on the data that was repetitive, consistent, and

connected in some way. From there, I identified broader categories that informed themes relevant to the research topic. Essentially, reducing the codes to make sense of data.

Lastly, connecting strategies were used to pull the data back together in comprehensible and well-defined themes. I often thought of it as having puzzle pieces of a puzzle I had put together before but had not done the work. It required me to categorize the pieces that I thought fit well together and then move them out as more of the picture came into focus. Once I had a better view with the pieces laid out where they might go, it became easier to put the puzzle together. I detail each strategy in the following sections.

Categorizing Strategies

Categorizing is a data analysis strategy that focuses on grouping similar ideas, words, and phrases that are found in the data (Maxwell, 2013). Simply put, categorizing is about seeing the similarities in various units of data. According to Maxwell (2013), the categorizing process: “identifying units or segments of data that seem important or meaningful in some way (p. 107). I did this by taking Seidman’s (2013, p. 100) suggestion as to mark what is interesting in the text.

Likewise, the first step in categorizing strategy in qualitative research is usually coding, which was the dominant strategy in my data analysis (Maxwell, 2013). The main purpose of coding is to take the data and categorize it in ways that make sense. Coding in qualitative research, as described by Saldaña (2021), provides researchers with a robust framework for conducting rigorous and insightful analyses. It involves the process of uncovering patterns, themes, and relationships within the data to organize and analyze it effectively. The result of this process equates to rearranging the data “into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and that aid in the

development of theoretical concepts” (p. 106). In other words, the data should be fractured into passages that the researcher can then label with a word or phrase known as a code. That label should hold meaning to develop theoretical concepts or answer the research questions in the study.

Being that Saldaña (2021) cautioned against treating coding as merely labeling data only, I used various coding forms to go deeper into the labels originally created. He emphasized the need for creativity and interaction with the data, describing it as a dynamic process that involves moving back and forth with emerging themes and patterns to continually refine understanding. Specifically, coding entails identifying key elements, themes, and patterns from participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2021).

By analyzing data through coding, I began to see patterns and connections form, which led to valuable insights and meaningful connections in the research. Using coding to organize, categorize, and make sense of what was happening in participants' experiences started to get at the research questions. I began with initial coding, a process where raw data is broken down into discrete parts (Saldaña, 2021). According to Saldaña (2021), initial coding involves examining the research data pieces, assigning codes, and generating preliminary themes. I used MAXQDA to store the data and codes systematically, employing various forms of coding, including values, in-vivo, and descriptive. Each coding strategy will be explained and detailed in sections that follows. Thus, I moved back and forth with different coding, which I describe in the following paragraphs.

Values Coding. The first initial coding action, values codes, came in the form of writing words next to phrases participants used that expressed what I considered an

attitude and belief during interviews; I defined attitudes and beliefs as general statements that the participants made reflecting their way of thinking towards a person, people, experience, or idea—from my working in counseling, we label them attitudes AND beliefs because they are inseparable in that beliefs forms attitudes and attitudes in turn keeps deepening the belief. I then employed a modified method for using values coding because I assigned values to the participants' words and opinions based on how I understood their expressions, as opposed to them stating the value directly. I invoked the interpretivist approach that is used in qualitative research and expounded on what I understood as the intent. Subsequently, I translated for the reader what the young men valued.

For instance, in the data collection section, I discussed how one participant stated, “teachers are going to be teachers.” I examined and analyzed this statement, thinking about its meaning, and wrote the word "acceptance" next to it because I felt the participant was accepting the situation as it was. The next attitude and belief were, "it's just life," and I wrote the word "hopelessness." For the statement "it is the whole system," I wrote "fairness." I continued through the attitudes and beliefs, following the same process and arriving at the words "acceptance," "fairness," "against," "excessive," "neglect," and "abuse." This process describes how I started the initial values coding, a subset of initial coding, because I assigned labels to segments of data based on what the participants said (Saldaña, 2021).

Figure 4 demonstrates the values I believed the participants were highlighting in their experiences. Many of the responses reflected overarching attitudes and beliefs of being disempowered or disconnected from the school and their teachers. The responses

were not expressed in a positive manner but rather in sober and depressive tones. For example, one of the participants shared that he believed the “whole system” was against him. Thus, the values codes in Figure 4 reflected the codes similar to those sentiments like “fairness,” “trust,” “support,” and “relationships” because the participants shared ideas that the system (of education) was not a positive experience for them and lacked those values.

Figure 4

Example of values coding from memos in my research journal

- She can go do anything and the principal and my ma going to believe her ... they going to be on her side → Trust

- It's just life ... → Hopelessness

- just the way they are → Teacher Relationship } Hopelessness

- How they cooperate → Fairness

- the way they work together and team up with each other → Hopelessness

- The whole system → Fairness

- Everybody → Hopelessness

- what I'm supposed to do? → Hopelessness

- So I won't have nothing to say → Avoidance

- They were different ... They were nicer → Teacher-Relationship

- They actually try to help you → Support

- Now they don't want to do that → Teacher Relationship

The figure is a memo I wrote after listening to Batman's first interview. It demonstrates how I labeled statements made by Batman as values and how the values started to repeat themselves and later informed categories, then themes. Yet, I also understood that coding needed to reflect the culture of my participants. Therefore, I began to think about ways to incorporate their words to label and define categories.

Culturally responsive coding. Referring to coding, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) advocated for a framework that acknowledges the intersectionality of identity, race, gender, class, and other factors shaping individuals' experiences. They stressed that researchers should address the complexities and intersecting dynamics when studying and analyzing data from particular groups. Understanding the influence of cultural factors on my participants' responses to questions and probes, it became essential to prioritize their cultural identities in the values.

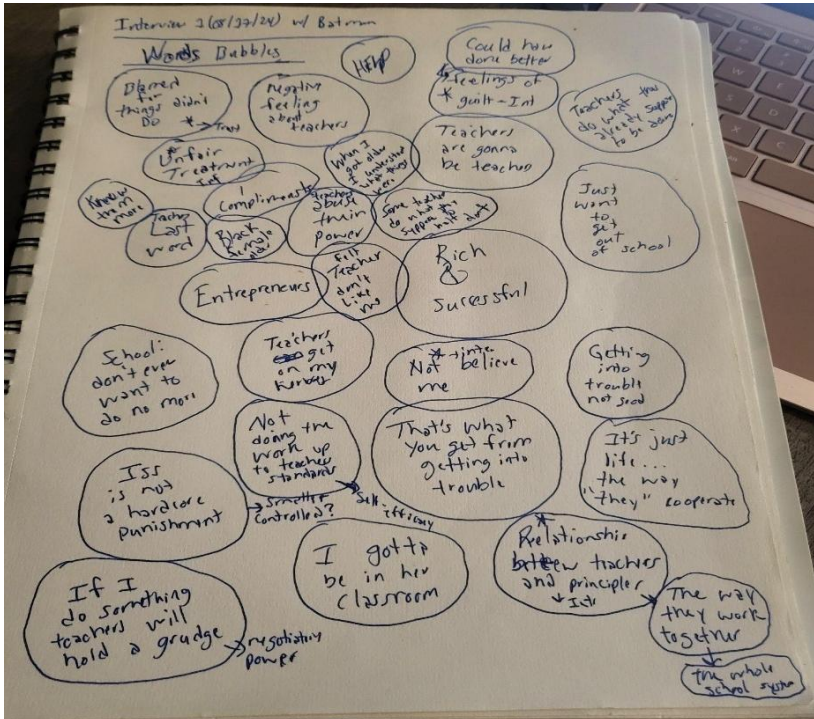
Because I did not want to lose the voices and identities of my participants through coding, I decided to implement culturally responsive coding, which interpreted the data through the cultural lens of the participants in the research. When studying African American males from a rural geography, it is crucial to interpret their narratives through a historical and sociocultural lens to capture the nuances of their stories effectively. Culture was the centerpiece to maintaining who the participants were, which gave way to my understanding of how cultural factors influence participants' responses. Simply put, I needed to adopt coding practices that resonated with the lived experiences and cultural backgrounds of my participants.

This type of coding acknowledged the lived experiences and cultural differences of the participants. I used it to take a step back and not freely apply coding that did not express the participants' identities. Consequently, this coding began before transcription (of the interviews and focus group) to maintain momentum between interviews. One way I started to adhere to culturally responsive coding is by writing down participants' words when they shared their stories and later circling those words if I thought they held some

significance for the research. I named this activity the “word bubbles” activity because it resembled word bubbles. This is demonstrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Word Bubble Activity



In this figure, Batman’s words expressed some values that I thought held meaning to his experiences. The bubbles with a star inside were particularly interesting as I thought they expressed notable values pertinent to the research questions. For example, “feeling of guilt” was starred because it related to how his experience started to affect his feelings, mainly how he felt about himself, relating to research question 2. The arrows represent a relationship to the words or phrases it is pointing to. For example, “if I do something, teachers will hold a grudge” leads to (represented by the arrow) negotiating power with the teachers. I interpreted that Batman indicated a power imbalance that he needed to negotiate within the school setting. It allowed preliminary identification of

patterns (e.g., recurring mentions of “Black female teachers”), which informed follow-up questions.

Overall, the first two coding processes, values coding and culturally responsive coding, facilitated my initial understanding of what the participants were saying about their lived experiences in each interview and prepared me to ask follow-up questions in the subsequent semi-structured interviews. At this point, I had not received the transcripts from previous interviews and did not want to stop the interviews due to not having the transcripts. Once I transcribed the first couple of interviews, I chose to use in-vivo coding because in-vivo coding involved using the participants’ own words, which allowed me to preserve the cultural context in analyzing the data.

In-vivo coding. Rooted in Saldaña’s (2021) approach, in-vivo coding prioritized participants’ language to avoid researcher bias and placed in the foreground their perspectives. Consequently, this study employed in-vivo coding (Saldaña, 2021) as a primary analytical strategy to center the voices of African American (AA) male students and preserve the cultural nuances of their experiences. Saldaña (2021) suggested that in-vivo coding is a powerful qualitative strategy used in data analysis that illuminates the voices and experiences of the participants. In-vivo coding involves segmenting meaningful terms from participants’ own words or phrases into brief descriptive labels and categorizing them (Saldaña, 2021). For example, phrases like “don’t even want to go no mo” (Figure 2) were retained verbatim to honor participants’ linguistic and cultural expression. This method aligned with the study’s commitment to culturally responsive research, as AA male students’ narratives often reflect unique sociocultural contexts (Miles et al., 2014).

To get to in-vivo coding, I used Rev.com to transcribe the audio recordings from the interviews and focus group into readable text. Once the transcriptions were completed, I loaded them into MAXQDA. I read each interview and played them while correcting any inaccurate words from the transcription service. I carefully reviewed each transcript in MAXQDA and corrected any errors by listening to the audio recording word by word. If there was a line or section I needed to fix, I paused the audio and corrected it by typing the words that either the participant or I said. I also paused the recording when I needed to code or write a memo. For instance, if a participant said something I thought was meaningful, I used the MAXQDA open coding function to mark the sentence and label it or add a memo to it about the statement. This was a meticulous process of listening, pausing, correcting, coding, and memoing. However, the benefits derived were a large volume of in-vivo codes.

For the first round of transcript analysis, I continued using in-vivo coding in MAXQDA by highlighting the participants' exact words from their statements and answers to questions. I did this for all the interviews (1-3) and the focus group. Then, I imported the codes into a Microsoft Word document. The import displayed the codes in a chart with four columns. The first column (from left to right) contained the in-vivo codes. The next column displayed the memos attached to the codes. The final column showed the frequency of code use.

The structure of the table did not make sense to me. Therefore, I changed the columns, making the first column the frequency, the second column the in-vivo codes, and changing the heading of the memo column to "initial values codes." The third column ("initial values codes") contained descriptive codes, which I developed by using one to

three words to describe the general topic of the participants' words. Figure 6 represents the coding system followed. It demonstrates how MAXQDA helped identify and store the participants' words and how I moved their words to descriptive labels to start to inform categories.

Figure 6

Values Coding from In-vivo Coding

MAXQDA 24

9/5/2024

Code System

Frequency	In Vivo Coding	Initial Values Codes	2nd Value Codes
154			
1	They really <u>be</u> on the other kids' side sometimes,	Teacher Behavior	Trust
1	I get in her <u>class</u> , people have to go use the bathroom.	Student Experience	Trust
1	Because most of my teachers Black <u>only</u> probably like two teachers, but three of <u>'em</u> is Black.	Teacher Demographics	Race
1	This generation, the girls get it easy. I remember last year, my friend said, <u>oh</u> , she had <u>did</u> no work. I said, but soon I don't	Gender & Academic Expectations	Fairness
1	I be asking for a word on the test. I know you <u>ain't</u> helping me with <u>test</u> when I'm asking for the, they be like, I can't help y	Teacher Support	Support
1	I really, I be thinking because the teachers <u>just</u> collaborate with me. I collaborate with them, <u>them</u> they'll know, collaborate.	Teacher Collaboration	Support
1	I was just a good kid. I <u>just</u> love sports.	Student Self-Perception	Self-perception
1	I was supposed to be way better than that.	Academic Expectation	Self-reflection
1	but they <u>just</u> be all to me.	Student Experience	Experience
1	A lot because I can get out of <u>class</u> and I don't have to worry about <u>nobody</u> bothering me.	Discipline	Avoidance
1	It's an okay punishment. I can take	Discipline	Normalcy
1	That teacher said something crazy.	Teacher Behavior	Experiences
1	If you do something bad or if <u>people</u> <u>just</u> be mean, you <u>just</u> go to Star.	Discipline	Experiences
1	They do fair stuff. Like if you get in trouble, they dig deep. But when the teachers and the principal now, they don't dig too	Perception of Fairness	Preference of alternative setting
1	they know if I <u>ain't</u> did nothing, they'll just, they probably <u>just</u> let me do <u>pre</u> <u>prevent</u>	Discipline	Experience

Figure 6 is a small view of how I moved from in-vivo to descriptive to values. Ultimately, the use of MAXQDA afforded the ability to translate large amounts of raw data (the participants' words) in an organized and systematic way before translating them into other coding forms, such as descriptive and more theoretical ones. For instance, the first in-vivo code from one of the participants was "they really be on the other kids' side sometimes," and the descriptive code was "teacher behavior." Another example: "this

generation, the girls get it easy. I remember last year my friend said, oh, she had did no work," with the descriptive code being "gender and academic expectations."

Using in-vivo coding was personally rewarding as it allowed me to closely align the values codes with the participants' perspectives. In-vivo coding enhanced the depth and richness of data analysis by highlighting my participants' voices and experiences. Throughout this process, I engaged intimately with the data as I searched and extracted meaningful phrases or expressions that the participants used during data collection methods. The next logical step was to start to take the participants' words and sort or categorize them in some way that made sense to get to themes. Descriptive coding made sense here.

Descriptive Coding. Following in-vivo coding, I used descriptive coding by labeling the in-vivo codes with one to three words to summarize the general understanding of the participants' words. After typing descriptive labels like "teacher behaviors" for most rows of the table, I reviewed some of the initial codes I had written alongside the participants' attitudes and beliefs in the research journal (See Figure 4) and the circled words from the bubble activity (See Figure 5). Consequently, the next logical step was to use the initial values coding from the first two coding activities to connect the patterns in the data. Specifically, some words I labeled as attitudes and beliefs from the initial coding and the participants' words identified from the word bubbles were then used to further categorize the codes in the fourth and final column. Thus, the last column of Figure 6 reflects values codes from the earlier activities. For example, the in-vivo codes (e.g., "this generation, the girls get it easy") were first grouped into descriptive codes (e.g., "gender and academic expectations") to describe the general categorization. The in-

vivo code “they really be on the other kids’ side sometimes” was categorized under “trust” to reflect systemic perceptions of teacher bias.

As the main objective was to group codes into broader themes and categories in qualitative research (Saldaña, 2021), descriptive coding served as a stepping stone to using connecting strategies before thematic development. Consequently, this aided me in creating the bridge between in-vivo coding (participants’ exact words) and the broader thematic categories embedded in the connecting strategies. Details in the following section describe how I began to make connections in the data.

Connecting Strategies

After using in-vivo and descriptive coding, I started to see patterns and themes from the data—commonalities that tied the participants' stories together in meaningful ways under the research topic. However, there were still too many values codes to connect the data in a logical way. Thus, I needed to connect the data pieces by first reducing the values codes to fewer categories.

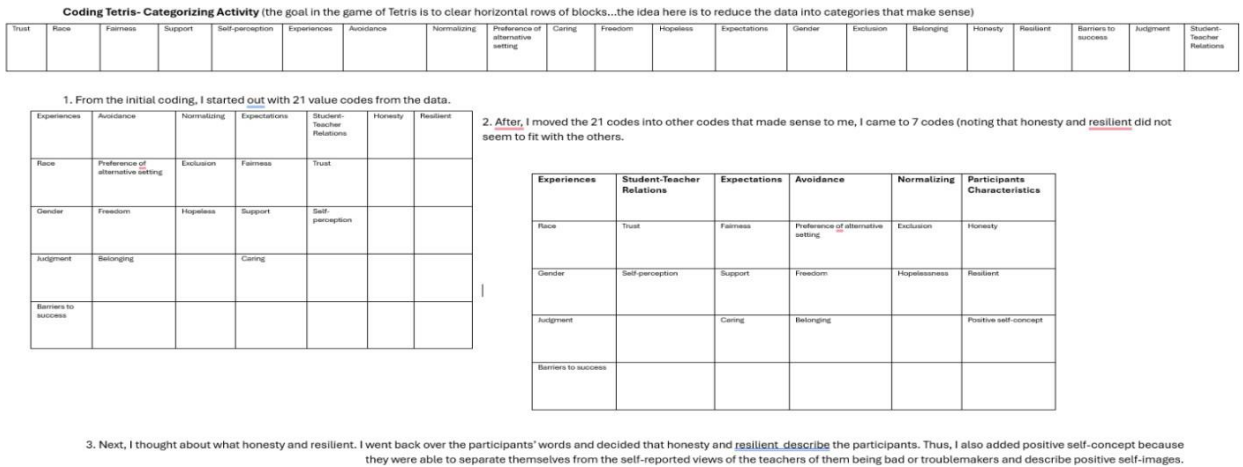
By using connecting strategies, I sought to do as Maxwell (2013) explained and understand the data in its context, unlike what I had done in categorizing when I fractured the data into segments. “The distinction between categorizing and connecting strategies is basic to understanding qualitative data analysis” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). “Connecting strategies are intended to address deficiency [of categorizing strategies]” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 112). Connecting is thought of as “looking for relationships that connect statements and events within a context into a coherent whole” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 112). From my understanding, connecting is also about identifying relationships within the context and understanding what happened over time (Maxwell, 2013).

After looking over the values codes, I needed to process the data to make sense in the context of the participants' experiences. In other words, I needed to connect the participants' experiences and their interview passages, and the codes from MAXQDA and my memos. I began to think about how the codes were aiding me in developing concepts that looped back to the participants' experiences. With the use of connecting strategies, I started to pull the data back together for a more contextual picture of what was going on with my participants.

The first action I took to begin connecting the data into categories was to examine all the codes and their relationships with one another. When I reviewed all the values codes created from the in-vivo codes in MAXQDA, it appeared that I could create a few initial categories. I started with 21 values codes, which was overwhelming. This is when I employed the Tertis Coding Activity (See Appendix I).

Figure 7

Coding Tetris Activity



Note: Readable version found in Appendix I.

This reduction activity (See Figure 7) was aptly termed “Coding Tetris”—just as Tetris aims to clear horizontal rows of blocks, this - a strategic reorganization process - sought

to reduce and connect the data into meaningful categories, analogous to the game's tile-matching mechanics. This metaphor captures how codes were systematically:

- Rotated to examine multiple conceptual orientations
- Strategically positioned to maximize categorical coherence
- Iteratively refined until achieving optimal theoretical alignment.

The Tertis Coding activity allowed me to reduce the values codes into broader categories. Specifically, I created the seven categories of experiences, avoidance, normalizing, expectations, student-teacher relationships, honesty, and resilience from the 21 values codes. After further thought, I was able to combine the last two categories under a new category of participants' characteristics, given that both honesty and resilience spoke to their character and did not have any other codes under them. This resulted in six overarching categories of experiences, student-teacher relationships, expectations, avoidance, normalizing, and participants' characteristics.

Table 3 illustrates the process I followed to connect the data pieces.

Table 3*Connecting Activities*

Phase 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A systematic review of the attitudes and beliefs activities documented in the research journal was conducted - Analysis of the values codes, displayed (Figure 5) - Strategic application of refined codes was then applied to the "Second ss Codes" column in (Figure 5)
Phase 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identified and extracted the most frequently occurring "Second Values Codes". - Employed additional reduction to further refine and condense the codes. - Employed the Tertis coding activity - Organized codes in a Microsoft Word document in an expanded 14" × 17" landscape layout to enable comprehensive analysis, allowing for all values codes to be displayed on a single page. - Conducted iterative reanalysis of the codes for redefinition and condensation to arrive at 21 categories
Phase 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilitated further simplification and reduction by identification of code patterns and thematic connections - Established hierarchical relationships between codes by examining patterns and relationships, allowing some codes to be categorized under others (grouping "respect" under others), resulting in a reduction to seven codes. - Reduced total categories to 7 core categories through pattern analysis
Phase 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Addressed non-conforming codes like "Honesty" and "resilience," which did not readily fit into these categories. - Further review of participant interview data to determine relationships for further grouping. - Reclassified categories: "honesty" and "resilience" were grouped under the category "Participants' Characteristics." This category was expanded to include "Positive Self-Concept" as a participant's subcategory based on participants' demonstrated ability to separate themselves from external negative perceptions held by others and articulate positive

Through these four phases, I connected the data pieces based on relational patterns I saw in the data across multiple sources— memos, interviews, and the focus group. This not only strengthened the credibility of the study, but it also moved me closer to understanding the patterns that informed the themes.

From there, I could begin to see some theoretical concepts from reading prior research that connected my participants' experiences as well. For example, caring (or the lack of) was a recurring code that prior research had supported. This indicated that I need to start connecting relationships that the data provided to themes.

This led to the development of the Disciplinary Progression Model (See Figure 8). I titled the model the "Disciplinary Progression Model" to emphasize how structured and systemic discipline of African American male students forces them to cope with the effects of it. It describes psychological and behavioral responses that the participants used to deal with their disciplinary experiences. The model utilizes participants' own words to define their beliefs about school and each specific phase. This is where values coding provided valuable insights into participants' values, beliefs and attitudes, and motivations, offering a unique perspective on the experiences of African American male students who are frequently disciplined in school. The model is based on the data from participant interviews to explain how a student who is frequently disciplined often transitions from enjoying school in the early elementary years to accepting alternative educational settings or exhibiting a nonchalant attitude towards missing regular education. The model comprises three phases: 1) early school experiences, 2) school disciplinary experiences, and 3) alternative setting experiences. Notably, the school disciplinary experiences phases encompass the following stages: (a) shift in attitude about school, (b) disengagement, (c) avoidance, and (d) normalization. Each of the other two phases has only one stage.

Figure 8

The Disciplinary Progression Model

4. This led me to thinking about the process in which the participants described from interviews 1 to 3. Under the research questions, how are school-based disciplinary experiences influencing their educational experiences? Thus, I start to work on this model.

Disciplinary Progression Model

Progression	Like School	Shift in feelings/attitude about school	Dis-engagement	Avoidance	Normalizing	Acceptance
Beliefs (participants' words)	School is Fun	-Teachers are teachers -They don't treat everyone the same	-I don't care no more -I rather be at home	-I do stuff to get sent home -Sometimes I don't want to go.	Everybody gets in trouble	-I can get my work done in ISS -Alternative school is better
Stages	Early School Experiences	School Disciplinary Experiences				Alternative Setting Experiences

The colors in the figures illustrate how the experiences escalate from positive (green) to warning signs (yellow), and last, it ends in acceptance (red), which signals a total disconnect with traditional educational settings. I will discuss the Disciplinary Progression Model in detail in the last chapter, but I wanted to introduce it here because it was critical in helping me develop the themes that I discuss next.

Thematic Development

My data analysis procedure involved several steps that I used to effectively arrive at themes I saw in the data. First, I used categorizing, specifically coding, to fracture and organize the data. This step was done by making notes of interesting and meaningful statements the participants used during interviews and the focus group. I noted these statements as memos in my field journal. Next, I employed values coding by labeling the statements under general words or phrases into categories that held similar meanings. This was the Attitudes and Beliefs Activity shown in Figure 2. Then, I went back and listened to the audio recordings again to pull out meaningful words that were repetitive in

the participants' interviews and circled those words. This was the process used in the Word Bubble Activity displayed in Figure 5. Once I had transcripts of the interviews and the focus group, I used MAXQDA to apply in-vivo coding to the data by taking the participants' own words that held meaning (See Figure 4). I took those in-vivo codes and categorized them under the values codes that I used in the first two activities described earlier. From there, I continued to categorize the data under the values codes until I reached a number of categories that reflected the essence of the participants' experiences. Thus, Activities 1 through 3 reflected the data analyses I used to fracture, label, and organize the data so that I could properly code the data pieces to begin to uncover similarities and patterns that could contribute to thematic ideas to answer the research questions. As Maxwell (2013) described, it was a constant play of back and forth in an interactive manner with the data pieces.

After employing categorizing, I started to see how the data was coming together in valid and credible ways. Next, I reduced the categories to six (students' experiences, student-teacher relationships, expectations, avoidance, normalizing, and participants' characteristics), the categories seemed to have a connective pattern to them. Thus, I created the Disciplinary Progression Model. The model was a way of using the values and in-vivo coding to arrive at thematic categories. It explained that the participants had positive school experiences when they were younger, but their attitudes started to shift as their disciplinary experiences progressed. The model demonstrated that the participants moved from shifts in their attitudes from positive to negative to school disengagement to school avoidance to normalizing discipline (and its consequences), and finally to the acceptance of alternative educational settings as better.

After reflecting on what the categories and the model suggested, I arrived at three themes that accounted for the fluid nature of the participants' experiences and how they made meaning of their experiences. The basis of the themes is (1) there is a shift from positive to negative experiences from the participants as they age through school and discipline progresses for them, (2) there are expectations of fairness, caring, and supportive teachers and school environment, and redemptive relationships with teachers, and (3) participants maintained a positive self-concept and held themselves accountable for their actions through honesty, which revealed their resiliency and their inclination towards goodness despite oppressive practices in their disciplinary experiences.

Consequently, these three themes best explained what was going on:

(a) Students' school experiences shifted from positive when they were younger to negative as they perceived teachers, administrators, and their school environment as unfair and biased.

(b) Students held expectations for their teachers and school environment to be fair, caring, and supportive but found it to be less of a safe place for them to be themselves and free of judgment while experiencing various forms of oppression.

(c) Despite their disciplinary experiences, the students maintained a positive self-concept and displayed characteristics of resiliency and honesty.

These themes evolved from a very interactive data analysis process.

The process involved three iterative phases: (1) pre-transcription coding, (2) transcription and software-assisted coding, and (3) thematic categorization. Table 4 summarizes the workflow, tools, and outcomes, while Figures 2 and 3 illustrate key activities.

Table 4*In-Vivo Coding Process and Thematic Development*

Phase	Purpose	Activities	Outcomes	Visual Example
1. Pre-Transcription Coding	Identify preliminary patterns and inform follow-up questions.	- Conducted “word bubbles” activity (Figure 5): Circled repetitive/meaningful participant phrases (e.g., “help,” “Black female teachers”).	1. Pre-Transcription Coding	Identify preliminary patterns and inform follow-up questions.
2. Transcription & Software Coding	Ensure accuracy and systematically code data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transcribed audio via Rev.com - Verified/corrected transcripts in MAXQDA - Applied in descriptive codes to participants’ exact words (e.g., “they really be on the other kids’ side sometimes”). - Attached memos to capture tone/context (e.g., emotional pauses). 	Refined codes, memos, and frequency counts.	N/A
3. Thematic Categorization	Develop broader categories from the codes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exported codes to Word, reorganized columns for clarity. - Grouped in-vivo codes into values codes (e.g., “gender and academic expectations”). - Thematically clustered codes (e.g., “trust,” “fairness”) (Figure 6). 	Final categories reflecting participants’ lived experiences and systemic issues.	Figure 7: Tertis Coding activity of categories

As Table 4 illustrates, each phase used the participants’ words to inform the development of categories and the themes. I believe this process added credibility and trustworthiness to the study. In the next section, I will detail how I accomplished that.

Validity

According to Maxwell (2013), validity is the "final component of your design" (p. 121). Validity is a property of knowledge, not methods. No matter whether knowledge comes from an ethnography or an experience, we may still ask the same kind of questions

about the ways in which that knowledge is valid (p. 733). I surmised that I must gain inside knowledge into the lives of the participants to arrive at a valid and credible study. This led me to understand that “meanings emerging from the data have to be tested for their plausibility, sturdiness, and confirmability—that is, their validity” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 37) because validity answers “why should we believe [the work you presented]” or “how will we know that the conclusions are valid?” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 121). In very generic terms, Seidman (2013) defined:

How do we know that what the participant is telling us is true? And if it is true for this participant, is it true for anyone else? And if another person were doing the interview, would we get a different meaning? Or if we were to do the interview at a different time of year, would the participant reconstruct his or her experience differently? Or if we had picked different participants to interview, would we get an entirely dissimilar and perhaps contradictory sense of the issue at hand? These are some of the validity, reliability, and generalizability that researchers confront. (p. 41)

To the latter point, Patton (2014) acknowledged that credibility, which parallels internal validity, “addresses the issue of the researcher providing accurate accounts” of the participant’s views and the researcher’s reconstruction and representations of those views (p. 685). In other words, “internal validity asks the question, how congruent are one’s findings with reality?” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 25). Said another way, “internal validity in experimental designs concerns the extent to which causal claims are warranted and can be substantiated” (Patton, 2014, p. 583).

One way that I ensured validity was through the selection process. At least one suspension qualifier was indicative of past disciplinary infractions (Losen, 2015) which enabled me to explore, through the use of interviews and a focus group, how these participants' lives were impacted by their disciplinary experiences and how the participants made sense of their world, given their history of being associated with behavioral issues. I reasoned that my research questions could only be answered by those participants and no one else (Maxwell, 2013).

In the case of the previous point, I agreed with Patton (2014) in his stance that “validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (Patton, 2014, p. 312). Merriam and Associates (2002) contended that “a small sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (p. 28) as one would in quantitative studies. She quotes Firestone (1993): “it is the reader who has to ask, what is this study that I can apply to my own situation, and what clearly does not” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 29). To satisfy this detail, I selected four African American male students who had been suspended at least once during their time in middle school. In general terms, “the inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 7).

The fact that only three participants collaborated in the research was an early concern of mine because I originally set out to select 6 to 10 participants. After collecting the data and analyzing it, I agree with Patton (2014) in his stance that “validity,

meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (Patton, 2014, p. 312). In general terms, “the inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 7). The fact that qualitative research is derived from “different assumptions about reality, generalizability needs to be thought of differently from quantitative research” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 28).

As a result, the data collection and the data analysis processes were the only means to get to the knowledge, which increased the credibility of the study. The more information I collected from the participants, which allowed me to analyze the data, which in turn, then allowed me to gain more knowledge about what was happening with the participants in the study. Yet, validity also includes limiting my subjectivity and bias.

Seidman (2013) argued that "there is room in the universe for multiple approaches to validity" (p. 44). The goal of this study was not to conduct research generalizable across various contexts but rather to achieve rigorous and trustworthy findings by exhausting the data collection process until no new themes were identified. This approach led to the conclusion that interviews and focus groups were sufficient to capture rich, thick descriptions during data collection. Only interviews (including focus groups), as a data-collecting technique, could provide insights into how participants construct beliefs and make meaning of their experiences (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Associates, 2002). To capture these insights, Seidman's (2013) three-stage interviewing technique was employed to record in-depth (semi-structured) interviews with participants. Maxwell

(2013) stated that the three-stage interviewing method is beneficial as it invites more data for comparison, providing richer data for triangulation.

In my study, each participant completed three interviews ranging from 30 to 90 minutes, depending on the participants and all three participated in one focus group. Originally, I was concerned about the amount of time of the interviews. I was stuck between asking them to share more and not forcing them to say things to fill the time and lose the richness of the meaningful data they thought was important to share. I came away with an understanding that the participants were sharing what they thought was important under the research focus. If I pushed them to share for an ideal amount of time, then the data collection would be compromised, and the richness would be lost.

After sitting with the frustrations of not having longer interviews, I had to ground myself in the reality that I was running up against the teenage male culture of not being expressive or lacking the ability to fully communicate their thought. Not to mention that the participants shared they had learned not to talk much due to being afraid of their teachers' responses or retaliation. Because this population should not be neglected or abandoned due to their learned inability to be expressive, I had to find creative ways to engage and ask them about their experiences. Thus, I asked them questions about sports, hobbies, and music, which led me to some insightful data about their ways of thinking and what was meaningful to them. Then I was able to go back and connect those expressions to the context of their schooling. I was able to pull more rich information from them but a lot of it was playing back and forth with the data through the analysis process and checking with them to confirm my assumptions and interpretations.

These interviews offered the rich and detailed data needed to "provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126). The logic is straightforward: more interview data allowed for confrontation with prior data, revealing more complete stories as participants share their experiences and enabling deeper probing to clarify any inconsistencies. The goal was to compare emerging data with existing data, seeking consistency when the emerging data repeatedly confirmed prior data.

To specifically discuss how I conducted a valid and trusted study, this section focuses on the questions posted by the qualitative experts regarding the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Those questions are:

1. How did I safeguard against the "hazardous passage from the writer to reader?" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 24)
2. "Why should we believe [the work you presented]" or "how will we know that the conclusions are valid?" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 121)
3. How do we know that what the participant is telling us is true? (Seidman, 2013, p. 41)
4. How congruent are one's findings with reality?" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 25)

The practical and collective answers are triangulation of the data points, the rigor of the data analysis, and strategies to mitigate threats to validity. It led to what I have already mentioned, which is, "validity is a property of knowledge, not methods" (Patton, 2014, p. 733). The more sources of data collection I used presented an opportunity to use creative and interactive data analysis processes to validate if one source was supporting the other, which helped to mitigate threats to a trustworthy study. All these measures forced me to

gain more insight and knowledge about what was going on and what was not going on, separating reality from my biases or subjectivity.

Because validity in qualitative research is more concerned with integrity than objectivity, the key to conducting credible research is for researchers to explain their "possible biases and how [they] will deal with these" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). This next section is dedicated to exploring biases and the strategies I employed to offer credible study with integrity and rigor in the data collection and data analysis processes.

While most scholars agree that it is impossible to eliminate the researcher's personal beliefs, favorable academic theories, or perceptual lens (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2014; Seidman, 2013), Maxwell (2013) argued that "qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding how a particular researcher's values and expectations may have influenced the conduct of the study" (p. 124). As the researcher who had a close connection with the subject matter from both a personal and professional level, I have developed some preconceived notions. I was an African American (AA) middle school student who was impacted by disciplinary practices in a rural school setting. I believe negative disciplinary treatment from teachers and other school officials can influence the experiences of AA middle school students in ways beyond the education system. My professional experiences as an educator for several years allowed me to witness what I believed to be mistreatment and racism within the school system. My years of experience working in the criminal justice system and observing the disproportionate number of AA males who entered, mostly resulting from school issues, influenced my personal beliefs as well. As a result, I believe there are systemic (institutional), structural, and subconscious biases that lead to racist effects in disciplinary practices. Those effects, in

turn, lead to discrimination in the legal system, which resembles the discriminatory discipline in the schools. Research has supported these assumptions for nearly 50 years through both qualitative and quantitative studies (Butler, 2011; Collier, 2007; Davis, 2008; Fergusson, 2001; Grady, 2023; Howard & Reynolds, 2013; Noguera, 2012; Skiba et al., 2002). During the last 17 years, as part of my career, I have read literature on the topics of school discipline, incarceration, race, and the intersectionality of the three.

In memoing about how I would deal with these biases, I came to understand that my research questions were grounded in my own biases. In other words, the way I came to select the research topic was because of the way I thought about the issues that African American male students faced given my personal experiences. My research questions are:

1. What social, familial, and education-related experiences have middle school African American (AA) male students with a prior out-of-school suspension on their record had related to discipline and what meanings do they attribute to those experiences?
2. What aspects of the context in which they were raised and schooled, begin to influence them and how—their self-identity and self-concept?
3. How do experientially based meanings of disciplinary practices influence AA middle school male students' construction of their worldviews in terms of authority, fairness, discipline, family, society, school, and community?

These questions ask for answers I want to know more about because I believe a certain thing about how it happens. Those are the biases that I needed to account for in my study. Now, I turn to explain how I dealt with those biases. The remainder of this section will be dedicated to the latter.

While Patton (2014) claimed that validity is the property of knowledge, not methods, Merriam and Associates (2002) explained that "knowledge gained in an investigation still "faces hazardous passage from the writer to reader" . . . the writer needs safeguarding the trip" (p. 24). Thus, in conducting this study, it was imperative that I account for those influential biases and discuss how I dealt with those biases in seeking answers to those questions (Maxwell, 2013). To address these potential biases, I employed several strategies. Therefore, the next sections are dedicated to measures that increase the trustworthiness of this study.

I used many strategies in this study to maintain the integrity and ensure credibility so that the knowledge passed to the reader is not from total subjectivity and bias. These are the specific strategies and approaches:

Bracketing: Throughout the research process, I engaged in ongoing critical self-reflection to identify my own assumptions and biases, and how they might influence my interpretations. I kept a reflective journal to memo my thoughts and feelings about the research process.

Peer Review: I shared my ongoing research findings and interpretations with peers, seeking their feedback and insights to challenge my perspectives and identify potential blind spots. This process helped to ensure that my interpretations were grounded in the data rather than my own biases.

Member-checking: I checked in with my participants about my interpretations of their accounts and experiences. I did this during interviews, after interviews, in the next interviews, and used the focus group to check with them about accounts they all shared.

Triangulation: I used multiple sources of data, including participant interviews, a focus group, and memoing, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of my participants. This helped to reduce the influence of any single source of data on my conclusions.

Data analysis strategies: I used several data analysis techniques to play back and forth between data pieces (interviews, memos, and the focus group). One technique's weakness was strengthened using the others.

Transparency: I was transparent about my biases and the strategies I employed to mitigate them. I presented my findings in a clear and objective manner, allowing the reader to judge the credibility and integrity of the research.

By employing these strategies, I aimed to minimize the impact of my biases on the research process and ensure that my findings were credible and trustworthy.

According to Patton (2014), “even in the most stringent research designs, bias seems to be a major problem” (p. 95). Research bias or subjectivity is referred to as, “the selection of data that fit the researcher’s existing theory, goals, or preconceptions, and the data that “stand out” to the researcher” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). Merriam and Associates (2002) explained that the hazards that qualitative research can involve, “the writer needs safeguarding the trip” (p. 24).

As all three research questions centered around participants' experiences and their attributed meanings, the interviews were reinforced by a focus group. In addition to using interviews and a focus group for data collection, journal memos were incorporated.

Recognizing that each data collection method (interviews, focus groups, and memos) held both strengths and weaknesses, their combined use enhanced validity, as the strength

of one method helped to mitigate the weakness of another. Bracketing, a technique used for memoing, proved particularly useful.

Bracketing is a valuable strategy to address human error and personal biases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is a unique approach to dealing with threats to validity by removing the researcher from the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). "Prior beliefs about a phenomenon of interest are temporarily put aside, or bracketed, so as not to interfere with seeing or intuiting the elements or structure of the phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 7). Merriam and Associates (2002) stated that "the researcher must suspend presuppositions to enter the lifeworld [of the participants]" (p. 94). She proposed bracketing two main categories of presuppositions: "those to do with the temptation to impose on the investigation of the life-world claims emanating from objective science or other authoritative sources, and those to do with the imposition of criteria of validity arising outside the life-world itself" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 94).

Patton (2014) provided the most thorough account of how a researcher may approach and practice bracketing. He stated: "In bracketing, the researcher holds the phenomenon up for serious inspection. It is taken out of the world where it occurs. It is taken apart and dissected. Its elements and essential structures are uncovered, defined, and analyzed. It is treated as a text or a document; that is, as an instance of the phenomenon that is being studied. It is not interpreted in terms of the standard meanings given to it by the existing literature. Those preconceptions, which were isolated in the deconstruction phase, are suspended and put aside during bracketing. In bracketing, the subject matter is confronted, as much as possible, on its own terms. Bracketing involves the following steps: (1) Locate within the personal experience, or self-story, key phrases

and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question. (2) Interpret the meanings of these phrases, as an informed reader. (3) Obtain the subject's interpretations of these phrases, if possible. (4) Inspect these meanings for what they reveal about the essential, recurring features of the phenomenon being studied. (5) Offer a tentative statement, or definition, of the phenomenon in terms of the essential recurring features identified in step 4" (p. 575).

As illustrated by Dr. R. Schmertzling, my committee chair, bracketing prompts us to question how we define objects (such as a rock) (personal conversation, date unknown) and challenges us to explore them without relying on prior assumptions. Similarly, in this study of the experiences of African American males, bracketing required setting aside preconceived ideas from personal experiences and prior research about how factors like discipline shape their experiences. It forced the researcher to examine participant statements for meaning and generate further questions. These questions involved exploring potential biases that might be forming connections that were not present in the data. As the data was read and reviewed, questions were written, followed by questions about those questions within the journal memos. These questions became inquiries directed at the researcher, then the research committee (personal conversation, August 20, 2024), and Dr. Frazier (personal conversation, August 18, 2024), both of which are discussed in the data collection section.

Bracketing allowed for the incorporation of my research committee's and Dr. Frazier's feedback, as well as the researcher's own questions, into the formulation of new questions and probes for subsequent interviews and the focus group. The goal was to eliminate as many biases as possible. The aim was to answer the research questions, not

to confirm my own beliefs at the expense of the participants' voices. Thus, a built-in member checking process was created by starting each new interview with follow-up questions from the previous interviews.

Member checking provided a high level of credibility and validity (Seidman, 2013). It can be defined as a technique for validating a researcher's hunches by "checking" with participants for feedback (Maxwell, 2013). According to Maxwell (2013), researchers should "undertake extensive member checking of [their] findings and transcripts on an ongoing basis" (p. 156). In essence, I needed to directly ask participants about some of the statements they made in prior interviews. After extensively reviewing previous interviews and creating new questions to clarify or follow up on certain statements, the second and third interviews were used to initiate some initial member checking. This approach aligned with the rigor advocated by Maxwell and the process described by Patton (2014) for addressing disconnects between data from various collection methods. More feedback from member checking increased the odds of presenting credible findings. Additionally, this process fostered a sense of partnership between the researcher and participants (Maxwell, 2013). By viewing themselves as co-researchers, participants were more likely to engage, be honest, and share, thus providing more credible data.

I used member-checking in three ways with my participants. First, during our interviews. I repeated their statements during the interviews and asked them if I heard them correctly and when appropriate, made interpretations about what they said asking them if I had it correct. Sometimes the participants would say "yay" and other times they would correct me or restate what they said in a way I could better understand. Secondly, I

reviewed each participant's previous interview and memo with the intent to understand their experiences. Sometimes I did not always understand. In those times, I formulated questions for clarification, more detail, or new probes to ask in the subsequent interview. I asked the questions directly and shared my reasons or reflective thoughts about the questions. Last, I used the focus group to connect most of the things they shared during their individual interviews and asked whether the others had those experiences. The focus group allowed them to collaborate with one another and correct any errors or provide more details about surrounding assumptions and interpretations.

In addition to serving as a safeguard, member-checking fostered a better sense of partnership with the participants. During the focus group, it was apparent that the participants viewed themselves as co-researchers, and it served to be the most engaged, honest, and sharing discussion I had with the participants. They corrected me and provided better details by picking up any details they thought one another was leaving out. This provided more credible data for me to go back and plug into the other data and codes. I believe member-checking allows AA male students to have a voice in the stories they are sharing. Using member-checking in this way complemented the next safeguard to a reliable and credible study, triangulation.

Despite member checking being used, the credibility of the data from interviews can potentially be not credible if participants are given accounts of what they believe the researcher wants (Maxwell, 2013). Triangulation is a crucial strategy in qualitative research that leverages the strengths of multiple data collection methods to enhance validity and address potential weaknesses. By employing interviews, focus groups, and memos concurrently, I mitigated the limitations of each individual approach. As Maxwell

(2013) and Patton (2014) explained, this combined approach allows one method to check and balance the others, resulting in stronger validity and minimizing threats to the research's credibility. The ultimate goal of triangulation is to ensure the study design effectively answers the research questions and fully accounts for the strengths and limitations inherent in each data source.

Thus, I followed that structure and intentionally chose to write focus group questions strictly from those reflective memos while bracketing. The benefit of focus groups is that assumptions can be tested by putting the assumption in question to the group and having the participants challenge one another's beliefs around what is going on (Patton, 2014). In some cases, the group can strengthen the assumptions. In addition, working with a minority population, African American male students, it is important to reference Patton's (2014) belief:

By bringing together people who share a similar background, focus groups create the opportunity for participants to engage in meaningful conversations about topics that researchers wish to understand. This ability to learn about participants' perspectives by listening to their conversations makes focus groups especially useful for hearing groups whose voices are often marginalized within the larger society. Focus groups are thus widely used in the studies of ethnic and cultural minority groups. (p. 477)

Despite the advantages of interviews, the possibility of participants tailoring their responses to perceived researcher expectations poses a challenge to credibility. The focus group provided a valuable counterpoint to this issue. In the focus groups, I was able to test some of my assumptions derived from interviews with all the participants at once and

receive feedback on whether the experiences were shared or only an individual experience. I found that the participants at times challenged one another's experiences, but more so collaborated and provided more details about their experience as the other participants listened and added what they experienced with the teacher, principal, or situation. At a minimum, the focus group offered a broader range of opinions and perspectives, providing a valuable check on the information gathered through individual interviews. Because the data from interviews and the focus group converged and supported many of my interpretations from the memos and prior data collection and analyses, the credibility and validity of my findings were significantly enhanced. This convergence strengthened the themes and findings.

Thus, I chose to use one focus group once all participants had completed the three interviews. I brought all the participants together and asked questions from their interviews in a group setting. This worked well to strengthen the credibility of the study because at this point of the research, the focus group explored a “variety of perspectives and increased confidence in whatever patterns emerged” (Patton, 2014, p. 475). This was important because it gave the participants an opportunity to hear some of their answers from their individual interviews and others to talk about whether they shared those experiences and related the similarities and the differences between their experiences.

One observation that I picked up on was that the participants seemed more relaxed to talk with their peers and it highlighted one of the themes from the interviews; they liked to socialize with their peers. At its least, the focus group added the advantage of obtaining more information with varying opinions and perspectives. In that way alone,

the data from the interviews and focus group started to reinforce assumptions and form connections.

My memos, while useful, could not directly access participants' thoughts and feelings and were subjective in nature because they were what I thought. Thus, interpretations derived from memos risk being skewed by my inherent bias. Because the weakness of my reflective memos was my thoughts and assumptions, and they lacked the ability to speak directly to the thoughts and feelings of the participants, the memos worked well for exploring themes and connections from prior statements of interviews, and, in turn, the data from the various sources interacted and confronted one another. This allowed me to check my assumptions and ask participants about statements that were unclear, or I needed more clarity around to start making sense of the data. This speaks to the very nature of triangulation in qualitative research. The goal was for one method to provide checks and balances on the other, which, in turn, provided for stronger validity and to limit possible threats to the credibility of the research (Maxwell, 2013). After no repeated themes, I looked across multiple interviews, my memos, and the focus group to reinforce the reliability of the other data pieces. Stated plainly, triangulation was used so that I addressed the weaknesses of one data source to the next. In this process, it can be deemed more credible or valid. This is the very purpose of triangulation.

Credibility is the hallmark of successful triangulation. Because each data collection procedure (interviews, focus groups, and memos) has strengths and weaknesses, using them together increased the validity as the strength of one procedure helps to diminish the weakness of the other. As I described in the section before data collection, triangulation afforded a study that was supported and backed up by each data

piece reinforcing the others. Each did that and I was able to feel confident that the repeated data coming in was being exhausted despite being collected from various sources.

The goal of triangulation is for one method to provide checks and balances on the other, which, in turn, provides for stronger validity and to help limit possible threats to the credibility of the research (Maxwell, 2013). Triangulation is key to making sure that the study design answers the research questions (Patton, 2014) and that we address the weaknesses and strengths of the data. The biggest challenge left was to parse out Type III errors.

In qualitative studies, validity is most concerned with avoiding the right answers to the wrong questions— known as Type III errors (Patton, 2014). One of my goals was to create a feedback loop between data collection and data analysis processes. I did that through the data analysis process, providing invaluable feedback as to whether the data gathered during the data collection process is answering the research questions.

To deal with Type III errors, the process of crafting interview questions from data gleaned from prior interviews, the focus group, and memos helped to ensure that the data informed the questions to be asked. The process aligned the interview questions with the research questions. The objective was to focus the inquiries on the topic of the research, and not wonder into other topics or irrelevant areas of interest. All the questions and effort were focused on answering the research questions. For instance, after analyzing the data, the data that was collected spoke to the research questions. The participants' experiences highlighted that school disciplinary practices impacted their relationships, but other experiences shaped their perspectives as well.

A related goal was to answer the research questions through data collection and analysis. Patton (2014) offered that the best method for this is to regularly check the alignment between research questions, data collection strategies, and data analysis. I did this and explained it in the previous paragraphs. Creswell (2013) stressed that the data collection and research design respond to the research questions. The way I made sure that the design, data collection, and questions were aligned was to constantly consult Maxwell's (2013) advice to either change the design or questions if the data is not informing the research questions. I did not experience a time when the questions were not being answered by the research design or the collection methods.

Consequently, Type III error was avoided because the research design fit the research questions in that a narrative inquiry was used, the study focused on the experiences of the participants relating to their lived experiences as African American rural middle school students, and the data answered the specific research questions. The data informed what factors were influential in the relationships, self-concept, and worldviews of the participants. Because the data informed the research questions and no other questions, then it is a telling confirmation that I did not conduct a study that produced the right answers to the wrong question. I conducted a credible study that yielded answers to my research questions. In closing, the feedback loop between the collection and analysis processes assisted me in avoiding Type III errors under my chosen research design.

My ultimate hope was to create a feedback loop between the data collection and data analysis processes in which one reinforced the other. If the data collection process aligned with the research questions, then the data analysis process would answer those

questions. Maxwell (2013) stressed that if your methods do not provide data to answer the research question, then there is a call to change questions or methods. In my research, I found that the data analysis procedure reinforced the data collection process because the data gathered informed the questions I asked in this study. As a result, the themes and findings are built upon credible and reliable data due to the data collection and analysis processes.

To answer those questions, using both categorizing and connecting strategies ensured that threats to the study were limited in that the subjectivity of my labeling and categorizing the data was backed by connecting those categories to the specific words of the participants and then creating the themes from both (my labels and their words). In the data analysis section, I provided rich details of how I analyzed the data through triangulation of the different data pieces (interviews, the focus group, and journal memos) using creative and interactive categorizing and connecting strategies such as Word Bubble, Tertis Coding, and the Disciplinary Progression Model activities. Those were the means of depicting the processes and actions that led to the observations and themes. Because I went back and forth with the data in a creative and interactive way as Maxwell (2013) provided, it helped limit my subjectivity and other explanations that could explain what was happening in the participants' lives regarding the research focus.

The use of both categorizing and connecting strategies resulted in more reliable findings. Categorizing has the limitation of removing the data out of its contextual reference (Maxwell, 2013). As Maxwell pointed out, it can decontextualize the data from its original context and maybe alter the meaning because it is removed from the details in which it was gathered. To my understanding, the goal of categorizing is not to maintain

the detail but rather to label the data in a way that simplifies it. Thus, using it alone will almost ensure validity threats because details are lost, and the research may utilize their subjectivity in categorizing. For instance, the participants shared experiences that defined a lack of fairness in their schooling. Chucking those experiences under the category of fairness was used to simplify the data but the specific details in which the participants expressed unfairness were not maintained. One participant's experience of unfairness was about not letting him use the bathroom or treating him as a bad kid. In contrast, another participant's experience defined teachers treating girls better than boys. The former is one of denying a privilege, and the latter is more of a bias. Maxwell (2013) suggested accounting for this limitation with connecting strategies.

While categorizing was done using my knowledge base, conceptual framework influences, and subjective judgment, connecting worked to validate the judgment with data occurring across the participants. Staying with the concept of fairness, I made a connection that all the participants experienced a sense of unfairness in their relationships with teachers and other school officials. These examples strengthen the research in terms of validity because sound interpretations could be made regarding the relationships that exist between the educational setting and Black males in middle school. As a result, I could better construct themes and make interpretations about what was going on. In short, both strategies were complementary in the way the two need each other to provide a well-rounded account of what is going on. Categorizing simplified the data to make sense and rearranged it to speak to the connecting threads between the participants and the teachers. I was beginning to see what was going on between my participants and the teachers, only I analyzed the data to discover that fairness was at play. In other words, fairness was the

simplified word that allowed me to find the connection between what was happening between the teachers and my participants. In a practical way, categorizing was about putting things that look the same together (being treated unfavorably) while connecting was about making bridges to things that hold meaning together (teachers denying Black males the same privileges they give others). Categorizing, used alone, presents a unique threat of taking the data out of its original context while connecting strengthens the study by retaining the data in context (Maxwell, 2013).

Summary

In reflecting on the methodological approach, the guiding principle "validity is a property of knowledge, not methods" (Patton, 2014, p. 733) proved invaluable. While the employed strategies enhanced data integrity and confidence in interpretations, the significant insights gained from participants' lived experiences and contextual understanding ultimately yielded a valid study. The study's validity transcended methodological considerations; it stemmed from the challenging of prior assumptions and the generation of new knowledge. This rigorous exploration of participants' lived experiences yielded a trustworthy account, demonstrating that the depth and relevance of the insights, not the methods themselves, determine validity. In the context of qualitative research, this underscored the primacy of context over generalizability. While the findings may not be generalizable to all African American male students, their validity is firmly grounded in the authentic narratives of the study participants. As the primary research instrument, my role was to amplify these voices and contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

In addition, the researcher's diligence is crucial in mitigating threats to reliability and validity. A robust plan to address potential research bias and subjectivity was paramount (Maxwell, 2013). This section addressed key questions essential for establishing the trustworthiness, validity, and credibility of this study, as identified by leading qualitative researchers:

- 1) How did I mitigate the “hazardous passage from the writer to reader” (Merriam, 2002, p. 24)?
- 2) Why should the reader believe the presented work, or how can the validity of the conclusions be ascertained? (Maxwell, 2013, p. 121).
- 3) How do we know that what the participant is telling us is true? (Seidman, 2013, p. 41)
- 4) How congruent are the findings with reality? (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 25)

The following discussion provided detailed responses to each question.

Regarding question 1, potential biases stemming from my own beliefs were addressed through rigorous bracketing and member-checking. This process allowed participants the opportunity to confirm or challenge both the collected data and my interpretations of their narratives. For question 2, the credibility of the study rested on the substantial volume of data collected. The three individual interviews and focus group discussions provided rich accounts, revealing recurring themes and consistent responses across participants, thereby validating emergent themes. Importantly, the data were not manipulated to fit predetermined research questions; instead, the findings, some of which diverged from my initial assumptions, were accepted as presented by the participants

(further discussed in the concluding section). Concerning question 3, the credibility of participant accounts was supported by the consistency of their narratives across the three interviews and the focus group, further corroborated through follow-up member-checking. Furthermore, participants actively challenged some of my initial characterizations and assumptions, offering alternative perspectives. Finally, addressing question 4, the congruence of the findings with reality is supported by existing research, which corroborated many of the identified themes. The participants' narratives also reflect the lived realities of their experiences. In essence, I was able to unearth connections and patterns to offer insights about the participants' experiences through methodological rigor:

- Cultural Validity: By prioritizing participants' language, the study mitigated interpretative bias and amplified marginalized voices.
- Triangulation: Cross-referenced interviews, focus groups, and field notes to validate themes (e.g., "bias treatment" was consistent across multiple sources).
- Auditability: MAXQDA's audit trail and memo features ensured transparency in code-to-theme decisions.

Consequently, the presentation of the data is detailed in the next chapter.

Chapter IV

NARRATIVES

One of the primary goals of my research was to amplify the voices of the three young men who trusted me to share their stories with the research community and beyond. I prioritized telling their lived experiences in the most authentic and truthful way I could with the stories I had. Intentional use of participant language was employed to define their experiences and foster a deeper connection to their perspectives for both the researcher and the reader. First, my approach to presenting their stories as a composite of vignettes that address different phases of their lives is explained.

Data Presentation

Merriam and Associates (2002) argued that qualitative research aims to uncover "how people make sense of their lives and experiences" (p. 38), while Seidman (2013) viewed participants' experiences as a "way of knowing and understanding" (p. 16). Both perspectives emphasize the importance of presenting data coherently to effectively convey participant experiences. However, the underlying assumption is that a researcher's primary responsibility is to present data in a manner that ensures the reader understands. Therefore, my goal was to present the data in a way that enabled readers to understand participants' experiences and eventually how the data related to the research questions.

Seidman (2013) advocated for presenting participant stories through detailed narrative profiles, capturing their experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Seidman (2013) stressed the importance of richly descriptive data, incorporating direct quotes and

vivid anecdotes to highlight participants' voices. Adhering to Seidman, I intended to present seamless stories of the participants' experiences through narrative profiles, but I did not have enough descriptive data to be true to Seidman's intentions with a complete profile because the participants did not give coherent stories of their experiences. Unfortunately, I had to take the data and present it under topical sections pulled from in-vivo coding phrases that characterized concepts of their descriptions of their experiences. Specifically, I created vignettes, shortened individual stories that, when viewed holistically, paint a picture of the individual and let the readers get to know them. Similarly, Merriam and Associates (2002) emphasized the importance of richly descriptive data, including direct quotes and anecdotes, to center participant voices. The vignettes do address Merriam and Associates' (2002) approach to these narratives and provide detailed accounts of participants' experiences, challenges, and aspirations.

To effectively capture the experiences of rural African American males, I aimed to present data in participants' own words, providing transparent insights and thoughtful interpretations of their experiences (Seidman, 2013). I believed this approach was essential given the complex intersectionality of race, gender, and rurality. In focusing on rural African American males, I believed it was crucial, as Seidman (2013) advocated, to present the participants in a manner that best facilitated readers' connection to participants' lives. This approach aimed to provide a coherent and compelling interpretation of the data and transparent accounts of participants' experiences.

Previous studies employed various methods to present qualitative data from African American students. Of the eight studies included in my literature review, four distinct methods of data presentation were identified. Woodson (2013), Austell (2008),

and Bell (2015) utilized a narrative-by-themes approach, categorizing participant responses under thematic headings. Rolland (2011) and Melvin (2004) organized data according to specific research questions, while Monroe (2009) employed pre-existing themes from the literature. Berry (2005) and Collier (2007) presented data using narrative profiles, attributing responses to pseudonyms.

I now add my vignette approach, which are descriptive profiles similar to Berry (2005) and Collier (2007) in that they start by introducing each participant, then present thematic analysis of their responses in the next chapter. This method prioritized participants' humanity while simultaneously elucidating themes that I also discovered. It allowed for a nuanced understanding of how individual identities shaped responses, maintaining a balance between participant narratives and thematic exploration. I believed this approach accurately represented each participant's individuality while also highlighting the themes across participants.

While acknowledging the strengths of alternative presentation methods, such as narrative-by-themes and research question-driven narratives, I dedicated time to contextualizing each participant's responses within the research questions and overarching themes in Chapter 7. This approach aimed to enhance clarity and coherence for the reader because I wanted to give the participants' experience uninterrupted by themes or answering questions. Rather, I decided to first present the narratives and demonstrate how those narratives shaped the themes and helped me answer the research questions. I believed that participants' identities were intrinsically linked to their responses and sought to maintain the integrity of their experiences.

Finally, I recognized the value of presenting narratives within the framework of research questions and themes. I posited that those researchers who employed these methods found them advantageous because this organizational structure facilitated clearer conclusions for the reader. To address the potential limitations of presenting data solely through named narratives, I dedicated the next chapter to explaining how each participant's responses helped me formulate the themes. Again, the overarching goal was to ensure reader comprehension and coherent data presentation while preserving the integrity of participant voices and the humanity of their being.

Participants' Narratives

The imperative to “Not to turn back now . . . continue to tell the stories that need to be told” (Alexander, 2020) resonated deeply throughout my doctoral studies. This conviction became particularly salient during a pivotal moment when I proposed researching the disproportionate disciplinary impacts on African American males in rural areas. However, a Black professor unexpectedly discouraged my interest, stating, “Don't do that; it has been done too many times.” This response, while initially perplexing, prompted a deeper reflection on the existing literature and the ongoing need for further investigation.

While I acknowledged the extensive body of research on this topic—a body of work I had engaged with since my undergraduate studies and continued to explore throughout my master's program, and which includes consistent findings spanning the past 50 years (Butler, 2011; Butler et al., 2012; Ferguson, 2001; Owens & McLanahan, 2020; Rolland, 2011; Skiba & Williams, 2014; Welsh, 2021)—I remained acutely aware that many African American male students' experiences remained unheard. My daily

interactions with these students underscored the persistent systemic injustices within the educational system, often funneling them into the criminal justice system. This stark reality, particularly for African American males, fueled my commitment to this research.

Driven by a profound desire to amplify their voices, I sought to create a space for these students to share their experiences with disproportionate discipline. This research ensured that their stories were not relegated to the margins, overshadowed by more novel or superficial research. As Alexander (2020) reminded us, persistence in telling essential and relevant narratives is paramount. Understanding their narratives was crucial to comprehensively understanding this complex issue.

Central to this research was the provision to ample space for my participants to tell their stories in their own voices. Therefore, I have presented their interview responses in a narrative format unique to who they are and the way they presented themselves and their experiences. I refer to it as a categorical vignette. To maintain clarity and emphasize the distinction between my interpretations and their lived experiences, my words are italicized, while their words appear in standard font. This approach is crucial, as Kendi (2019, p. 19) asserted that "the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it—and then dismantle it."

With this understanding, I present their narratives in the following sections—using their pseudonyms to set them apart. With each participant, I offered an introduction, for which italics were used to demonstrate that it was I doing the talking, as opposed to the young men. The stories that they shared, written in their words unless noted with brackets, where I inserted words for clarity. I concluded each vignette using italics for my reflection on their stories.

Meet Batman

Batman, age 15, and in the 8th grade at an alternative school. His favorite subject is social studies. He lives with his mother and siblings. His dad is around and lives a few blocks away. He has a relationship with him. He likes to stay home and play video games. His favorite console is the Playstation and the games are Call of Duty, Madden (NFL), NBA 2K, and Grand Theft Auto (GTA). His favorite song is “Again” by Lil Xhino who is his cousin. Lil Xhino is currently locked up. The lyrics to the song say “You know I am playin the cards I was dealt . . . I get mad when I think about the pain I’ve done felt . . . they try to count me out...they don’t want to count me in.” He wants to return to regular school and go to college for gaming and coding.

Batman’s most recent suspension from school was a few months while he was in the 7th grade. He self-reported that he has been suspended from school a lot and the last time engaging in a fight was the reason. He relayed that he and the guy started arguing in the classroom and agreed to go to the restroom and fight. Once in the restroom he and the guy fought and the noise led to school officials breaking it up and suspending them both. Here is his story as told by him.

Batman’s Story – My Mama Hyped Me Up – The Early Days. I’m Batman. Fifteen years old, tall, and I like to stand out. I play sports, dress differently, act differently. Cheeseburgers and the color yellow are my favorites. My family’s close; I get along with everyone—my neighborhood, my brothers and sisters, even school. It's a small school, so I listen to teachers and do my work. It keeps me out of trouble, but it's natural anyway. My mama and sister are always there for me. I feel good about myself,

always have. I'm a one or two people kind of guy, spending a lot of time at home. I don't hang out much in my neighborhood. I look up to Elon Musk – rich and successful. I gotta do something, get into that entrepreneur stuff. I don't remember much trouble at home, but school? Always something.

When I was younger, school was great. My mama hyped me up, we had fun. I had friends, teachers bought us snacks. That's not happening anymore. It was a more positive environment back then. I didn't know anything—no streets, no life stuff. Then I got older, started learning about life. I just want to graduate and get out. School's okay, but I want to be done. Graduation means good stuff.

She Really Didn't Like Me—The Sixth Grade Incident and Beyond. I don't remember the first time I got in trouble, but I remember sixth grade. My cousin was cussing in class, joking around. The teacher heard him, but thought it was me. I got suspended. Everyone said it was him, but the teacher blamed me. She really didn't like me. If I walked in, she'd started on me. If I needed to use the bathroom, she'd catch an attitude. A couple of times a week, like that. She didn't like me, and I hated her class. She wanted me in trouble. She wouldn't let me sharpen my pencil, I was always in trouble for little things. One time, I really had to go to the bathroom. She let everyone else go. I asked; she said no. The bell rang; I asked again; still no. I was so mad.

White teachers treated me differently than Black teachers. This White boy hit me in the bathroom; he told the teacher I hit him, she believed him, even though others said he hit me first. I got paddled; nothing happened to him. All types of stuff. I'm mad about that. They threatened alternative school. She was doing too much. Why didn't she send

him home too? They do too much; they make me mad. I'm good at listening to authority, but sometimes I get angry, and then I don't listen. I've gotten in trouble for that.

I had this teacher during virtual learning. She told me to do my work; I was, but it wasn't enough. She called my mom, saying I wasn't doing my work. I thought like I was. I couldn't tell her how I felt. I've learned to keep my mouth shut; she'd hold a grudge. Sometimes I don't even want to go to school. Getting in trouble meant a paddling or my mama. Now, it's STAR. STAR's a behavior program; a military drill sergeant. You get written up, your mama signs a paper, you go to STAR, get paddled, or go home to your mama. I'd rather go home. STAR is intense—18 hours of workouts, isolation, a black uniform with a STAR.

I first went to STAR in fifth or sixth grade, because of Prevent [which is] a whole day workout [without having to be in the program]. The principal sent me; my mama had to agree. I hate STAR; I'd rather go home. I don't like getting whipped. ISS is better—in-school suspension, just sitting and doing work. It's not harsh. Sometimes ISS is an option, but they take it away. It's paddling, home, suspension, or STAR. Getting in trouble just happens; you get punished. I'm not sure if teachers treat me fairly; sometimes it's hard to tell. If I did it, I said I did it, but if I didn't, I said I didn't. But I was already doing stuff, so they automatically thought I did it. So wasn't really nothing I said that made a difference.

Getting kicked out, locked up, alternative school—that's everything I did bad. I regret it. I'm not a bad guy, just made mistakes. The world is corrupt—teachers, principals, police, family. I realized I was Black seeing Black-on-Black violence on the news. It's crazy. You're treated differently because of your race. I'm Black; I can't

change it. Teachers have favorites. I get treated differently—mostly by Black women teachers. Not in alternative school, but in regular school. I’m Black; I got to accept it. Things come with it. A White lady called the police on me and my cousin for walking in the park. We did nothing. These folks . . . [as he ends in a depressive tone].

It’s Just the Way They Work—The System and My Future. My last time getting in trouble was months ago. I got locked up for a fight. A guy wants to take my tray. I refused and then my homeboys beat him up. Next, I got into a fight at school, on the bus. A guy named K kept talking crazy to me, threatening to beat me up. On the bus, it happened, we started fighting. The bus driver took us both back to school. I got suspended because of it. My probation officer said if I got in trouble again, I’d be sent away. Then later, I saw K; he tried to start something again, but I didn't fight back.

My last suspension was about 3-4 months ago. I got into an argument with a [another] kid named K at school, it escalated to a fight off school premises, near the school. The bus driver called the school. I ended up going to alternative school. Another time, I fought this kid in the bathroom. He was acting hard, and we fought. The principal walked in and sent us both to alternative school. Getting into fights caused problems with my relationships with other kids and school staff. I know teachers thought of me as a bad kid. One teacher, a dark-skinned Black woman, would call me a troublemaker and blame me for things. Other teachers, White women, treated me better; It's like the students acted differently, and the teachers let them get away with more things in her classroom.

My favorite song, “Help me out. They tried to count me out,” resonates with me because I felt like school didn’t want me. The line about the pain makes sense because I get mad when I think about it—family deaths, getting kicked out of school. I sometimes

go to school mad. I think school should make an effort to turn bad days into good days for kids—talk to them, send them to counseling. School isn't fair for everyone; some kids are teachers' pets and get treated better than others. Some teachers abuse their power—they don't let kids use the bathroom or sharpen pencils. I had an incident with my probation officer. My cousin stole a car and let me drive it, and I got caught. He took the fall, but it was all on camera. He got in trouble since then though. My relationship with authority figures has been okay, because I usually listen. But sometimes, when I'm angry, I don't. There have been times when I listened and still got in trouble. My perception of fairness is when everyone is treated equally, but school doesn't always do that. My experience has definitely changed how I see authority, inside and outside of school. I think a lot of people abuse their power—teachers, police, and gang members. My mom and my next-door neighbor use their authority fairly. The guards at the facility were different: Some were cool and gave me little things, but others were unfair. Police officers can be crazy.

But I see the world as a good place. Some people mess it up, block your shine, but there is still hope. I want to be back in regular school, socialize, hope to get back to my grade. Socializing with friends, work done, no bad teachers, good food at home—that's a good day. I want to graduate, go to college for gaming, maybe technical school. I'm ready to start my life. Tell teachers to step up their game, care for their students.

My Reflection of Batman

Batman was the oldest participant in my study and had received the most suspensions and been in the most trouble at school. He had also been incarcerated in a youth detention center and is currently in alternative school. He presented as reserved

and quiet during most of our time together. He seemed to think a lot before he spoke and at times, struggled to really talk about his disciplinary experiences. He did not necessarily view racism as a part of his experiences. His experiences taught him to view the world as complex, largely good with some corrupt components, because teachers and the whole school system were against him. Despite all his experiences at school, he continued to hold himself accountable for his actions and expressed regret for those actions that got him where he is. From his story, he values his individuality, autonomy, and freedom. He remains hopeful and determined to be successful. His story is one of hope and resilience. In Chapter 5, I will share my findings from his experiences, which shaped his meaning of his disciplinary experiences, self, and the world.

Meet Tarzan

Tarzan, a 12-year-old seventh grader, has a passion for mathematics. He resides with his mother and younger sister. Although he has memories of his father from his childhood, he rarely sees him now. Tarzan enjoys playing sports, participating on the middle school football team and in a sports development league. At home, he finds solace in watching old football highlights, particularly featuring retired players like Ed Reed, Ray Lewis, and Deion Sanders. He often speaks of their greatness and expresses his aspiration to emulate them. Tarzan also enjoys working out, focusing on calisthenics to achieve a toned physique rather than bulk. While he prefers rap music, his mother discourages it, fearing potential trouble at school. As a result, he predominantly listens to gospel music.

Tarzan reported experiencing multiple school suspensions, most recently in May of this year. This suspension stemmed from an altercation following his report to a

teacher about a male student hitting him, which was met with inaction. He shared that he frequently faces bullying from peers and that teachers often turn a blind eye. This is Tarzan's story, as told by him.

Tarzan's Story. A Good Kid, Mostly. Growing up wasn't easy. My dad wasn't around much, just a few times here and there. Football and school kept me occupied, but things changed when I hit fifth grade. That's when the bullying started. Kids doing stuff, and when I told the teachers, they got mad at me. I kept telling them, but nothing happened. One kid kept on and on, scratching me, refusing to give me the ball, poking my nose and saying mean things about my mama. I lost it, and we fought. My cousin broke it up, and the teacher showed up late, after everyone was already running. Even when I asked to call my mom for my inhaler, they said no. The principal's office was next, and all I could say was that the teachers didn't do nothing. Another time, I tried to be a leader in class, telling everyone to be quiet, and that teacher got angry with me. It felt like "damned if I did, damned if I didn't."

The World Isn't Fair. At home, it wasn't much better. My sister and I fought a lot, and mom would tell us to stop, to be friends and say "y'all not Indian so we don't do that." My first real school trouble was in fourth grade – name-calling led to me flipping a table. That got me in trouble. Now, my mom is a little rough on me; she worries about the music I listen to, thinks it makes me want to fight. My goal this year is to control my anger. Ms. Patrick, my coach, and the science teacher are rough on me too. The science teacher, an older Black lady, gave me problems about going to the bathroom. The White teachers, though, did way too much. In fifth grade, they gave me problems constantly; even when I was being bullied, they ignored it. One time, a White girl called me the N-

word in class. Everyone got mad, but the teacher didn't do anything. I was in silent lunch; it just made me mad.

STAR: A Place of Its Own. In sixth and fifth grade, I only got two paddles. STAR is this program; if you get in enough trouble, that's where you go. You get a uniform – black and White – and you do workouts, community service. You can be there for 15, 30, or even 60 days. I think STAR is a good program for people who do stuff that needs punishing, but sometimes teachers and the principal go too far. I've been sent there for things like having my hair too long. They make you get a haircut if it's too long. One time, I talked back to a teacher—we went back and forth. She called STAR, and I had to go. It wasn't okay; I shouldn't have talked back, but she was talking back to me, too. I think STAR is an okay punishment – I can take it; I'm used to working out. Sometimes I even like STAR better than class because I can get out of things, and nobody bothers me. There's a point system; a three is okay, a two is bad, and a one is really bad. Kids in my class get on my nerves. They talk, and when I tell them to be quiet, they say things then act like they don't know what I'm talking about. It gives me headaches and makes me tired and mad. When I get mad, I “spazz out,” and the teacher sends me to STAR.

Suspended: A Break. When I was younger, I thought of myself as a good kid, but now, I get in trouble a lot. I think teachers could collaborate with me sometimes, if they would just help me with words on tests. When I get suspended, I'm happy. I get to relax, sleep, watch YouTube, and work out; I can do whatever I want. I still want my education, but the teachers make me mad sometimes. They take their anger out on us, and that's not okay. When teachers are negative, I walk out of their class. When I get in trouble, I might feel like a bad kid, but my mom tells me I'm not. It makes me mad because it feels unfair

when I haven't even done anything wrong. If I get into a fight, it's because they've been nagging at me. Sometimes I don't even feel like I'm a bad kid—like when teachers aren't collaborative or helpful. Being sent to silent lunch feels like sitting alone in a scary movie. It's unfair because everyone else gets to talk, but not me. Trying to be a leader doesn't work; I still get in trouble. Being suspended makes me feel like a bad kid, especially if I got into a fight because someone was getting on my nerves. But other times, when I get in trouble for not being able to pronounce words, I don't feel like a bad kid because it isn't my fault.

Authority and Fairness. Fairness in school isn't consistent. If I get punished, I want others to get punished too, if they did the same thing. School taught me that the world isn't fair. My perception of authority has changed. Teachers say they're in charge, but they don't always do the right thing. They might lie to other teachers or ignore other kids talking. The principal tries to be fair, the judge uses the gavel and tries to be fair too. But other authority figures aren't always fair; my grandma favors my sister. I don't like police officers because some of them are racist. They act like they have all the power. I learned about racism from teachers talking about slavery. Teachers are biased too, probably usually towards girls, treating them better than boys. School taught me that the world isn't always fair, by showing how some people treat boys versus girls. Sometimes cops listen to only one side of things. It's like school; life doesn't always treat people equally. They treat the boys differently than they treat the girls. Being Black has made me feel like I have to act normal to prove that I'm not a monkey – something my mom said some White people think. Trying to “act normal” feels like I can't be myself, can't talk as much. I want to be accepted, to feel like I belong. But I think teachers hate boys –

they treat boys differently than girls. Because of that, I feel that they will treat me bad in the real world because they did in school. Alternative school is better because I don't get in as much trouble, and teachers might help me. I want to feel like I belong, but school is tiring, people always messing with me, which makes me retaliate. I want my education, but I also want to be treated fairly, with respect, and without being made to feel like a bad kid for asking for help. School taught me that the world isn't fair. But I know I can be a beast, and I hope that I and other kids can get through stuff. I just want people to love each other and take care of each other.

My reflection of Tarzan

Tarzan was the youngest participant in the study, but I often saw him as a big personality in a small body. He always had an abundance of energy and told his story with a lot of emotion and tones. Many times when he shared, I could feel his emotions. Of all the participants, his interviews were the most raw, lively, and random. There were also elements of his story that represented feelings of grief. Some of those occasions were missing his father, a better relationship with his grandmother, and his papa's and dog's deaths. It was interesting hearing his story because he depicted himself as being bullied in school. He talked a lot about liking to workout and idolized athletes and sports figures. It seemed as if he glorified the physical appeal of these athletes and figures as a way of standing up for himself and escaping bullying and his smallness compared to others around him. I often thought about this connection of missing his father and papa with how he viewed relationships with female teachers as opposed to male teachers. His experiences seemed to be told through a lens about gender more than race. Yet, he showed a lot of compassion for others. When I would go to interview him, many times he

would be playing outside with his friends in the neighborhood. I witnessed him sharing his food with them. He liked to add special messages after the interviews. Those messages were ones of telling everyone to love one another and be nice. His story is one of resilience, persistence, and strength. In Chapter 5, I will share my findings from his experiences, which shaped his meaning of his disciplinary experiences, self, and the world.

Meet Flash

Flash, a 14-year-old ninth grader, finds his favorite subject to be health. His passion lies in basketball, where he finds fulfillment through playing, scoring, and connecting with his community. This passion keeps him away from the temptations of the streets. While he enjoyed playing Fortnite with his friends when he was younger, he now prefers Call of Duty. Flash also enjoys a good night's sleep.

He resides with his mother, older brother, and younger sister. His father is present in the community but does not have a strong relationship with Flash. Flash considers his family to be his greatest influence, emphasizing the strong bond and care they share. His grandmother and mother have been particularly influential in his life, teaching him the importance of compassion and perseverance.

Flash self-reported a history of school discipline issues, including a suspension for fighting and multiple infractions resulting in stays in in-school suspension (ISS). His last suspension occurred in 9 months before this study while he was in eighth grade.

Flash's Story. Tucked Down Playgrounds and a Childhood of Respect. It was pretty nice growing up, before things changed. Every day was a new adventure, filled with fun; no troubles at all. I was just a kid, doing kid things, pretty insecure, you know?

My relationships at home were good, just the occasional argument. School was good too, except for some teachers who I felt didn't like me for some reason. Everybody in my neighborhood knew me; I lived there my whole life. We were like one big family – everyone knew everyone. We got into some stuff, fought sometimes, but we always ended up friends again. It's funny now, looking back. I thought of myself as different; I didn't do what other people did. I thought of myself as respectful. My mom and other family members were respectful, and that really influenced me. School influenced me a little bit too, but it's hard for me to say exactly how. Teachers would sometimes say, "Good job," and that made me feel special, but I felt like they expected more out of me as I got older.

My family would go out to eat, and sometimes we would put our phones down and actually talk. That was really fun for me, to learn about them and hear what they were thinking. We went to Chili's one time, and it was really fun. We learned what kind of food we liked and some things we liked to do. My Grandma is a hardworking woman; she'll always try to lift others up. She's caring. She taught me that if you see somebody who doesn't have something and you have a lot of it, you should share it. My Mom is hardworking too; she's always been there for me. I remember one time I was feeling down; it was the beginning of basketball season, and I didn't get in the game. She just told me, "It's alright, you're going to get that chance one day." My happiest moments are always on the basketball court. Basketball is my passion. I've been playing since fourth grade, and I love it.

My First Trouble: Rocks, Kickballs, and a Fifth-Grade Teacher. The first time I really remember getting in trouble, I was seven or eight. I threw a rock at the window of

the community building, and it broke. I ran home and told my mom I was chased by a dog. I was scared. My first trouble at school was in fourth grade. I got into a fight – a kickball thing, something stupid – and I couldn't control my anger. In seventh grade, another fight. It seemed like most of my trouble was fights, but there was a fifth-grade teacher who didn't like me. Every time someone did something near me, she blamed me. She was middle-aged, White, sometimes nice, sometimes mean. One time, someone threw a pencil, and she told me to stop. I told her I didn't do it, and she told me to be quiet and do my work. When I was younger, getting in trouble mainly meant talking too much in class.

My biggest rule that I seemed to break was having my phone out in class. I remember one time in eighth grade when a teacher yelled at me for not doing my work, which I was doing, but she said I wasn't. She told me to get out, and I walked out. My mom always told me to just let adults handle it, so I did. I didn't like that teacher; she acted childish. If someone started talking, she'd just stop teaching and say, "I'm done." I had better experiences with a Black male teacher than I did with that White teacher. That black man teacher was cool, talked about sports, and checked in on me. The other teachers were stricter and wrote me up more easily. The Black teachers would talk to me before writing me up. The White teachers seemed to automatically write you up. It often didn't feel fair. In eighth grade, I got 2 days of ISS for talking. It didn't seem fair, especially compared to other times I'd gotten in trouble. Talking was the main reason I got in trouble. Sometimes the punishment was fair; other times, it wasn't. It depended on the teacher. Most teachers made it easier to succeed and helped me, but some made it harder.

My family and my teachers were my biggest support system. My teachers knew I was a good kid and would talk to me. Because of them, I didn't get much more trouble. The most recent time I got in trouble, I snuck out at 12:30 AM, and my mom found out. I had to give her my phone. I got suspended three times. My mom wasn't mad and knew that we would be okay. I was happy being suspended because at that point I didn't like school very much. When I get in trouble, I get mad at myself and wish I had done things differently. Sometimes I couldn't avoid getting in trouble. I felt targeted by some teachers. I think I learned to manage the situation by telling my mom instead of reacting right away. I figured out that teachers have more power, and even if I'm right, I'll get in more trouble for arguing. The school often seems to side with teachers, even if the teacher is wrong.

It Hit Me that I was Black and the Weight of Being Black in School. It hit me that I was black in fifth grade. My teacher's daughter had a really nice SUV and a big house, like you see on TV. I was figuring out how much of it was because I was black and how much of it was just life. Being Black made a difference in school. I've seen it happen. In sixth grade, a Black student asked to go to the bathroom and the teacher said no, but a White student asked the same thing in the same class and the teacher said yes. It was a male teacher. That was the only time I noticed a difference like that. Being Black, I feel like I have to be more reserved in school, like I'm split. You know like can't be yourself. There's a lot of drama, and I don't want to get involved. I feel restricted and don't always feel safe expressing myself fully. I often feel targeted because I'm Black. This happens about three times a week. I try to negotiate my response to stay out of

trouble. I feel like some teachers are more understanding than others. For Black students, it feels like they don't get the same chances or fair treatment as White students.

The speaker who came to school and said, "I'm Black and I'm proud," made me feel proud. It was a moment of pride. I haven't had many experiences like that before. I see Black people doing what I want to do, which gives me hope for the future. Media can sometimes portray Black males badly. Getting in trouble can reflect badly on the entire group, not just the individual.

I think teachers need to be more understanding and patient, and the school needs more activities for students who aren't in sports. Life isn't always fair, and I've learned to accept that. I cope by avoiding trouble, because once you get in trouble, it's hard to get out. I feel like "chopped in half" to fit in at school. What I mean by chopped in half is like, you can't really do nothing or really be yourself . . . you just start getting comfortable with 'em, they don't really . . . that's all I can think of. I feel like my creativity is what's chopped at school. Creativity is like, do it how the teacher tells you or you ain't getting it right. I keep my work ethic, but it's not always present.

Some teachers, I felt like they didn't like me for some reason. My beliefs are that schools can sometimes be fair and unfair at certain points. I feel like everybody deserves a second chance, at least like one time. I remember me and this White boy was just talking, and he only got one day, and I got two. I was like that's why, he's White - that was the first thing that came to my mind. I think the White teacher was unfair; I was just talking in eighth grade, it was just talking. I feel like the Whites have more power . . . they can get away with anything, even if it's something bad. They don't get the punishments as we do. Flash in school is more to himself type person. I don't talk to

nobody. I have to play it safe. I don't want to get myself caught up in something I ain't meant to be in.

Ninth Grade and Beyond: Goals and Getting Out. Now, I'm in ninth grade. It's good; other classes are easy, but math and reading are giving you a lot of work. What motivates me? Getting out of this town. The gangs and violence here are a big reason why. It happened in one video, and I realized that I couldn't be involved with that. Basketball is my passion. My goals are to get my driver's license and make honor roll. It would make my mom proud. Looking back, school was a mix of good and bad years. Good years because of classes and teachers, and bad because of classes and teachers. Some teachers weren't good at their job.

My Reflection of Flash

Flash was the only participant who was in high school. He presented as a person who thought a lot but said way less than he thought. He talked profoundly about what his family meant to him and the connections he had with his mother and grandmother. Even his depiction of basketball and what it meant to him was rooted in community and affection, much like he talked about his family. It seemed that he used basketball as an escape to keep him out of trouble, to feel connected, and to make his family proud of him. He discussed race and racism more than any other participant and was able to give accounts of actions perceived as racist by teachers. He was able to talk about perceived power dynamics between Blacks and Whites and experiences outside of school that impacted his views on race, like George Floyd. Yet, at times he struggled to talk about it or express it the way he wanted. I often thought of this as a way he learned to mute himself for protection. His story is one of community, determination, and resilience. In

Chapter 5, I will share my findings from his experiences, which shaped his meaning of his disciplinary experiences, self, and the world.

This chapter gave an opportunity to see Batman's, Tarzan's, and Flash's world as told by them through descriptive of the events that shaped their understanding of their schooling. Their personal stories in vignette format gave voice to their experiences as they navigated the educational system and the world at large. Chapter 5 advances to thematic analysis of those stories. Connections are made from their individual narratives to highlight the consistent patterns informing the research in how the participants navigated their challenges as they developed coping mechanisms to maintain positivity in oftentimes uninviting school settings. As well, the data is examined to offer key themes that inform the research through providing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants and implications for the education of middle school Black male students.

Chapter V

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

As I analyzed data, constructed narratives, and recounted my own experiences, I recognized unique components of each collaborator's story. Through an interpretive approach, I recognized similarities across participants. From these, I built themes that express ideas of values that need to be recognized and considered as educators move forward in working to improve learning environments for young Black males. There were three overarching themes that formed threads that ran throughout the data. After analyzing the data and making meaning of it from an interpretive approach, three overarching themes consistently came from the data.

The first theme involved a notable shift from positive to negative experiences between the participants and their teachers and the broader school environment— *Theme 1: As school changed from a positive to a negative experience, coping mechanisms led to survival*. Initially, all three participants described positive and nurturing relationships with their teachers and the school setting. This shift toward negative experiences coincided with their increasing awareness of their Blackness and the systemic biases embedded within the school context. It is important to note that the participants' levels of awareness were not uniform. Flash demonstrated an awareness of the racial dynamics at play between himself and the school context. He frequently discussed the implications of being Black and observed what he perceived as an easier life for White students. Batman exhibited a more profound understanding of his Blackness but mitigated the impact of

this awareness by normalizing his experiences with racially biased behaviors. Tarzan, the youngest participant, struggled to explicitly identify the racial biases exhibited by his teachers, often attributing such bias to gender differences, mirroring similar dynamics he observed at home, where his grandmother favored his sister over him. Notably, Tarzan also embraced the STAR program despite its potentially oppressive nature.

This shift in the participants' experiences did not diminish their inherent expectation of fair, caring, and supportive school environments, as defined by their earlier positive experiences— *Theme 2: As participants' eyes were opened to injustices in school, expectations of fairness, caring, and support were buried in an oppressive environment.* All participants described instances where certain students, whom they perceived as teachers' pets, received preferential treatment, a phenomenon they found puzzling. Batman expressed a strong desire to be included among these favored students. Tarzan recounted attempts to demonstrate leadership, which were met with reprimand. Flash explained his reluctance to speak up openly in class, fearing he would be treated differently as a Black student. The restriction of basic privileges, such as using the restroom, sharpening pencils, or asking for academic assistance, further reinforced the racial power dynamics within the educational system, where Black male students are often categorized as "troubled." This lack of care and support reflected marginalization and powerlessness (Young, 1990), as the participants' voices and experiences were largely ignored and dismissed by the system.

Despite these experiences of being ignored and unheard, Batman, Tarzan, and Flash maintained a positive self-concept—*Theme 3.* Their ability to develop and utilize coping mechanisms to withstand the oppressive nature of racism embedded within the

educational system grew stronger. Their narratives challenged the dominant narrative of the perpetually troubled Black male. Their honesty, self-reflection, and determination to succeed academically served as a testament to their resilience and refusal to accept the stereotypes imposed upon them.

Collectively, these three themes provide a glimpse into school discipline as experienced by my participants. The participants' experiences illustrated a progression from engagement to disengagement as they confronted discriminatory discipline and the objectification inherent in the abuse and biases they encountered. Observing this phenomenon led to the conceptualization of the Disciplinary Progression Model to better explain and conceptualize how the participants experienced their discipline issues, and the coping mechanisms formed to deal with the impacts. The next few sections expound upon each of the themes and the model will be further discussed in the final chapter.

Theme 1

Theme 1— Participants' shifts from positive to negative views of schooling as a result of their experiences, pushing them to employ various coping mechanisms to survive. Participants painted a clear picture of the downward spiral that occurred in their views of school and its influence in their lives. The more experiences these three Black male students had with school the more prominent the shift became from initially positive experiences at and perceptions of school to negative and complex. The interplay of their disengagement in learning, avoidance of teacher interaction, acceptance of targeted discipline as normal, and ultimately, the acceptance of believing the system was inherently unfair and biased culminated in suspensions and them giving up on the idea traditional education would ever be as good for them as it was when they were young.

The early years were consistently remembered fondly; participants uniformly described their younger selves experiencing school as a positive environment with kind and caring teachers. As Batman recalled, "When we were younger . . . They were . . . nicer," a sentiment echoed by Tarzan, who described teachers as "actually try[ing] to help you. It was a more positive environment." Flash also shared positive memories, stating that [teachers] were good. Fifth grade, I say all my teachers, it was just one teacher that I didn't like. They ain't really say nothing, they just teach. [When they told me I did a good job, it made me feel] special."

Each of my participants described their early school experiences as positive. They remembered their teachers as kind and caring. However, as they grew older, there was a shift. They began to associate negative attitudes with schooling because their encounters tapped into strong personal feelings as they felt demeaned to a greater degree with each time they were singled out for punishment. They characterized teachers and administrators as unfair and biased. They viewed the system as focused on punishment and lacking the sensitivity to or interest in understanding them. They felt targeted, misunderstood, and negatively labeled.

Consequently, their positive perception underwent a dramatic shift, often pinpointed around fifth grade. This shift coincided with a change in the students' understanding of discipline. Flash articulated this pivotal shift: "Uh, it's basically mostly easy. Basically, the majority of it is easy until, like, you get in trouble. You would do something like . . . you would probably do something minor and get in trouble for it. Probably the other kids are probably doing the same thing, but you'd be the only one getting in trouble for it." His belief was this was unfair, and targeted discipline formed the

core from which he went on to view similar and repeated experiences as negative, solidifying a sense of being misunderstood and inappropriately labeled as troublesome. This perception of unfair and targeted discipline formed the core of their negative experiences. Tarzan's experience powerfully illustrated this: "Now, I think I'm a bad kid because my mother [says] 'you always get in trouble and stuff.' Then I just like dang. When I was younger, I was good, but now I'm so bad. My ma would say 'I don't know what happened to you'."

As disciplinary actions escalated from verbal reprimands to in-school suspension to expulsion, each participant indicated growing agitation with the system, seeing the actions as unjust and disproportionately assigned to them as opposed to others who were also involved. They believed minor infractions resulted in overly severe consequences that others did not get for the same behaviors, which fueled their growing sense of being singled out and unfairly judged. They used the recurring phrase "doing too much" to encapsulate their perceived mistreatment. It was a phrase all three young men used to refer to their feelings, summarizing their experiences with teachers' actions they saw as overly punitive, nagging, and insensitive to their perspectives. Teachers inconsistently applied rules, ignored bullying incidents, and seemingly assigned arbitrary punishments. I had to learn what "doing too much" meant to them. I noticed it was an important way of communicating and understanding their unpleasant experiences. While I had a contextual idea of what the phrase meant, I did not know for sure how it specifically related to their experiences. I eventually understood that "doing too much" was an inclusive phrase for behaviors of others, mostly teachers, who seemed unfair or excessive. Because all the participants used this phrase, I saw it as an in-vivo phrase that characterized how their

attitudes shifted during their educational journeys. That is how each became disengaged from the educational setting and started to accept alternative educational settings as better for them. Tarzan provided a detailed explanation:

The White teachers, they just be doing too much all the time. The White teachers, but some Black teachers too. They just be nagging at me They just always gave me problems. I just be trying, I be trying my best. But then they be saying the stuff they be doing, but they just don't say nothing at all. They would literally look. Say if somebody bullying me, they just don't do nothing. Then I pushed them and be, oh why you are pushing for, oh I ain't see the other kid do it. I'm like, he pushed me first.

He further elaborated, explaining that "doing too much" encompasses instances of excessively punitive responses to minor infractions and unfair application of rules:

Soon as I talk, I be the only person that gets silent lunch. I don't get it. You say whoever talking messed up for everybody. Everybody be talking. So that means everybody should have silent lunch. Don't single me out about five people, single out the whole team.

The cumulative effect of these experiences led the students through a progression of coping mechanisms: disengagement, avoidance, normalizing, and then finally acceptance. Those coping mechanisms acted as barriers to their self-esteem and allowed them to retain a positive view of their lives, fostering a complex understanding of the world around them. In the final chapter, I discuss the Disciplinary Progression Model (see Figure 8 in Chapter 3), which I created to explain the stages of progression the

participants underwent and how negative disciplinary interactions could impact African American male students towards disengagement from traditional educational settings.

Theme 2

Theme 2— Participants' expectations of fairness, caring, and support in school were diluted by their experiences, and instead they found themselves uncertain in an oppressive environment and with a voice that did not matter. While the participants coped with unfair, biased, and discriminatory treatment, they clung to expectations to be treated fair, have caring teachers, and a supportive environment at school. They voiced how they saw their peers treated and highlighted instances in which they were denied privileges that other students enjoyed. They were clear that they wanted to be treated fair, feel cared for, and be supported when they needed help.

Fairness

The participants' understanding of fairness centered on equitable treatment and access to resources. Batman succinctly captured this when he stated, “They don’t treat folks equal like they supposed to.” This sentiment is echoed throughout their shared experiences. Batman described how teacher favorites were granted privileges—access to printers, bathrooms, and errands—while he was consistently denied these same opportunities. He articulated his desire for equitable treatment: “They treating me like a regular student. Stop telling the kids they ain't got to go to the bathroom. Stop trying to tell 'em how they feel. Actually, listen to what they're saying. They treat everybody the same.” This desire for equal treatment extended beyond material privileges; it encompassed the equal application of rules and consequences. Tarzan observed the inconsistency of punishment:

Some teachers treat me fair, some teachers don't. Some teachers get on my nerves, some teachers don't . . . if I get in trouble the other person being in ISS with me most of the times, yeah [it is fair]. But if I have to go to STAR and the teacher say y'all going to get same punishment and he get to go home, eat, get to go to sleep and chill, that's not going to be fair.

Flash directly addressed racial bias in the application of fairness:

Say like, this student is a troublemaker and he asked can I do something?

She said, no. This student is not a troublemaker and the teacher says yes.

The Black kid had asked can they go to the bathroom and she said no. The

White kid had asked the same hour in the same class can they go to the

bathroom, she said yes. In my mind, everybody should be treated equally.

Because everybody should have a chance.

This inequitable application of rules and privileges—where race seemingly dictated access—represents a profound injustice. The participants' experiences demonstrated how the concept of fairness is manipulated to maintain power imbalances and perpetuate oppression.

Care

The participants' yearning for care transcended mere politeness; it signified a deep desire for genuine empathy and understanding. They craved educators who acknowledge their individual needs and circumstances. They expressed frustration with teachers who exhibit apathy and disengagement. Batman defined this by saying: “Every school you'll go to, it'll be certain teachers that they just don't care what they're doing. Just doing the work and go home. They don't care what you doing, how you do it, they don't care. They

just don't care.” In contrast, they valued teachers who demonstrated genuine concern and actively engaged with them. Flash highlighted this contrast by describing a positive relationship with a Black male coach:

The teacher I was best with was a Black man. He was a coach. He was a real cool dude. He was funny. He wasn't boring. He was cool. He was just, he would talk about sports. That's his favorite thing . . . and he knew a lot. That was my first Black teacher. Black man teacher. I think. Yeah, he'll check on me, he'll check on a lot of folks. He'll check on his players. It means a lot. Just to have somebody to talk to.

Similarly, Tarzan stated:

Because I think everybody should check in on somebody. It probably makes somebody day feel better. Probably help people to get their education better. Not them staying back. If the teacher don't do nothing to me, they just help me out. But some teachers don't want to listen to me like my science teacher. They take that anger on all the kids for no apparent reason. Just like when I went to alternative school, all the teachers take all the anger out besides one teacher. And he was so nice. If I was just in his class in the first and second period, I'd be happy.

Consequently, the absence of care created an environment where students felt unseen, unheard, and undervalued, exacerbating their feelings of marginalization and powerlessness. The participants' experiences revealed how a lack of care is not simply a personal failing of individual teachers but a systemic issue reflecting broader societal attitudes towards marginalized groups. This lack of care manifested as a failure to address

students' emotional needs, to acknowledge their perspectives, and to create a supportive learning environment. Flash stated, "Like, you don't know what they're going through and you can't just say this or that. You gotta understand what's really going on with them and why they're acting like that." This underscored the crucial role of empathy and understanding in fostering a just and equitable educational system.

Support

The participants' expressed need for support goes beyond simple academic assistance; it encompassed emotional, social, and behavioral guidance. They highlighted the detrimental effects of unsupportive environments where their struggles are minimized or ignored. Batman explained:

I feel like I'm trying so hard, but it's never enough. I can't get the question right or something like that. I probably trying to do my work. She keep asking me stuff, keep doing stuff. The teacher told me to do my work and I did it. Then she got mad. I was virtual, my teacher told me do my work, I was doing my work but I guess I wasn't doing any work to her standards. She got mad.

They articulated a need for teachers to provide appropriate levels of challenge and to offer meaningful support when needed, rather than resorting to punishment or dismissive attitudes. Tarzan described feeling "slow" when teachers refused to read him questions on tests, highlighting the need for differentiated instruction and individualized support. The lack of adequate support contributed to feelings of inadequacy and disengagement from the school system. The participants' desire for support reflected their fundamental need for encouragement, guidance, and a belief in their potential. They expressed a desire for

educational settings characterized by patience and understanding, exemplified by the Flash's plea:

Please give more activities for the kids that's not in the activity. Something like that. And be more understanding. It would be a huge impact. Probably every student in their school because you can't just walk around grumpy. Like you have to teach a class of kids and can't just be, you know, like be so short. You got to have patience to have the job, in my opinion.

This highlighted how supportive educators are essential in fostering a sense of belonging and self-efficacy among marginalized students impacted by discipline.

Discipline's Oppressive Nature

The participants' descriptions of unfair treatment, lack of care, and unsupportive environments are not isolated incidents but rather symptoms of a deeper systemic issue rooted in racial bias and the unequal distribution of power. The denial of fairness, care, and support in the participants' experiences aligns with Young's (1990) five faces of oppression. Understanding their experiences required examining the concepts of fairness, care, and support within the context of Marion Young's five faces of oppression, which I further explain in the final chapter. Next, I discuss how the participants were able to counteract the deep-rooted oppression within their experiences.

Theme 3

Theme 3—The counternarratives and personification of the balance of honesty, positivity, and resiliency. Theme three unpacks how the participants' personal traits of resiliency, positivity, and honesty manifested despite their lived experiences characterized by unfairness and systemic oppression. While their lived experiences were defined by

systemic racism under school-based discipline, their responses contradicted stereotypes that African American males, faced with discipline, do not value their education. By centering their stories on their honesty, desire for education, and resiliency, the prevailing narratives of dangerous and harmful stereotypes too often associated with Black male students were countered. Their stories served as a testament to their character, elevating their desire for fairness and a genuine desire to persist in their educational journeys. The blend of these three traits found in these participants grounds them in personhood, which is often forgotten as they are assigned to a group of the bad kids.

“Because I still got to get my education” was a powerful phrase shared by Tarzan because it told the story of resiliency, determination, and positivity reflective of the participants’ characters. It effectively countered the narrative that troubled youth do not care for school. The statement occurred during Tarzan's second interview. When asked, “If you had it your way, would you go to school?” after he described a utopian time at home after getting in trouble, he defiantly shared: “Yeah, because I still got to get my education.” I found this to be the case for all the participants. They all remained honest, positive, and resilient towards educational achievements.

Honesty

The participants demonstrated remarkable honesty in recounting their experiences, acknowledging both their mistakes and the injustices they faced. This honesty was not self-flagellation, but a crucial aspect of their self-awareness and their efforts to understand their own situations. Batman, for example, engaged in profound self-reflection, stating:

First I'd be like how I get myself into stuff like this. How I started off, why was I doing it? Why I ended up like this? Who fault it is? Why fault myself? I'd be like why I did it. Getting kicked out of school, getting locked up, going to alternative school, getting in trouble. It is basically everything I did bad. I regret [it]. Cause I get mad when I think about stuff like that too. I was supposed to be way better than that. Just lot of regret. Sometimes it makes me doubt myself sometimes I was doing too much so I be like I should have never did it."

His admission of regret, his self-doubt, and his acknowledgment of personal responsibility are all part of this honest self-assessment. Similarly, Tarzan's honesty extended to questioning his own behavior and the treatment he received:

I just be saying to myself am I really bad or is it just really me not really bad or that other people just make me mad. Sometimes, I don't know. I feel sad sometimes. I try to help myself. I try not to cry.

His vulnerability and self-questioning reveal a level of honesty often absent in narratives that simplify the experiences of marginalized youth. I believe this honesty, while painful, forms the foundation for their resilience and their ability to move forward.

Positive Outlook

Despite facing significant adversity and systemic oppression, these young men maintained a remarkable positive outlook. This was not in a naive optimism, but a conscious choice to focus on their goals and futures despite the challenges. Tarzan's unwavering commitment to his education, despite the obstacles he faced, exemplified this positivity: "All the kids say they don't want to go to school but I think we should for our

education and stuff because I still got to get my education." This statement, delivered in response to a question about his desire to return to school after a period of trouble, highlighted his unwavering commitment to education. Flash, too, exhibited a positive outlook, emphasizing his academic goals and the importance of making his mother proud: "I want to get honor roll at least two years in a row in high school and I'm working on it. It's going good right now. I just got to stay on that. Definitely make my mama proud of me." This focus on achievement, despite the systemic hurdles he faced, signals a powerful positive outlook. Even Batman, despite acknowledging his regrets, maintained a belief in his ability to improve: "I can do better once I graduate. Once I graduate, I'm going to be able to do good stuff." This vision of a better future demonstrated a resilient positive outlook, even amidst considerable self-critique.

Resiliency

I think that resiliency is not the absence of hardship, but the ability to overcome adversity. These young men demonstrated exceptional resilience in the face of systemic oppression, unfair disciplinary practices, and the pervasive negative stereotypes they encountered daily. Batman's assertion, "My self-esteem is pretty high. I really didn't care what other folks thought [or] think about me. Cause I don't know. To me, everybody gets in trouble. So, it really ain't nothing. It really ain't nothing too deep. Nothing too deep," revealed an inner strength that transcends the negative judgments imposed upon him. He refused to internalize the negative stereotypes, viewing trouble as a common experience rather than an inherent flaw. Flash further demonstrated resilience through his passion for basketball, which he identified as a positive influence: "My happiest moments are always on the basketball court. Basketball is my passion, because basketball keeps me out of

trouble." His ability to find positive outlets underscored his resilient spirit. Tarzan's statement, "Because I still got to get my education," captured the essence of their collective resiliency. It is not merely a desire for education, but a persistent determination despite significant setbacks. Each participant, in their own way, demonstrated a profound ability to overcome challenges and maintain a belief in their potential for a better future. This resiliency is a direct refutation of the stereotype that frequently disciplined Black male students are inherently unmotivated or undeserving of educational opportunities.

The narratives of these three students, therefore, represent a powerful counter-narrative to the simplistic and harmful stereotypes that often dominate discussions surrounding Black male students. Their honesty, positive outlooks, and remarkable resilience, despite experiencing systemic injustice within a school system fundamentally structured by White supremacy, highlight the profound strength and determination of these young men. Their stories underscore the critical need for a more nuanced and equitable approach to education, one that acknowledges and addresses the pervasive systemic issues that contribute to the disproportionate discipline and marginalization of Black male students.

Summary

The three themes that I constructed from the data revealed that participants' lived experiences can be characterized by a disconnect with education caused by biases and racism of the educational setting, yet their understanding of the meaning that they attribute to their experiences is as complex as human life itself. Disciplinary experiences were a part of their lives but did not define their lives. After reflecting on these themes and the experiences I had with the young men, I recognized several very important

connections to the literature that needed to be unpacked and shared. Thus, Chapter 6 is just that – a discussion of how Young’s Faces of Oppression and critical race theory can be demonstrated through the data in this study.

Chapter VI

CONNECTION TO THE LITERATURE

After formulating Theme 2 from the different data pieces, it became clear that the participants' experiences were reflecting social science literature and theories, especially when discussing marginalized groups, like African American males. Reflecting on what it means for three different individuals to have shared commonalities within the same educational system produced connections to literature I was exposed to as an undergraduate political science and psychology major. I was curious to know, beyond the surface, what the restriction of basic privileges such as using the restrooms, sharpening pencils, or asking for academic assistance means in the larger context of the social dynamics of American society and history. How did the larger context connect to the experiences of Batman, Tarzan, and Flash? I understood there was something to these actions and behaviors, but could not grasp the underlying meaning with a construct to provide more clarity. Basically, what were the systematic things happening under the façade of a seemingly neutral system of just rule-breaking and school discipline?

As I thought more about their experiences in how they were treated and the abuse they shared regarding the punitive nature of the STAR program, oppression became a reasonable claim. This is where I recalled Marion Young's five faces of oppression from my undergraduate studies. As I mentioned in the prior chapter, Young's concept aligned with the participants' lived experiences—denial of fairness, care, and support. Furthermore, their experiences connected with some of the tenets of critical race theory.

The stories of these young men became a real example of racism affecting the lives of marginalized groups in American society, aligning with the premise of critical race theory that racism is embedded and endemic in America. This chapter details how these concepts connect with the lived experiences of my participants.

Young's Five Faces of Oppression and the Manifestation in School Discipline

Marion Young's (1990) five faces of oppression complement the underpinning of the study—the participants faced oppression and relied on coping mechanisms to survive the oppression of discipline in their lives. Young's concept of oppression explains how the experiences of these young men mirror a familiar pattern for minorities in America at the intersections of race and class. Young, a prominent scholar known for her work on societal inequalities and contributions to political and feminist theory, wrote extensively about the multifaceted ways in which oppression manifests in the lives of Black people and other marginalized groups. She characterized oppression as a structural phenomenon that immobilizes or diminishes a group (p. 57), explaining:

Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people's choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules. (p. 56)

Her central argument detailed that oppression extends beyond economic exploitation and direct violence, manifesting in various ways in the lives of the most marginalized individuals in society (Young, 1990). She identified five primary manifestations of oppression, which she termed the five faces of oppression. Young (1990) identified exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence as the

ways in which marginalized people are oppressed, even in societies that purport to be egalitarian, particularly in America. She believed that each of these five faces represented distinct experiences in the lives of the oppressed, contributing to a deeper understanding of the injustices they face. In the lives of my participants, I found evidence of each form of oppression theorized by Young.

Exploitation

Young (1990) linked exploitation to the ways in which "social institutions enable a few to accumulate while they constrain many more" (p. 76). Research consistently supported the idea that African American male students were among the most marginalized (constrained) groups in education (Collier, 2007; Monroe, 2009; Rolland, 2011; Ross, 2023), as evidenced by discipline disparities, not to mention academics. The unequal distribution of resources and privileges (bathroom access, sharpening pencils, printer use, etc.) exemplify exploitation, where the system benefits from the unequal treatment of Black students. The system leverages the prevailing racial biases to maintain the status quo, benefitting from the suppression of Black voices and agency, with the benefactors being the Whites.

Young (1990) argued that race functions as a structure of oppression, similar to class or gender. My participants were African American males, subject to disproportionate levels of discipline, and parents from low-income and working-class backgrounds. Their experiences were shaped by the pervasive notion that Whiteness is inherently valuable and correct, setting the rules and defining fairness. This aligns with Kendi's (2017) recounting of Louis Farrakhan's words from the 1995 Million Man March, where Farrakhan stated, "The real evil in America is not White flesh or Black flesh. The

real evil in America is the idea that undergirds the setup of the Western world, and that idea is called White supremacy" (Kendi, 2017, p. 464).

Young (1990) acknowledged that exploitation involves social rules around "what work is, who does what for whom, how work is compensated . . . are appropriated to enact relations of power and inequality" (p. 64). A deeper reading of Young's work revealed a social dimension to exploitation, where Whiteness functions as a form of private ownership extending beyond labor and capitalism. Exploitation, in this context, involves Whiteness setting the rules and standards, permeating various aspects of American institutions. In the educational setting of my study, this manifested in teachers' discretionary enforcement of rules. Participants shared experiences of witnessing other students (often White) receiving privileges like using the bathroom, sharpening pencils, running errands, or going outside, while they were denied the same freedoms. This inconsistency stemmed from their perceived inability to exert agency within predominantly White spaces. Although they understood the concept of fairness and could mostly articulate how teachers should demonstrate it, they often encountered confusion in its practical application. Through the lens of racism, I concluded that my participants experienced oppression through exploitation.

Marginalization

Young (1990) highlighted the increasing prevalence of racial oppression in the United States through marginalization, deeming it the "most dangerous" form (p. 76). Marginalization, she argued, involves excluding entire groups from meaningful social participation, potentially leading to severe material deprivation and even extermination. In addition to violence, I found this face of oppression most pertinent to my participants.

The very essence of this study, which focused on students who had experienced suspension, dealt with marginalization. However, the acts of marginalization extended beyond formal disciplinary measures like in-school suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), the STAR program, and alternative school placements. Marginalization, as experienced by my participants, encompassed acts of exclusion within their classrooms.

The exclusion of the participants from basic activities and the subtle yet pervasive ways in which they were sidelined within the classroom represent marginalization. Their voices were actively silenced, and their needs ignored, pushing them to the periphery of meaningful participation in the school community. For instance, my participants were excluded from basic activities like freedom from moving without strict surveillance, receiving support, asking questions, and experiencing fair treatment. Young would categorize these as injustices. She wrote:

Two categories of injustices beyond distribution are associated with marginality. First, the provision of welfare itself produces new injustice by depriving those dependent on it of rights and freedoms that others have. Second, even when material deprivation is somewhat mitigated by the welfare state, marginalization is unjust because it blocks the opportunity to exercise capacities in socially defined and recognized ways. (pp. 76-77)

In the educational context of my study, the school functioned as a government institution with mandatory attendance. Yet, my participants shared experiences of witnessing other students enjoying privileges denied to them. Meanwhile, students rely on the school's welfare and safety to protect them and uphold their dignity by granting equal access to

these privileges. As Young's second point highlighted, while the school or parents provided for participants' material needs, they perceived teachers and principals as failing to exercise their capacity for care, support, and fairness. The participants accurately defined these concepts but were deprived of them, despite witnessing their routine demonstration in other social contexts like their families and, occasionally, within the STAR program and alternative school. At times, these alternative settings offered glimpses of positive experiences with Black male authority figures who "dug deep" (Tarzan) and created more supportive environments (Batman and Flash). However, within mainstream schooling, marginalization hindered the participants' meaningful and positive participation in a fundamental aspect of American childhood. This is often found in African American and other marginalized groups' culture, where they practice freedom and expression in community spaces away from the mainstream culture or traditional settings.

Similarly, Webster (2019), in his race-conscious dissertation "Where Did My Black Folk Go? The exclusion of Black Males from American K-12 classrooms," examined this phenomenon within a critical race theory (CRT) framework. His central focus was the school-to-prison pipeline, where Black male students are disproportionately pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system. In his discussion, he wrote:

All participants recognized that teacher racism had an impact on how they were excluded from the classroom. This racism led to Black males failing in school and increased their interactions with the criminal justice system through suspensions. The results of this study confirm that punitive tools

and approaches removed Black males from U.S. K-12 classrooms, hindering their academic achievement and disproportionately sending Black males onto a one-way path to prison. Though a few males did not have interactions with the criminal justice system, many were disproportionality suspended for minor offenses such as standing up for themselves or play-fighting. Disproportionate punishment of Black students compared to their White counterparts, helps maintain the White racial frame, which normalizes racism to maintain White dominance. (p. 59)

This is critical to understanding my study because, as discussed in the introduction, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of schooling for children's development. Yet, the issue of disciplinary disparities for African American male students creates a sense of hypocrisy between the need for school for youth and the disproportionate rates of young Black men. This brings us to the next face of oppression: powerlessness.

Powerlessness

Powerlessness refers to the feeling that most people "lack significant power" and "do not regularly participate in making decisions that affect the conditions of their lives and actions" (Young, 1990, p. 79). Young (1990) explored the concept of the "powerless" as those who lack authority, even in mediated contexts, and are subject to orders without the right to give them (p. 79). The participants' feelings of helplessness in the face of unfair treatment and lack of agency reveal the pervasiveness of powerlessness. They felt unable to influence decisions affecting their lives, accepting their treatment as inevitable.

While interviewing participants for this study, it became very apparent that they felt powerless under the weight of discipline. Batman called education "corrupted" and believed that the "whole system" worked against him. He stated, "It's just life. It's life. Just the way they are. How they cooperate. The way they work together and team up with each other." Batman and Flash admitted that they could not do anything about it, using phrases like "that is just the way it is." This captured the experiences of Tarzan who was punished for trying to enforce quiet rules in the hallway while his classmates were in line. Tarzan's attempt to demonstrate power, rooted in his desire to create order, was met with disciplinary action, highlighting the power dynamics at play in the school environment. He was left perplexed, unable to understand why his use of power was perceived as a transgression.

The reflection that came to me when thinking about how each of them felt powerless was defined by an inability to separate what happens to them from who they are. They almost equated their racial identity with powerlessness, accepting that they could not change being Black, so they also could not change how they were treated. For instance, when asked how to change it, Batman replied, "There is no escaping it. I am Black." Flash said that if he talked back to a teacher, "it is going to get worse for me . . . White people can get away with anything."

Young (1990) also emphasized the concept of "respectability," arguing that the powerless often lack the means to transcend oppression due to a lack of respect, which she defined as "to treat people with respect is to be prepared to listen to what they have to say" (p. 80). The participants in this study consistently pointed to the need for teachers to listen to their voices as a sign of genuine care and support. This resonated with the

observation that many people fail to listen to those they perceive as inferior, rendering them "invisible" (Young, 1990, p. 81) which leads to the next face of oppression.

Cultural Imperialism

The lack of recognition of their cultural contexts and needs reinforced a sense of invisibility and alienation. The imposition of a dominant White culture that devalued their experiences, identities, and expressions demonstrates cultural imperialism. This cultural imperialism manifested in the lives of the participants in this study through the denial of their interests and expectations. The positive experiences they had with Black male authority figures highlight the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Flash expressed his connection and affection for his only Black male teacher who, unlike other teachers, engaged in discussions about sports, checked in on his students, and created a fun and interactive learning environment. Tarzan similarly valued his teacher who displays cultural sensitivity by greeting him upon arrival, engaging him in discussions, and utilizing culturally relevant language. Batman, meanwhile, appreciated the freedom to move around the school, run errands for teachers, and socialize with his friends. These desires reflect the culturally valued interests of Black youth, particularly Black boys, yet they are often overlooked or dismissed in the school environment. The school system lacks the awareness and desire necessary to incorporate these interests and create a more inclusive and supportive learning experience for students who are often marginalized and disciplined.

Finally, the participants highlighted the pervasive presence of stereotypes that further perpetuate oppression. They all perceived that their teachers viewed them as troublemakers. Batman believed that teachers "probably look at a group of black people

walking together and say they trouble," while Flash recalled being watched by a White teacher and hearing the thought, "he is a troublemaker." Tarzan internalized these stereotypes, admitting that he sometimes believes he is a bad kid and feels the need to "act normal" and "not like a monkey." Young (1990) pointed out the irony of this, stating that stereotypes "confine them to a nature which is often attached in some ways to their bodies, and which thus, cannot be denied" (p. 82). For them, the label is just as real as their bodies, which is why Batman says "it is no escaping" it. This confinement forces them to navigate an identity that is often imposed upon them, rather than one they choose for themselves.

Batman and Flash, who have experienced the realities of street life, view education as a potential pathway from the dangers of gangs and the negative media portrayals of Black violence. This highlights the irony of their reality, where the very identity that is used to stereotype and marginalize them is the same one, they must strive to overcome. This stark reality leads us to the next face of oppression: violence.

Violence

Moreover, Young (1990) stated:

Cultural imperialism . . . itself intersects with violence. The culturally imperialized may reject the dominant meanings and attempt to assert their own subjectivity or the fact of their cultural difference may belie the dominant culture's implicit claim to universality. The dissonance generated by such a challenge to the hegemonic cultural meanings can also be a source of irrational violence. (p. 86)

The study participants rejected the dominant culture of Whiteness in the sense that they respected their own personhood and identity. Batman discussed how "I like to be different . . . how I act." Flash said, "I thought of myself as a, I don't know how to say it, different. I ain't do what other people do at the time." These statements affirmed their sense of self and their desire to be unlike others or assimilate. This form of violence is a symbolic form, which I am discussing next.

Symbolic Violence. Ferguson (2001) found that "for African American children, the conditions of schooling are not simply tedious; they are also replete with symbolical forms of violence" (p. 169). For the participants, being different was not a welcomed attribute in the form of Black male identity. As Flash said, he "chopped" his "creativity" in school. It makes sense that the two participants who were aware of their racial identity toned it down to avoid trouble. Even Tarzan was aware that he had to "act normal... not like monkeys." He said, "I want people to think I'm a normal person. I don't want nobody to be scared of me. Probably getting along with everybody . . . help people . . . does a lot of stuff . . . likes doing hobbies, like working out, playing with dogs and stuff." Tarzan's expression echoed the lyrics of Cole (2016) from my introduction: "watching Netflix . . . Catching up on our shows, eating breakfast . . . Raisin Bran in my bowl with bananas and some almond milk . . . I never thought I'd see the day I'm drinking almond milk" (verse 2). Because Cole highlighted references of what assimilation means in the sense of Black male identity, then symbolic violence becomes a real threat if Black males do not comply with the dominant culture's expectations. Time after time, my participants expressed real fears of violence that would ensue if they did not confine their behaviors or identities.

Young (1990) defined violence as living "with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person" (p. 83). In this form of oppression, she also included harassment, intimidation, and ridicule to degrade, humiliate, and stigmatize a marginalized group through what she calls its "systemic character" (p. 84) as a "social practice" (p. 85). Young (1990) believed that violence is an oppressive force that causes a climate of fear and insecurity for marginalized groups. Significantly for my study, Young (1990) stated, "regardless of what a Black man has done to escape the oppressions of marginality or powerlessness, he lives knowing he is subject to attack or harassment" (p. 85). The participants discussed these forms of violence. This violence was not brute force or physically but psychological in a sense of being embarrassed, labeled, or made to feel that they are not worthy of care, support, or equality.

Flash shared his experience with a teacher who constantly humiliated him if he asked a question about a classroom assignment. He said that she would say, "you should have listened when we went over it." This caused him to "figure it out" himself or not do the work in her class. Both Batman and Tarzan shared experiences of feeling "slow" in classrooms. Batman experienced this feeling when he would ask a question or need the teacher to slow down so he could better understand. He stopped asking questions because the teacher would "have an attitude" with him. Tarzan experienced this when he would report bullying and the teachers would say, "the world is not fair." Thus, in addition to being labeled troublemakers, my participants feared being ridiculed or labeled as slow if they needed support in their classrooms. This is the essential nature of the school environment that the participants shared in their experiences. Yet, the physical violence

was perpetrated against them when they were “sentenced” to the S.T.A.R. program as a form of punishment for rule-breaking.

Physical Violence: The STAR Program. Ultimately, the experience of the STAR program is a prime example of the total powerlessness felt by the students. The physical and emotional abuse experienced in the STAR program, coupled with the constant threat of humiliation and unjust punishment, represents violence. The program's structure, itself described as "military-like," perpetuates a climate of fear and intimidation. The casual racism and the application of force represent significant forms of violence targeted toward Black students. The accounts of being hit with switches, forced to fight in closets, and subjected to humiliating practices within the program serve as stark evidence of the physical and psychological violence inherent in the systemic structure.

Under the U.S. Department of Justice, Dopkins (2000) summarized 10 Student Transition and Recovery (STAR) programs operating in Georgia during the 1998–1999 school year. The 12-page report summary:

The STAR Program serves middle school students at risk of school detention or entering the juvenile justice system. The program is a military-like operation that requires students to report to one of three tracks of varying length. STAR I is a 6-month program for youth referred by the court. STAR II is a 1-day program for youth referred by their school or parents, while STAR III is a 30-day program for students referred by their school. In each case, students must report to the STAR location by 5:30 a.m., exercise, shower, eat, and then report to school. Immediately after school, youth return to the STAR location for homework assistance.

Parents are required to take a parenting class and drop their children off in the morning and pick them up at 6:00 p.m. (para. 1)

This summary reflects the operational experiences my participants shared, but not their perceived impact and certainly the abusive nature of the program. STAR was perceived as a very intense, immoral, unethical, and excessive form of discipline. I refer to it as the most insidious act of White supremacy that an educational setting can force upon marginalized students.

Before discussing the participants' experiences under the STAR program's supervision, a 2006 news report discussed staff-perpetrated abuse in the STAR program, in rural Georgia, including an incident that led to the program's shutdown.

Dougherty County—A shocking hidden camera video shot by a student lead to the suspension of a school disciplinary program and a criminal investigation. The Dougherty County School System shut down its STAR Program and fired the coordinator. A student taped the coordinator forcing students to rough each other up. The instructor also brought in private school students, and that school has now closed its doors. On February 17th at Radium Springs Middle School, STAR Program Coordinator Ronald Causby commanded one student to shove, push, and bully another. It was caught on tape, secretly recorded by a student because no one believed him when he reported the actions. "He brought the camera to show the relative that he was not making this up. That it actually happened," said Deputy School Superintendent Carlos Keith. "Found it did happen, and that instructor has been terminated," Keith said. The

STAR program is supposed to help students with disciplinary problems.

STAR stands for Student Transition and Recovery Program. (WALB, para 1)

This reported abuse is only one form of violence and abuse that my participants reported from their experiences in the STAR Program. The participants reported that they were allowed to go into a closet and fight it out as instructed by the STAR staff.

The participants' experiences in the STAR program represented a particularly egregious form of oppression, combining several of Young's phases. The program's militaristic structure, racially biased application, and brutal disciplinary tactics demonstrated a systemic disregard for their humanity and dignity. The parallels between the participants' experiences in STAR and historical atrocities such as slavery and the Holocaust are striking—not to minimize the suffering of those groups but to highlight the persistence of oppressive structures and the insidious nature of systemic dehumanization. The focus group discussion provided almost unbelievable experiences of abuse, highlighting the severity and the lasting impact of this supposedly "rehabilitative" program.

The program's racially biased application overwhelmingly targeted Black students in a school system with only a slight majority of Black students as opposed to Whites and others, as evidenced by the participants' own observations. "In entire, I've seen probably about like five White kids," Tarzan noted, while Batman added, "I haven't seen one." This disproportionate impact further underscored the program's systemic oppression of the marginalized group of Black students and cruelty.

The program's disciplinary tactics went far beyond mere correction. Batman described grueling 18-hour workouts, enforced isolation ("eat with them in the STAR room"), and the forced wearing of identical uniforms. These restrictions were coupled with physical abuse, described vividly by the participants. Tarzan explained the system of points, where accumulation of '3's led to paddling and '1's resulted in immediate referral to STAR. Brutal physical punishments were routinely administered, as Batman recounted, "They got a switch. They got three switches duck taped together . . . You drop that log, boy it's over." Tarzan corroborated this, stating, "it hurts . . . I couldn't sit down for like three days," after being struck. The switch was not the only method; Batman detailed a horrifying incident where "[STAR staff] came by and he had hit everybody in their backs with the switch" for a single student's failure to perform a pushup correctly. Flash confirmed the pervasiveness of violence, recalling hearing "a scream" while in the gym and witnessing a student being physically beaten.

The abuse extended beyond physical violence. Forced participation in fights in a small closet ("They'll let you go in the closet and fight"), the humiliation of being made to roll in the dirt in new clothes ("Major made him go outside, roll around in the dirt"), and the cruel act of having dirt or grass shoved in their mouths ("They'll say open your mouth. They rub it in your mouth and say you spit it out") constituted psychological torture. Flash's account of his sister's experience, where a staff member threw grass in her face, further demonstrated the arbitrary and abusive nature of the program's power. The power imbalance between militarized staff and the predominantly Black students, coupled with the knowledge that the staff often knew the students' parents and could extend their control into the home ("They pull up to the hood . . . We finna go see what

these folks talking about”), created a climate of absolute terror. The participants’ collective narrative paints a disturbing picture of a program that, far from rehabilitating, actively traumatized and dehumanized its young participants. Their experiences demonstrate the insidious persistence of oppressive structures, highlighting the striking parallels to historical injustices. Not being able to escape the rule and power of authorized institutionalized force in their homes and neighborhoods illustrated just how the terror resembled that of Jews in Europe and Blacks in America during slavery and Jim Crow.

Parallels to Slavery and the Holocaust. While absorbing the participants’ accounts of the STAR program, I reflected on how their experiences mirrored the knowledge I had acquired through my academic journey. As a political science major with a concentration in political thought, my studies often centered on the Holocaust. My undergraduate seminar classes frequently examined the inhumane conditions endured by Jewish people. Simultaneously, as a Black child raised in the traditional South, living in public housing with blue-collar parents, I was keenly observant. This led to a deep interest in slavery and the American Civil Rights movement. Consequently, I developed a passion for history, societal dynamics, and justice. I dedicated myself to studying Black issues in America, from slavery to the contemporary mass incarceration of Black men, whenever possible. As I listened to my participants during the focus group, thoughts and images from my experiences and learning flooded my mind. I began to perceive school discipline not merely as an act of modern White supremacy but as its direct descendant.

My comparison of school discipline to the Holocaust and slavery is not intended to be dramatic but rather to acknowledge how practices persist through acceptable means

within specific historical contexts and times. The participants' depictions of the STAR program bear striking similarities to the treatment of Jews and enslaved African people in America by authorized and legal institutions. While the discriminatory practices of teachers and principals toward Black males are evident, the STAR program constitutes a profound violation of these students' humanity and dignity, yet it remains legitimized by the state.

If we were living in Europe over 90 years ago or America 160 years ago, and I recounted a story of a group of people who were first labeled and restricted in their shared spaces, then subjected to isolation, stripped of their clothes and individuality, given uniforms and shaved heads, confined to specific areas, forced to perform intense labor for hours on end, publicly humiliated and ridiculed, beaten and brutalized to follow strict orders enforced by military guards, denied escape from authority even in their own homes and personhoods, and targeted based on their physical appearance or phenotype—all for breaking minor and subjective rules characterized by unfairness and discrimination—whose stories would I be telling? I believe I would be recounting the experiences of Jewish people during the Holocaust and enslaved Africans in America. These study participants have shared similar stories, and I am now conveying them to you.

As a devoted reader of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, I have come to believe that the new Jim Crow is not and has never been solely mass incarceration. Instead, it has manifested as widespread discrimination in school disciplinary policies and practices in the era of desegregation, fueled by sympathies for the poor and White working class who still

harbor fears of their daughters sitting next to black male students. The question is not whether we see this phenomenon, as it is clearly evident and supported, but rather how we allow it to persist.

While this may sound like a conclusion, it is not. These participants demonstrated unexpected resilience and accountability, reflecting the enduring spirit of Black individuals who have consistently resisted White supremacy throughout history. The next section is grounded in the spirit of critical race theory (CRT), as I believe a counter-narrative cannot be constructed without acknowledging the strengths and resilience of my participants.

A Critical Race Theory Analysis of School Discipline

Using critical race theory (CRT) as an analytical framework deepens the interrogation of the findings. CRT revealed that the persistent nature of racial bias in school discipline is deeply embedded in the structures of educational institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). The concept of the permanence of racism is vividly illustrated by the students' accounts of long-standing discriminatory practices that persist despite early experiences of care (Crenshaw, 1991). This analysis challenges the notion that such practices are anomalies and positions them as systemic features of the educational system.

Cautiously, I aimed to center the research on participant experiences, avoiding the imposition of theory onto their narratives. Consequently, I initially hesitated to apply critical race theory (CRT) as participants were reluctant to discuss their experiences through the lens of race during early interviews. I was wary of forcing a theoretical

framework onto the data when the only apparent connection was the participants' African American identity, and the study employed a qualitative approach.

This discomfort prompted me to delve deeper into CRT. My understanding of its application shifted after encountering the insightful words of Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (2005), "stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being" (p. 92). Brayboy's assertion bridged the gap between narrative and theory, allowing me to recognize how participant stories could inform and be interpreted through CRT.

In further researching and rereading James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, I was able to understand some of the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) through his powerful narrative as a young Black male growing up in Harlem. In depicting his story, he illustrated the experiences of young Black men and the choices and transitions they endure throughout life. His story and analysis of the journey of young Black males is a brilliant portrayal of the struggles to find their place between the world and themselves. Baldwin (1993) wrote:

Every Negro boy— in my situation during those years, at least—who reaches this point realities, at once, profoundly, because he wants to live, that he stands in great peril and must find, with speed, a “thing,” a gimmick, to lift him out, to start him on his way” (Baldwin, 1993, p. 240). Negroes in this country—and Negroes do not, strictly or legally speaking, exist in any other—are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world. This world is White and they are Black. White holds the power, which means they are superior to Blacks (intrinsically, that is:

God decreed it so), and the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared. Long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it . . . he must be ‘good’ not only please his parents and not only to avoid being punished by them; behind their authority stands another, nameless and impersonal, infinitely harder to please, and bottomlessly cruel” (Baldwin, 1992, p. 25-26). He does not know what the boundary is, and he can get no explanation of it, which is frightening enough, but the fear he hears in the voices of his elders is more frightening still. The fear that I heard in my father’s voice, for example, when he realized that I really believed I could do anything a White boy could do, and every intention of proving it, was not at all like the fear I heard when one of us was ill or had fallen down the stairs or strayed too far from the house. It was another fear, a fear that the child, in challenging the White world’s assumptions, was putting himself in the path of destruction.” (Baldwin, 1992, p. 26-27). A child cannot, thank Heaven, know how vast and how merciless the nature of power is, with what unbelievable cruelty people treat each other” (Baldwin, 1992, p. 27). Unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was “the man” – the White man. (Baldwin, 1993, p. 19)

Baldwin's elaborate storytelling conceptualized the Black male's enduring struggle against racism (permanence of racism), defined and restricted by White authority

(Whiteness as property), and their narratives as counterpoints to the dominant narrative (counter storytelling). This framework guided my understanding of the African American male experience, particularly their scholarship, and informed the application of three key tenets of critical race theory (CRT): (a) the permanence of racism, (b) Whiteness as property, and (c) counter storytelling.

However, initially, I hesitated to explicitly address race and racism in my research due to a concern with bias. A conversation with Dr. Frazier (personal communication, September 10, 2024), revealed that my participants were at various stages of racial identity development, distancing them from fully recognizing race as a significant factor in their experiences (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Consequently, their initial discussions about race were limited. However, the participants' comfort level increased in a subsequent focus group setting, leading to more open discussions about their racial experiences.

This change allowed me to view the participants' stories as windows into their world and daily lives, specifically addressing the experiences of African American male students within the context of school-based discipline. Even though their level of consciousness ranged from pre-encounter (largely unaware of race or its implications, carrying beliefs of dominant White culture) to encounter (experiencing events deemed racism forces them to acknowledge their Blackness and the possibility of being targeted by racist acts) (Cross & Vandiver, 2001), their narratives provided valuable insights into the interplay of race in their experiences.

Feeling confident in the stories, I applied CRT to understand the experiences of the participants. The same three tenets that I found operating in Baldwin's narrative

resonated with the experiences of my participants: (a) the permanence of racism, (b) Whiteness as Property, and (c) counter storytelling.

Permanence of Racism

"Racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society" (Bell, 1992, p. ix). Derrick Bell, a prominent figure in the conception of critical race theory, arrived at this stark conclusion after decades of observing the limitations of civil rights efforts in the United States. In his seminal work, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, Bell (1992) argued that American society is fundamentally flawed by its enduring racial hierarchy. He posited that Black people must accept this reality, seek progress and acknowledge that their gains are often fleeting, vulnerable to the shifting interests of the dominant White culture.

Charles W. Mills further elucidated this notion of permanent racism through his concept of the "Racial Contract." Mills stated that:

We live in a world which has been foundationally shaped for the past five hundred years by the realities of European domination and the gradual consolidation of global White supremacy. Thus, not only is the Racial Contract "real," but—whereas the social contract is characteristically taken to be establishing the legitimacy of the nation-state, and codifying morality and law within its boundaries—the Racial Contract is global.

(Mills, 1997, p. 20)

The Racial Contract, as described by Mills (1997), operates beyond the written legal framework, shaping the very fabric of American society in ways that perpetuate racial inequality. It explains why even in a society that claims to be colorblind, the experiences

and outcomes of Black people and other minority groups consistently reflect their marginalized status.

Charles R. Lawrence III (1987) delved into the individual level of racism, exploring the interplay of unconscious bias and cultural symbolism. He argued:

The unconscious racial attitudes of individuals manifest themselves in the cultural meaning that society gives their actions in the following way: In a society that no longer condones overt racist attitudes and behavior, many of these attitudes will be repressed and prevented from reaching awareness in an undisguised form. But as psychologists have found, repressed wishes, fears, anger, and aggression continue to seek expression, most often by attaching themselves to certain symbols in the external world. Repressed feelings and attitudes that are commonly experienced are likely to find common symbols particularly fruitful or productive as a vehicle for their expression. Thus, certain actions, words, or signs may take on meaning within a particular culture because of the collective use of those actions, words, or signs to represent or express shared but repressed attitudes. The process is cyclical: The expression of shared attitudes through certain symbols gives those symbols cultural meaning, and once a symbol becomes an enduring part of the culture, it in turn becomes the most natural vehicle for the expression of those attitudes and feelings that caused it to become an identifiable part of the culture. (p. 356)

Lawrence's analysis reveals that racism is perpetuated not only through systemic structures but also through the everyday actions and interactions of individuals. These

actions, informed by unconscious biases and embedded in a shared cultural context, serve as vehicles for the expression and reinforcement of racist attitudes. This creates a cycle where cultural symbols become laden with racist meaning, further perpetuating the very prejudices they represent.

Therefore, understanding the permanence of racism requires recognizing its multifaceted nature. It operates both systemically, through the "Racial Contract," and individually, through the unconscious biases and symbolic actions of individuals. This complex and interconnected reality, as illuminated by CRT, presents a challenge to dismantling racism, demanding a nuanced and persistent approach to dismantling its entrenched structures and individual manifestations. This becomes apparent when I read Bell's (1992) explanation of his racial realism in the educational system. He admitted:

It took me a long time to recognize that school officials—when they finally complied with desegregation court orders—were creating separate educational programs for Black children within schools that were integrated in name only. In fact, they were too often resegregated by "ability groups," denied Black teachers and administrators, disproportionately disciplined for the least infractions deemed threatening to Whites and generally made to feel like aliens in what were supposed to be their schools. (p. 23–24)

Bell's admissions of how desegregation allowed for racism to continue in schools speak to my participants' experiences. He accurately named the topic of my study: "disproportionately disciplined."

This is the reality for African American male students. Children do not understand this social or racial contract. They are busy understanding their school lessons, their families, their friends, their neighborhoods, their relationships with school peers, teachers, and principals, and their school environment. Specifically, these study participants struggled to understand the racial implications of racialized individual actions of their peers, teachers, and principals.

They were better able to identify, formulate, and articulate racialized actions within the experiences in a group setting that exposed them to other's experiences of racism. All the participants relayed that they did not talk about their disciplinary experiences, and they coped with them in ways that described escaping the reality. The focus provided a safe place to talk about their experiences with racism in the schools.

One of the most telling patterns of the study was that the older the participants were, the better they were able to define racialized actions. For instance, Tarzan, being the youngest, could not fully comprehend the teachers' actions as racist but talked about unfairness in terms of gender; "girls get it easier." Not to say that is not true for his experiences, but the research is clear that Black males are treated unfairly (Bell, 2015; Collier, 2007; Danilova, 2018; Skiba et al., 2013; Valles & Villalpando, 2013) because of their race, not gender alone. Batman, on the other hand, while he was the oldest by age, had less years in regular school than Flash due to him being placed in alternative school for nearly two years. This is important because Batman and the research (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022; Losen, 2015) defined alternative schools as different than regular schools in that there is more caring from teachers and less time spent in alternative schools. Consequently, Flash has spent more time in regular school under school-based

discipline, and he was able to talk about racialized experiences in greater detail and recognize them as so.

Yet, Batman discussed being racially judged and targeted. He shared a story about walking in the park with his cousins and a White lady called the police on them. He shared the story and was able to say "them people" without naming the actions of White people specifically. At one point he described how he is targeted and his beliefs: "cause they see random Black kids walking in groups, they think they up to trouble." He noted that Black teachers treat White students differently: "Like Caucasian folks, she wouldn't say stuff [like she say to Black students]." He said, "She wasn't Black, so she really ain't care what she said." Batman also talked about being Black and it "ain't nothing you can do about it . . . ain't no escaping."

Flash in his third interview talked about race and the implications directly. He talked about how his feelings of how he believes White teachers perceive him: "I feel like White teachers feels like I am a trouble child." He shared this story about walking down the hall alone and this White teacher kept looking at him. He felt the stares were targeting him. He shared that he did not see White students in ISS. Flash stated that "I don't see racism happening to White" people. When defining power, he said Whites "get away with anything they want." When I asked, what can be done about it, he replied "nothing . . . just accept as just a way of life . . . once you get in trouble."

Those words profoundly impacted me because it symbolized the acceptance of their place in life and gave up on advocating for themselves, and their dignity. Yet, it is the same conclusion that Bell and Baldwin confessed: racism is permanent, especially in the lives of Black males.

Through deep reflections, I wrote about how racism is permanent in school, specifically for Black males experiencing school-based discipline. These thoughts led me to think about the reasons opponents of desegregation wanted to keep Blacks out of "their schools" in the first place. As I remember history lessons and the reason they stated, safety, came to mind. Surely, if the African American males were fighting and causing harm to other students and thus, disrupting the school environment, then they should not be in regular school or at least be suspended for some time for their actions. Yet, this did not explain to me the deep-rooted reasons for White supremacy that I speculated were there.

I considered the words of President Eisenhower, which I remembered from my education while studying the issues of race when he empathized with Southern racists who did not want school integration. Eisenhower explained his position to Chief Justice Warren, the U.S. Supreme Court, and a lawyer who argued for the position of Southern Whites over dinner after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case (O'Donnell, 2018). The writers of history quoted Eisenhower's words differently: (1) "they are not bad people . . . all they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls not be required to sit in school alongside some big Black bucks" (O'Donnell, 2018) (para. 1) and (2) "[Southern whites] are not bad people. All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in school alongside some big overgrown Negroes" (Ogletree, 2004, para. 2). Despite the words, they both sent the same message. That the real concern was the innocence or purity of Whiteness in its most fragile form, the White female; the least disciplined student across race and gender (Collier, 2007; Peterson, 2021; Skiba et

al., 2013). What immediately came to mind was the parallel between this idea and that of the lynching of Black males throughout the history of America.

Research has supported that lynching in America had three specific purposes: protecting White women from hypersexualized Black males, terrorism, and maintaining White supremacy and the social order (Kendi, 2017). I thought how coincidental of a President to speak those words justifying segregation and the practice of brutality and terror against Blacks and their communities. The idea that a President would characterize a child as dehumanized to justify a racist policy is exactly the White supremacy Kendi (2017) argued: "all these self-serving efforts by powerful functions to define their racist rhetoric as nonracist has left Americans thoroughly divided over, and ignorant of, what racist ideas truly are" (p. 5).

Unfortunately, this is the same kind of justification that has witnessed countless Black boys' expulsion from their very lives. The ones I talked about in the literature review: Tamir Rice (cast as older than his age); Ahmaud Arbery (cast as a stranger running through a White neighborhood), Trayvon Martin (cast as a burglar), and Emmitt Till (allegedly catcalling a White woman). Ultimately, this is the same spirit of White supremacy that lynched Black boys in and from school. School disciplinary policy is only the latest and most enduring form of White supremacy enacted in schools. It has the same targets (Black males), the same methods (intense labor and brutality - paddling, the STAR program), and the same goal (keep the social order through terror). If the big Black Buck bucks, then isolate him from the rest (ISS or alternative school), take him out and subject to fields and abuse and work (the STAR program), or if none of those options teach him, then take him out for good (OSS or expulsion).

In the foreword of Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, Michelle Alexander quoted Bryan Stevenson: "Slavery didn't end in 1865. It evolved" (Bell, 1992). In the evidence of the participants' stories, racism is indeed permanent through education, especially for Black males.

Whiteness as Property and African American Male Students' Experiences

The American forefathers linked the concept of freedom (rights) inextricably to Whiteness (Kendi, 2017). Initially, this association was primarily with males due to the deep connection with Christianity and religion. Subsequently, land ownership became an additional qualifier for claiming rights, introducing a class-based dimension (Kendi, 2017). I believe as more individuals fought for their rights, leading to the expansion of rights across race and gender (from Black people to Indigenous peoples), the term "American" became synonymous with Whiteness. For instance, the return and reemergence of Donald Trump to the presidency on a "real American" platform, the attack and banding of critical race theory, and the death of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (D.E.I.) demonstrate the deep-bedded sentiment that the American identity is the dominance of Whiteness.

It is important to clarify that I have intentionally used the terms "Black males" (or "boys") and "African American males" (or "students"), not interchangeably. This distinction is crucial when examining critical race theory (CRT) and the question of why some Black students receive more disciplinary action than others. I believe this disparity stems from the difference between "African American" and "Black." As previously stated, African American refers to the official country of birth (geography) or citizenship,

while Black encompasses culture, experiences, and a wide range of identities (Ridley-Merriweather, Hoffmann-Longtin, & Owusu, 2021).

This distinction is relevant under the CRT tenet of Whiteness as property because Black students who assimilate to Whiteness usually mitigate racist behaviors and gain acceptance. The participants' experiences revealed that their attempts to adopt the pro-White cultural standards did not afford them protection against racist biases. These participants' experiences centered on the fundamental inequities embedded in the educational structure.

I now believe that "African American" is not simply a racial category used to assign racial identity in this country but also represents an implicit buy-in by Black individuals into the norms, ways, and culture of Whiteness. African American is essentially the transition to owning agency within Whiteness as property. By reflecting on the participants' experiences, I arrived at the conclusion that Whiteness as property entailed the trade-off of Black culture and norms for the acceptance of Whiteness as an American identity. When I considered the participants and what distinguished them from other African American students, or those not entangled in school discipline, a consistent theme was identified: they expressed themselves through Black culture. Tarzan struggled with American diction, exemplified by his inability to pronounce complex words. Batman's speech pattern was characterized by slang, cut-offs of words, and a streetwise demeanor during interviews. Flash, a basketball enthusiast, resided in public housing. All of them described lacking the luxuries enjoyed by their White peers, such as allowance money or summer vacations. The participants, through no fault of their own, were labeled

as Black. Notably, the distinction lies in the understanding that "Blacks" lack rights, while "African Americans" possess them.

Ferguson (2001) found similar themes in her study. She illustrated how the Black boys defined and attached themselves to their identities by using the categories Black or African American. She named the chapter "Unreasonable Circumstances." She elevated Tyrone's voice in this excerpt:

Schoolboys were more likely to make the link with being Black and Black culture in an abstract sense removed from their own daily experience.

Tyrone, for instance, said that he preferred to be called African American rather than Black, "because that's the mother land—African. It means that they were like the first people that was living on the earth. Because Adam and Eve was Black. (p. 211)

Clearly there is an unspoken difference between the two associations and identities. One of my observations became that Black was the one attached to negative stereotypes and labeling, thus an unreasonable circumstance for this study's participants. Further contemplating this concept, I recalled an experience during my undergraduate studies when I heard Dick Gregory speak. A statement he made resonated deeply with me: "In the North, they do not care how big you get, just don't get too close. In the South, they don't care how close you get, just don't get too big" (Gregory, 1971, p. 103). It took me some time to fully grasp the meaning behind these words. Eventually, I understood it better. His statement proved incredibly insightful later in life. In essence, Gregory spoke to the idea that racism and Whiteness's expressive nature manifests differently depending

on the geography, industry, or culture, and thus, barriers and doors to Whiteness depend on those.

In the American South, Whites rely on Blacks for essential services like farm labor, domestic work, and childcare, but actively discourage Black upward mobility. Blacks are expected to remain subservient, avoiding the pursuit of business ownership or aspirations that could challenge the existing power structure. Even if Blacks achieve success, it is often viewed as serving White interests.

In the North, where socioeconomic disparities are less racially defined, Black communities like Harlem can flourish. However, areas like Staten Island and Long Island are considered White territory, with limited access for Blacks. This concept of "Whiteness as property" highlights the spatial segregation and power dynamics inherent in American society. While Blacks are permitted to "become big" in certain spheres, they are fundamentally excluded from the realm of "closeness," reinforcing the notion that Whiteness, as property, is an exclusive domain.

By reflecting on the participants' experiences and drawing from my own experiences, I arrived at the conclusion that Whiteness as property involves the trade-off of Black culture and norms for the acceptance of Whiteness as an American identity. Examining the participants, I observed a distinct characteristic separating them from other African American students, particularly those not facing disciplinary issues: they unintentionally expressed themselves freely through Black culture.

Brown and Jackson (2013) shared Cheryl Harris's conceptualization of Whiteness as an intangible property interest, illustrating how the legal system protected a vested interest in White skin. Harris (1995) uses the story of her light-skinned grandmother

passing as White to gain employment in the 1930s to highlight how Whiteness grants access to public and private privileges, affording greater control over one's life. This translates to automatic economic, political, and social security, reinforcing the legal system's historical protection of white privilege and converting whiteness into valuable property (Brown & Jackson, 2013, p. 19).

Lopez (1996) built upon Harris's (1995) assertion that "Whiteness—the right to White identity . . . is property if by 'property' one means all a person's legal rights" (p. 279). He emphasized that Whiteness transcends physical traits and ancestry, instead representing a system of racialized meaning and domination, composed of ideological adherents and material components. This clarity underscores that Whiteness is more than skin color or appearance; it is deeply embedded in the American fabric, dictating who is deemed worthy of rights and promises (Donnor, 2013, p. 199).

Fasching-Varner and Mitchell (2013) further elaborated on this complex concept. They argued that whiteness, often mistakenly perceived solely through physical characteristics, functions as an absolute property value, superior to other races (Winant, 2000). Lopez (1996) and Ignatiev (1995) highlighted the historical struggles of individuals attempting to be legally recognized as White to access the inherent property value associated with Whiteness. Harris (1995) underscored that White people capitalize on their Whiteness for enjoyment, valuing the reputation associated with it. Conversely, any perceived deviation from Whiteness is viewed as detrimental, devaluing their property. This inherent "goodness" of Whiteness, protected by the legal system, perpetuates its dominance and reinforces the exclusionary nature of Whiteness (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Bell (1992) alluded to this complex interplay between race and power, stating that "Black people will never gain full equality in this country . . . this is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies" (p. 15). The emphasis on "Black people" rather than "African American," particularly when discussing legal gains and rights, highlights the persistent denial of full citizenship to Black people. Baldwin (1993) further extrapolated this notion, arguing that even the most successful Black individuals "proved that they needed, in order to be free, something more than a bank account" (p. 21). This resonates with the notion that true freedom for Black people requires the denunciation of Blackness and the adoption of Whiteness, which represents the essence of American-ness.

However, the complexity lies in the inherent design and establishment of Whiteness as a property. Baldwin (1993) poignantly described the impossibility of Black people respecting White society's standards when their own experiences demonstrate a blatant disregard for those very standards (p. 22). "Those virtues preached but not practiced by the White world were merely another means of holding Negroes in subjection" (p. 23). Consequently, the goal of Whiteness as property is not genuine inclusion but the continued subjugation and ownership of Black people, perpetuating a cyclical pattern of oppression that resembles a modern form of slavery.

This phenomenon is exemplified by the experiences of individuals like billionaire Oprah Winfrey, who faced discrimination outside of the United States despite "buying into" Whiteness within the American context. In Zurich, Switzerland, in 2013, she was denied an expensive bag because the sales associate believed she could not afford it (McLeod, 2013). Unfortunately, Oprah's passport did not afford her the stamp of Whiteness outside of the United States of America. Similarly, the story of a Black

Harvard professor, Henry Louis Gates, was arrested for entering his own home after locking himself out (Edwards, 2009). His merited success gave him the keys to Whiteness, but Whiteness became unlocked in his own neighborhood as he appeared to be breaking into a property in a White community. These stories demonstrate how even economic, educational, and academic achievements fail to shield African Americans when there is a contextual perception of Blackness. These are the inherent racial biases ingrained in society, highlighting the limitations of "buying into" Whiteness (Subedi, 2013, p. 177).

This understanding underscores the fallacy of seeking to escape Blackness by adopting Whiteness. The desire to be like Elon Musk, as articulated by "Batman," reflected the flawed belief that wealth and success can buy one out of Blackness. However, class-based explanations fail to adequately address the complexities of racial oppression, as evidenced by the disparities faced by poor White children in Title I schools (Dumas, 2013, p. 119; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, pp. 50, 52).

The concept of Whiteness as property sheds light on the systemic and historical oppression experienced by Black people in the United States. It highlights the limitations of seeking inclusion through assimilation, exposing the inherent fallacy of "buying into" Whiteness. True liberation requires dismantling the system of racialized property and recognizing the inherent value of Blackness (Kendi, 2017).

While research has explored the intersectionality of class and gender on African American male students, my analysis draws from the stories of the study's participants to highlight how the White supremacy inherent in schools has a profound and race-specific impact. Research on the relationship between race, which is a social construct, and its

diverse manifestations suggests that the very notion of Blackness becomes a problem for African American male students within the context of school-based discipline.

Drawing upon critical race theory (CRT), Ferguson (2001) argued that the construction of Black masculinity is inherently intertwined with intersectionality and identity. She explained that Black males consistently face the challenge of constructing their identities within a cultural framework that perceives the nexus of Blackness and masculinity as inherently criminal, deviant, and problematic. Ferguson (2001) contended that:

Identification is a process of marking off symbolic boundaries through embodied performances of self that call up and draw on idealized figures and cultural representations as a reference to one's rightful membership and authenticity. Identification in this sense is a series of public acts of commitment to a subject position. (p. 236)

This concept resonated deeply with the experience of one of the study participants. Flash expressed suppressing aspects of his true self within the school environment. He described having to "chop" parts of himself, specifically his creativity, while maintaining a disciplined work ethic. This struggle perfectly encapsulates Ferguson's notion of "rightful membership and authenticity" – the constant negotiation of Blackness within a system that seeks to define it as inherently problematic.

Moreover, the experiences of Black males are complex and complicated. Austin Channing Brown (2018), in her book, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, richly captured the pervasive nature of racism in her own story. She narrated the contrasting experiences of her childhood, where her privilege as a child with both

parents shielded her from overt racism. However, this changed when she experienced life with divorced parents and less affluent relatives, leading her to witness different forms of racism firsthand.

Brown (2018) recounted the experience of her cousin, Dalin, whose shoes were taken, sparking a deep sense of anger and sadness. She wrote:

I can still see in his face, a troubling mix of anger and sadness . . . that was the moment when I understood the rules governing my cousin's life were different than those governing my own. Dalin lived in a world I knew only through headlines. So, I believed him. I believed his description of his world, and I was afraid for him. I wanted him to live. (p. 135)

This experience marked a pivotal moment for Brown, where she realized that her own privileged upbringing had allowed her to pass as an African American, effectively masking her from the harsh realities faced by her Black cousin.

Brown further articulated the inherent fear that Black parents face, a fear that is deeply rooted in the reality of systemic racism:

We fear that any public imperfection of our children will lead to extrajudicial, deadly consequences. Even when our babies aren't perfect, even when they are rude or disrespectful, even when they make mistakes or fail, even when their sixteen-year-old brains tell them to do risky, stupid things, we still want them to live. We want them to make it to another day. (p. 137)

This fear, tragically, encapsulates the disproportionate disciplinary actions faced by Black males within the school system. As Subedi (2013) posited, "the burden has been placed

on youth to resist and to claim their cultural citizenship in schools" (p. 178). For instance, Tarzan shared that his mother constantly told him to go to school and not act like a monkey because that is what White people think when they do not act the right way. From the perspective of Tarzan, it was asking him to denounce his personality and cultural expressions. This burden, however, is exceptionally heavy for marginalized children. It is my role as a researcher to amplify their voices, to share their stories, and shed light on the reality of systemic racism that continues to permeate our institutions.

African American Male Students' Counter Narratives

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2023) questioned in their book, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, "have you ever had the experience of hearing one story and being completely convinced, then hearing an exactly opposite story, equally well told, and being left unsure of your convictions? (p. 70). For me, this question encapsulated the meaning of counter-narratives. It asked of us to hear the other side. Because statistics and raw data in the form of numbers alone cannot tell you what is happening in the real world or the daily lives of people. The counter-stories - "stories of those individuals and groups whose knowledge and histories have been marginalized, excluded, subjugated or forgotten in the telling of official narratives" (Peters & Lankshear, 1996, p. 2). The central argument is that "CRT is better aligned with qualitative methods because of the focus on individual narratives, a core component of CRT" (DeCuir-Gunby & Walker-DeVose, 2013, p. 249). As quoted from earlier writings of Delgado (1989), "a strength of CRT is that it allows for the capturing of counter-stories or the narratives of marginalized groups that counter the perspectives of the majoritarian" (DeCuir-Gunby & Walker-DeVose, 2013, p. 248).

While this sounded simple enough, Bell (1992) laid a challenging task for the qualitative researcher: “they must find it in the lives of our oppressed people who defied social death as slaves and freedmen, insisting on their humanity despite a social consensus that they were ‘a brutish sort of people’ (p. 245). Then Delgado and Stefancic (2023) positioned another challenge for me: “equally well told” (p. 70). Next, Cook and Dixson (2013) purported “the possibility and necessity of translating analyses into active resistance against oppressive and racist structures must be foundational for CRT research and scholarship . . . [being] uniquely able to relate theory to the concrete experience of oppression” (p. 185). Thus, I defined my task in elevating my participants’ voices as to telling their stories in a powerful way that captured the essence of how systematic racism within education leads to disproportionate discipline in the schooling of African American males while also telling it in a way of highlighting their strengths; the deficits belong to the system and not the individual.

DeCuir-Gunby and Walker-DeVose (2013) claimed this form is the second type of counter-storytelling and the majority of qualitative researchers use counter-stories this way. They defined it as designated this form of narrative as “telling of another person’s experiences with racism . . . such stories are biographical and situated within the sociohistorical context (p. 253). Yet, it was a case of being easier said than done.

Solorzano (2013) demanded that “counter-storytelling pulls from the rich storytelling tradition in African-American, Chicano, and Native American communities and is a tool used in qualitative research to expose, analyze, and challenge the “majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32). I struggled to feel confident in telling the study participants’ stories because I was not sure that I was getting the data to support

claims of racism, which supported the use of CRT. The main struggle was to understand what was considered “rich data” for children who reported that they felt like they could not express themselves and coped with their disciplinary experiences by escaping them rather than talking about them. From my own experiences with my nephews, younger cousins, and the African American males I worked with in the courts, the youth have a different type of communication described by single and short answers to questions and conversations. How was I supposed to elicit responses from children who are oppressed, a form of it is the ability to express themselves; it was not a skill built into their environment, especially not in school. Batman was a very engaged participant but struggled to tell stories in ways that helped me understand the context. Tarzan viewed gender as much more of a concern than race. Flash carefully selected his words, and I observed him negotiating how much to say. So, I struggled to believe I could attain rich data.

Later, I thought about Baldwin’s depiction of how Black males struggled to express themselves under oppressive racism. He reminded me that Black males would be “unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was “the man” – the white man” (Baldwin, 1992, p. 19). Consequently,

In situations like this, the subordinate person lacks the language to express how he or she has been injured or wronged . . . the prevailing conception of justice deprives her or him of the chance to express a grievance in terms the system will understand . . . narratives provide a language to bridge the gaps in imagination and conception that give rise to the different (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 78).

After understanding this, I felt that telling my participants' stories well would require me to work harder in seeing the themes and concepts of race and racism that they were not yet aware of. This required constantly supporting my assumptions with prior research and the themes that came from the data gathered. So, I consulted Baldwin again and found confidence in his words that "A child cannot . . . know how vast and how merciless is the nature of power, with what unbelievable cruelty people treat each other" (Baldwin, 1992, p. 27). Thus, Chapter 5 discussed how the themes were directly related to their disciplinary experiences but did not discuss the research questions. The research questions are critical to understanding how the educational institution's power shapes their experiences.

In the final chapter, I discuss how the data informed the research question as well as how key findings make contributions to the current body of knowledge. This study was critical because there are still new discoveries and developments happening within the school context that involve discipline, despite the abundance of research covering the topic. My study revealed new insights and implications regarding the research topic, but also gave way to new questions that need to be explored. I discuss all this in chapter seven.

Chapter VII

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My research questions guided this study by asking how disciplinary experiences impact African American male students throughout their middle school years. The answers to the research questions were translated into the key findings, highlighting that the participants' lived experiences were negatively impacted by their school experiences. The Disciplinary Progression Model captured the nuances of their experiences by contributing a conceptual way of understanding how the participants coped and survived under conditions of bias and racist treatment. The themes helped clarify and define that this study found that the participants' experiences changed as they progressed from one grade to the next, discipline occurred more often, and their awareness of the biases and themselves became more prominent. This offered profound implications and assertions from the data that suggested the cumulative effects of the participants' experiences informed practices and policies that need to be addressed to create an equitable system in education. In the following sections, detail is provided about each of the aforementioned topics, and the chapter ends with a discussion regarding the limitations of the research as well as recommendations for the future and a final reflection of the work.

Answers to the Research Questions

The data presentation section of this study highlighted the importance of framing the data through the lens of the research questions. While a thematic analysis provided

deeper meaning, the direct connection to the research questions, as the foundation of this inquiry, remains paramount. This section explicitly addresses this connection.

Research Question 1: Social, Familial, and Educational Experiences

Research Question 1 explored the participants' social, familial, and educational experiences and their meaning for the participants themselves. The themes indicate that while early school experiences are marked by care and support, a critical shift occurs as discriminatory practices emerge, undermining students' trust in the system. The three themes directly address this question. Theme 1 reveals the initial positive early school experiences characterized by caring and supportive teachers and a welcoming school environment. This shifted around fifth grade for all participants. As they matured and became more aware, their perception of the school environment transformed into one of perceived unfairness, bias, and punitive treatment disproportionately aimed at them, in contrast to their peers of different racial or gender identities. Their shared stories illustrated this shift, highlighting incidents where teachers were perceived as overly punitive, unfairly targeting them, denying them basic freedoms, and failing to support them and show care. This is crucial for understanding how their perception of the school setting evolved from positive to negative.

Furthermore, their shared stories consistently revealed expectations of fairness, care, and support—Theme 2. Incidents in which these expectations were unmet underscored the injustices, biases, and abuse they experienced. The inconsistent application of rules, favoritism towards certain students, and the failure to address bullying or their educational needs provided significant insight into the lived experiences of the participants.

Theme 2 offered additional insights, revealing that their educational experiences did not solely define their character; their social and familial support systems played a significant role in mitigating the oppressive practices of school-based discipline. Their families instilled honesty, positivity, and resilience. Batman mentioned his mother and sister as a crucial support system, holding him accountable for his actions through a gentler approach of encouraging improvement in school. Tarzan's mother emphasized the importance of appropriate behavior and actively guided him, for example, concerning music choices. Flash highlighted the role of his family in teaching him respect, and basketball provided a positive outlet. Each participant reflected on their mistakes, demonstrating a desire for self-improvement. The crucial insight regarding Research Question 1 is that the interplay of social, familial, and educational experiences shaped the participants' understanding of the challenges they faced as Black males labeled as "troublemakers," yet they maintained an optimistic view of the future and the potential of education to achieve their goals.

Research Question 2: Influences on Self-identity and Self-concept

In research question 2, I was particularly interested in what aspects of the context in which the participants were raised and schooled influenced them, and in their attributes of self-identity and self-concept. I explored how participants' responses to the abusive nature of school discipline shaped their self-perception and led to the development of survival strategies. The oppressive school environment, characterized by disproportionate discipline and the misuse of the STAR program (an alternative educational program), significantly impacted their self-identity and self-concept. Participants adapted by developing coping mechanisms to navigate this challenging context and negotiate their

self-expression within an environment perceived as hostile to their Black identities. Furthermore, the normalization of negative experiences, often stemming from an acceptance of their inevitability as Black male students, was a recurring theme.

For instance, "Batman," a participant who had experienced incarceration, normalized his negative experiences, accepting that he was perceived as a "bad kid" and consequently expected restrictions of privileges, even without having committed a recent infraction. He expressed a desire to be a "teacher's pet" but recognized this as an unattainable goal, having seemingly permanently forfeited that privilege. He internalized the belief that teachers were always right and that the school system operated as a unified entity against him: "it's the whole system . . . they work together." His flat affect during the interviews underscored the sense of powerlessness he felt within this system.

In contrast, "Tarzan" responded to the negative aspects of his schooling by embracing a "tough man" identity. He found a sense of agency within the STAR program, viewing it as a space where he could showcase his strength and resilience. He identified with the authority figures within STAR, glorifying the program and its military-style structure: "I like to go workout . . . I can take it." His enthusiastic and positive portrayal of alternative educational settings contrasted sharply with the perspectives of the other participants.

Flash felt the need to chop himself in half—a strategy of self-preservation through compartmentalization. He utilized basketball as a means of coping with the oppressive environment, using participation in the sport to avoid disciplinary actions and to find a sense of happiness and agency. He framed basketball as a form of positive discipline, a way to stay out of trouble.

In some form or another, each of them found a way to cope with the oppressive discipline. Each participant developed a coping strategy to manage their pervasive disciplinary realities— normalized (Batman), embraced (Tarzan), or escaped (Flash). Hence, as I thought about it and at times questioned it, the very names they chose for this research held meaning in how their experiences shaped their identities. The selection of these pseudonyms, initially presented as a method of protecting participants' identities, proved to be a significant factor in understanding the way in which their experiences shaped their self-perception. I believe the participants' experiences with disciplinary practices influenced the research pseudonyms they chose. Consequently, the pseudonyms chosen by the participants provide further insight into these coping mechanisms and their relation to identity.

When I met with each one of the participants, I explained to them that they could pick any name they wanted so that their identities would be protected from any retaliation or anyone knowing what they said during the study. I offered superheroes as an example. Through the study, I wondered why each one of them chose the names they did, but did not consider the implications of identity until now. When I think about their chosen pseudonyms, each of their choices provides insights into how they mitigate the oppression of discipline and cope with it.

The choice of "Batman" is particularly revealing. Batman, who frequently wore dark clothing, concealed his face with a hoodie, and preferred nighttime interactions, embodied the secrecy and concealment associated with this fictional character. His extensive knowledge of street crime and gang activity reflects his prolonged experience with the oppressive aspects of his environment, an experience exacerbated by his

incarceration. His subdued demeanor and detailed suggestions for educational reform further reflect the profound impact of his experiences.

"Tarzan" represents a different form of resistance. His lack of awareness of societal expectations, described as "unconditioned," and his immediate, often violent, reaction to perceived threats align with the fictional Tarzan's rejection of civilized society in favor of his natural environment. His mother told him not to go to school and act like a monkey, but he did not really know what that meant. However, he did understand in a primitive way how to defend himself against invaders of his space, being bullied. The slightest offense would set him off and cause him to react with violence. He referred to it as "spazzing out." I recalled during the focus group how Batman and Flash perceived Tarzan. After talking for some time and glorifying his response to teachers and fighting others, Batman and Flash seemed troubled by his unconditioned behaviors and relayed that he had better chill. Yet, Tarzan defended his actions and position. He insisted that he had to protect himself and unapologetically, who he is. In many ways, Tarzan expressed the idea that nothing was wrong with him, and despite his mother describing those actions as acting as a monkey, he would defend the apes from all intruders—thus, the choosing of the name Tarzan held meaning in that the fictional character of Tarzan did not understand the civilized world that sought to intrude on the only thing he knew—the unconditioned, uncivilized world of his kind being left alone, to be who they are. His violent responses necessary form of self-protection.

"Flash's" choice of pseudonym underscores his strategy of avoidance. When interviewing Flash, he wanted to find the quickest answer to the questions. Open-ended questions were usually taken as too complex or complicated to answer, and sought to

evade them as much as possible. After reflecting, I reasoned that this was not a dig or expression of not participating in the research, but a learned behavior. His preference for concise answers and his reluctance to engage in extended reflection highlight his attempt to minimize conflict and expedite interaction. Flash shared that he did not argue back with teachers or express himself. During one of the interviews, he talked about not asking one of his teachers for help because she always reprimanded him for asking clarifying questions during class. Flash was all about expedience, the quickest way to get somewhere or do something with little resistance. It was easy to split away from any conflict if he could learn to leave himself when needed. His chosen superhero's speed represents his attempts to evade or overcome challenges, a strategy that proved less effective in situations requiring sustained engagement and reflection. This is representative of Flash, the superhero, because speed is the prime advantage—to be able to travel to safety as quickly as he can.

Their individual experiences significantly shaped their self-identities in ways that were often unconscious, requiring careful interpretation. Though their self-identity was shaped primarily by their school experiences, their self-concept was strongly influenced by their familial relationships, offering a protective contrast to the negative experiences they faced at school. Their families offered support, understanding, and unconditional love, providing a buffer against the negative impacts of school and distancing them from their self-concepts. Each one of them was nurtured by their mothers and grandmothers at home. These influencers were the ones who saw the behaviors as mistakes and not themselves. They contributed their positive energy and exhibited appreciation of their relationships and support from their families, namely their mothers. All the participants

shared that home was a safe place from school, and their mothers were a source of support. This is why Theme 2 speaks to their resiliency and positive outlooks despite their disciplinary issues at school.

Research Question 3: Influence of Experiences on Worldviews

The participants' experiences in both school and home environments shaped their worldviews, leading them to perceive the world as a complex interplay of fairness and unfairness. They witnessed inconsistencies in how they and their peers were treated, but also identified safe spaces that prevented them from adopting a completely cynical outlook on the world. This held them closer to reality and not accepting that the world—at large—was a bad and unpromising place.

Both Batman and Flash recognized the potential value of education and viewed school as a means to achieve success and higher education. Tarzan, in contrast, perceived school as only one aspect of life. He saw the charity of wealthy people in the world and felt like school was only a part of his experiences, but not everyone's, everywhere. All three participants recognized both the positive and negative manifestations of authority. While acknowledging the unfairness experienced at school, they also acknowledged fair and unfair practices in society at large. Their comprehension of appropriate punishments for wrongdoing was evident in their belief that authorities must uphold the law, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of justice, relaying that judges and police must do their jobs when people break the laws and do bad things. However, they also exhibited cynicism toward societal institutions beyond the school, indicating an awareness of power imbalances and racial bias. Despite the negativity associated with their school experiences, they retained a belief in the broader value of education, appreciating positive

relationships with teachers and peers. All shared that education was a means to their success.

Altogether, the data comprehensively addresses all three research questions, revealing the complex interplay of social, familial, and educational experiences in the lives of the participants. When taken together, the research offered new insights into the topic of disproportionate school-based discipline in that the research questions helped to understand the changes that happened over time as the participants lived through their negative experiences. Because of the multiple dynamics in life and social interactions not being static, the findings provide a complicated understanding of school-based discipline, not one that could be simply explained in cause and effect. The next section discusses those findings.

Key Findings

African American males are disproportionately disciplined and suspended from school, increasing their likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system and hindering their socioeconomic advancement (Workman & Wake, 2021). While research extensively documents racial disparities in urban and suburban contexts, a critical gap was identified in Rolland's (2011) work that indicates a lack of understanding of the lived experiences of African American male students in rural settings, particularly within the historically and culturally complex landscape of the rural South. My research study addressed this gap by employing a qualitative approach. It involved three individual interviews with each of the young men and a subsequent focus group where they came together to discuss their lived experiences as African American male students. Each had been suspended in middle school at least once in rural Georgia, a perspective often

overlooked. Each interview explored their middle school disciplinary experiences from a different angle: early years, present experience, and meaning-making. We discussed their experiences of at least one out-of-school suspension (OSS), hoping to better understand, as Seidman (2013) suggested, "how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation" (p. 37).

The study exposed the often-hidden mechanisms through which racism and bias shape educational outcomes. It moved beyond simplistic explanations of misbehavior to reveal the complex interplay of supportive and oppressive forces that influence student identity and engagement. Despite the negative impacts of biased discipline being mitigated by strong familial support and adaptive coping mechanisms, the findings demonstrate that African American male students initially encounter nurturing environments, fostering an initial sense of belonging and hope, but as they progressed through the grades, particularly around the pivotal fifth-grade year, these positive experiences tended to give way to increasingly negative disciplinary encounters. This shift was particularly pronounced in settings where racial disparities were deeply embedded in the institutional culture, which did appear to be the case for my participants in the rural South. This shift marked the beginning of the three young men's journey through what I created and call the "Disciplinary Progression Model," a process of increasing disengagement and eventual acceptance of alternative educational settings.

Furthermore, the development of the Disciplinary Progression Model provides a structured framework for understanding the evolution of disciplinary experiences. The model identifies key stages from initial engagement to critical turning points and eventually adaptive coping, which offers a roadmap for potential interventions. This

conceptual tool is instrumental in linking individual narratives to broader systemic patterns.

The Disciplinary Progression Model

As cited earlier, “stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 92). As I listened to the young men’s stories, I recognized in them an approach I’ve seen other young men use when it seemed the world wasn’t going to treat them right, so they had to find a way through their experiences. As I pondered what my participants shared, what I had been through myself as a young African American male, and what the youth in the juvenile justice system in which I worked told me, I recognized that their stories spoke to a concept not captured or discussed in ways I had read or heard before. At this point, I began to put together a model that I believe speaks to the coping mechanisms that are often employed. I identified four coping mechanisms and created the Disciplinary Progression Model to conceptualize what I observed relevant to their lives amid school-based discipline. The model demonstrates how these young men worked through disengagement, avoidance, normalizing, and finally acceptance. The model is a framework that maps the evolution of disciplinary experiences over time. It unfolds through several distinct phases, beginning with a sense of unfairness and escalating into a complex process of coping with perceived injustice—all phrases are connected to the themes I discovered in this study. In the upcoming section, I will explain how the participants coped with their disciplinary issues through this model.

Disengagement

The first coping mechanism that became clear from the data was disengagement. The participants felt alienated and disaffected, losing motivation to engage fully in school and with the teachers. The participants began to withdraw emotionally and intellectually from school activities. This manifested as decreased participation in class, declining academic performance, and a general loss of interest in learning. The school became a source of frustration and anger, rather than an opportunity for growth. This is evidenced by Tarzan's statement:

I don't want to go to school, it just makes me mad . . . I know I love to participate. I love to do tests sometimes to help me. If I know it is easy, I'll do test. But if it be confusing with the big words . . . I'll get mad and I'll just start holding my heart and I just started crying.

Similarly, Batman expressed a sense of disconnection:

I feel like I belong in school but sometimes they don't want me there. It be like the smallest things. They be like oh we fixing to send you to alternative school. You doing this or you doing that, you finna get wrote up, you finna get sent home. They do too much over the littlest things.

Flash's experience with a teacher who "would sit down and not even teach" further exemplified this disengagement from the learning process. With intensification of the disengagement, the young men moved closer and closer to the next step in the model—avoidance.

Avoidance

As disengagement deepens, the participants started to show more avoidance of school and conflictual situations. This involved actively trying to circumvent negative interactions with teachers or the school environment. The school became a place where the participants felt like they could not win despite their best intentions and behaviors. Active strategies were employed to minimize contact with the negative school environment. This involved absenteeism, creating excuses to avoid school, and deliberately provoking disciplinary actions as a means of escape from an unpleasant classroom experience. Batman described this avoidance by stating:

I don't be wanting to go, some days I just wake, I don't want to go to school. All types of stuff. I used to feel like they didn't want me there cause all the way they used to treat me. They'll be like, oh he ain't nothing but trouble. Sometimes I'll be going getting up, get ready and I'll get mad but I don't even want to go to school no more. Probably couldn't find the right shirt. Probably can't find socks. I don't even want to go to school, make my whole day go down. Some days when I didn't want to be at school and the teacher would get on my nerves, I do something to get sent home or either I act sick. Cause I ain't want to be there. Cause when teacher started get on my nerve, I don't even want to be in her class. I don't even want to be at school.

Tarzan similarly recounted avoiding confrontation: "They bring all their negativism. I walk out of their class. No hesitation. So I won't get myself back in alternative school."

Flash recalled that he avoided conflict by: "Sometimes, I did want to say something, but I

think before I speak, so that wasn't the best move. It would've got worse for me." This avoidance, however, often led to further disciplinary actions, reinforcing the cycle and leading to the belief that this is just the way it is, no matter what I do.

Normalization

As the cycle of negative interactions continued, students begin to normalize the unfair treatment. Students started to accept—even internalize—the notion that unfair treatment is inevitable. This is not an acceptance of the inherent fairness of the system but a rationalization of its inherent biases and unfairness they perceived. They expected to be unfairly targeted and punished and adjusted their expectations accordingly. Tarzan's acceptance of suspension as "more breaks" exemplified this:

When I get suspended, I feel happy. I don't do nothing. Yeah, I feel way better. Because I get to go home, get to be a big bag. A big bag. It's like when you eat how much food you want. I get to get my rest. I get to watch YouTube and probably looked at some YouTube sports and do some workout. Go outside, get some fresh breeze. Probably do a lot of stuff without nobody keep nagging at you.

Batman also demonstrated this normalization:

I was in ISS a lot. Because she didn't like me so I wasn't doing nothing in her class. I just go to my other homeroom teacher and do my work in the afternoon. I don't say nothing. If I do say something like that, she going to hold grudges. Just teachers just going to be teachers basically. They going to do what they want to do, they can. We can't do nothing about it.

Flash observed similar racial disparities but internalized the experience as a normalized part of the school experience. Flash recounted:

Blacks, we get treated sometimes differently than some Whites. It ain't never happened to me, but I see it. This Black kid had asked could he go to the bathroom? And she said no. The White kid had asked the same hour in the same class, can they go to the bathroom, she said yes. I felt like that was unfair. Why do Black kids have to get treated differently? It doesn't make sense to me.

By accepting unfairness and discriminatory practices as normal ways teachers handed Black boys, participants began to accept the treatment as part of their experiences, believing no one would change it for them.

Acceptance

This final stage represents a complete shift in perspective from where they started at a young age, enjoying school. Students embraced alternative schooling options like alternative schools or ISS as preferable to the main school environment. They did not necessarily accept the unfairness of the system and believe it to be okay, but they accepted the inevitability that there was not a place for them in it. Alternative educational settings were viewed by them as less punitive or more accommodating even though the intent was to punish them with hoping to “fix” them. Their acceptance wasn't necessarily because alternative settings are superior in terms of educational quality, but because they offer a refuge from the perceived harassment and injustice. In some cases, they even found aspects of these alternative settings, like the increased autonomy and lack of pressure, to be preferable. This stage reflects a deep-seated disillusionment with

mainstream education and a belief that the system fundamentally works against them.

Tarzan dramatically illustrated this:

I think alternative school is better for kids to be in there. Like kids like me because you won't get in trouble and sometimes they'll help you on your test and get extra food I would rather be in STAR and just work out. Cause I think it's better for me.

Batman echoed this sentiment:

Teachers in regular schools, they don't really like to help students with their work. But alternative school, they'll help sometimes Yeah, at first I was mad, I just got suspended. But then after I started getting suspended, I actually started liking going home. So I started going along with it.

Even though they expressed disapproval of the unfair treatment in the traditional school setting, the alternative becomes their preferred choice during the acceptance stage. This highlights their adaptation to a system that they perceived as consistently biased against them. Batman's final statement: "So it ain't nothing you can do about it. It really ain't. I'm going to say it really ain't, really, ain't no escape. Ain't nothing I can do about it. I got to accept the fact I'm Black, things going to come with it," tragically sums up this stage of resigned acceptance.

The participants' experiences exemplify cognitive dissonance. As described by Bonior (2016), cognitive dissonance is:

When we have two simultaneous and seemingly incompatible thoughts, we will do what we can to minimize the discrepancy by adjusting our thoughts accordingly. We don't like the discomfort that the incompatibility

creates, and so we are motivated to get rid of it, even if we have to change what we believe. These thoughts can involve our attitudes and beliefs, our observations, or even our acknowledgment that we are engaging in certain behaviors. When the brain catches the discrepancy, we become uncomfortable. And so we search for a way to make the discrepancy go away. (p. 160)

For the participants, the discomfort came from the conflict between their belief in fairness and equality and their lived experiences of systematic bias and unfair treatment. This dissonance drove their progression through the Disciplinary Progression Model, from initial disengagement to ultimate acceptance of a flawed system. Their coping mechanisms—avoidance, normalization, and acceptance—are not signs of passivity but rather ways of navigating a system that consistently failed to meet their expectations of fairness. While the overarching issue of systemic racism remained implicit, their experiences highlighted the tangible impact of biased disciplinary practices on their emotional well-being, academic engagement, and future prospects.

Meanwhile, this perceived injustice precipitated a progression through several stages of disengagement from the school environment. These stages, which represent a coping mechanism in response to the cognitive dissonance caused by the discrepancy between the ideal of a fair school system and their lived experience, can be defined as a dynamic process reflecting an attempt to resolve the cognitive dissonance created by the discrepancy between their expectations of fairness and equality and the realities of their experiences. While lacking a full understanding of systemic racism, these students possess a sharp awareness of injustice and demonstrate remarkable resilience in

developing survival mechanisms within a system designed, they feel, to marginalize them. Their narrative highlighted the urgent need to address not just individual teacher behavior but systemic issues of racial bias and inequity within the educational system.

The model's strength lies in its ability to capture the complexity of these experiences in a structured format. It synthesizes diverse elements—from early positive interactions to later experiences of discrimination—into a single framework that is both descriptive and analytical. This expanded understanding is essential for developing targeted interventions and policy reforms because the model outlines a clear progression from initial engagement with positive educational experiences to later stages marked by negative disciplinary practices and, finally, the emergence of adaptive coping strategies. Each stage represents a critical juncture where the cumulative impact of systemic bias reshapes the students' perceptions and responses. This synthesis is essential for drawing meaningful conclusions about the nature of school discipline and its long-term effects on marginalized students.

By mapping the progression from early engagement to later experiences of systemic bias and the development of coping strategies, the model provided a clear framework for understanding where a student is in the process of disengagement from school. Because the model identifies key turning points, particularly around the fifth grade, that signal the onset of discriminatory practices and the need for intervention, it is both a tool for understanding the trajectory of students' experiences with school discipline and an articulation of the stages of coping mechanisms in response to oppressive racial behaviors and discriminatory disciplinary actions from teachers and the school environment as a whole.

Perceived injustices lead to the distinct phases of the Disciplinary Progression Model. Disengagement, the initial response to perceived unfairness, is marked by a growing detachment from the educational process. This disengagement progresses into avoidance. The participants actively sought ways to escape the negative school environment. As the negative experiences accumulated, a process of normalization began, where the participants started to accept the injustices as an inescapable reality. They came to see disciplinary actions not as a consequence of misconduct but as a predictable outcome of being a Black male in the school system.

The final stage, acceptance, represented a profound shift. The negative experiences have become so ingrained that the participants began to view alternative settings, such as alternative schools and suspension, as preferable to the mainstream educational environment. This was not necessarily an endorsement of the system, but rather a pragmatic acceptance of its realities. It was a strategy for navigating a system perceived as inherently biased, a system that rendered their voices and experiences marginalized. The seemingly paradoxical preference for alternative settings underscored this struggle to reconcile the idealized tenets of the American educational system with the harsh reality of their experiences as Black male students. While the racial contract remains largely implicit through deep-rooted oppression, its impact is unmistakably evident in their journey through the Disciplinary Progression Model.

Ultimately, the key findings underscore the urgent need for systemic reform in school discipline. The experiences documented in this study reveal that discriminatory practices are not isolated incidents but are embedded within the structures of educational

institutions. The basis of these findings offers support to prior theory in a few ways, which I discuss next.

Theoretical Support

This study made several significant theoretical contributions through its application of critical race theory (CRT) to the analysis of school discipline. By foregrounding the concepts of the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, and counternarratives, the study provided a nuanced understanding of how systemic bias operates within educational institutions. It demonstrated that disciplinary practices are deeply intertwined with broader societal power structures.

The integration of the Disciplinary Progressive Model into the literature was another major contribution. This model offers a new lens for understanding the dynamic progression of disciplinary experiences and the development of coping mechanisms among marginalized students. It bridges the gap between individual experiences and structural forces, providing a coherent framework for future research and policy interventions.

Furthermore, the study challenged deficit-based narratives by centering the voices of African American male students. Their counternarratives, rich in detail and resilience, provided empirical support for more positive perspectives on marginalized identities. This approach not only enriches theoretical discussions but also lays the groundwork for transformative practices in education.

In summary, the theoretical contributions of this study lie in its innovative use of CRT, the development of the Discipline Progress Model, and the amplification of

marginalized voices. These contributions offer valuable insights for both academic inquiry and practical policy reform aimed at addressing systemic inequities in education.

Implications of the Study and Assertions

“The future must be a construction supported by [humankind] in the present” (Fanon, 1967, p. 255).

During this study, I believe I did what Bell (1992) asked: “find it in the lives of our oppressed people who defied social death as slaves and freedmen, insisting on their humanity despite a social consensus that they were ‘a brutish sort of people’” (p. 245). Through reporting my participants’ goals, dreams, expectations, resiliency, and belief in viewing the world as fair and good, I reflected on their humanity despite the labels that have been historically cast upon them. They are not what they have been labeled, and this study offers that counternarrative to the conversation by highlighting that there is value and hope in us turning the tide for the sake of African American males and their futures. However, I agree with Fanon (1967) that we must begin to construct the path toward a better future now. This study allowed me to gain insights on how we can influence practices, policies, and future research through identifying research implications and assertions derived from the data.

The implications of this study extend beyond the realm of school discipline and have the potential to influence broader social change. At its core, the research challenged dominant narratives that depict African American male students as inherently problematic, instead highlighting their resilience, agency, and capacity for self-determination. By amplifying counter-narratives, the study contributed to a more balanced understanding of racial dynamics in educational settings. It is complicated and

there is enough blame to go around, but if the environment is not conducive to positive changes, then we will not trend towards improvements. Plainly, the educational system has a responsibility to do a better job.

Moreover, the study underscored the need for systemic reforms that address the root causes of racial bias across institutions. The patterns observed in school discipline reflect broader societal structures that privilege certain groups while marginalizing others, namely Black and brown students. Addressing these issues in schools can catalyze reforms in other sectors, such as criminal justice and employment.

The research also called for a reevaluation of how success is defined in educational settings. Rather than focusing solely on academic outcomes, policymakers and educators must consider the social, emotional, and psychological well-being of students. A holistic approach to education can help create more inclusive environments where all students have the opportunity to thrive.

After this research, I believe the data shows that we need to rethink disciplinary policies to ensure they do not disproportionately target African American male students. In essence, the study's findings have far-reaching implications that resonate with ongoing discussions about equity, justice, and systemic change in society. By advocating for policies that are informed by rigorous research and rooted in the lived experiences of marginalized students, the study contributed to the broader struggle for a more just and equitable future. The implications extend beyond theoretical analysis and have concrete ramifications for educational practice. Schools must move away from punitive approaches and adopt restorative, culturally responsive practices that support holistic student development. I believe early intervention in the education of youth, particularly at

the turning point identified in the Disciplinary Progression Model, is critical for preventing long-term disengagement.

Second, the study underscored the importance of strengthening familial and community ties as buffers against the negative impacts of school discipline. Educators should actively engage families and collaborate with community organizations to create a supportive network for marginalized students. This holistic approach to student wellbeing is essential for promoting equity in educational outcomes.

Third, the findings advocate comprehensive bias training for educators to raise awareness of implicit prejudices and counteract discriminatory practices. By equipping teachers with culturally responsive strategies, schools can foster a more inclusive environment where every student is treated with fairness and respect. This training is a necessary step toward rebuilding trust between marginalized students and the educational system. It is not enough to train teachers and educators practitioners in how to teach students if they are not training them how to relate to students. There is a disconnect between the forming learning and the social dynamics and it must be repaired.

Finally, the practical implications extend to policy reform at both the school and district levels. The study's insights provide strong evidence for systemic changes that address the root causes of racial bias in discipline. By adopting policies that promote equity and support restorative practices, educational institutions can create environments where every student can thrive. These reforms have the potential to transform the educational landscape, better school performance indicators, and contribute to broader social change to combat the effects of school-based discipline on African American male students.

I fundamentally believe that the effects are damaging not only to African American males but also to the vitality of our communities because this study drew out assertions, which describe in real ways what it means to be an African American middle school student who finds themselves in the clut of the disciplinary machinery. It is apparent that educators and policymakers have failed to realize how racial bias shapes disciplinary practices and policies. The assertions that follow lay out what it means to be an unfortunate benefactor of the racial bias, and building blocks to make better policies and improve practices.

The findings helped identify four prominent assertions derived from the data. First, the participants' descriptions of unfair treatment, lack of care, and unsupportive environments are not isolated incidents but rather symptoms of a deeper systemic issue rooted in racial bias and the unequal distribution of power. The young men felt powerless to change the system that perpetuated oppression and violence against them. Next, the cumulative effects of the negative experiences from racial biases led the students through a progression of coping mechanisms. Those coping mechanisms acted as barriers to their self-esteem and allowed them to retain a positive view of their lives, fostering a complex understanding of the world around them. Third, Black male students in rural schools could experience discipline as a form of exclusion from traditional academic settings, which offer them better opportunities in the future. The final assertion is that their stories underscore the critical need for a more nuanced and equitable approach to education, one that acknowledges and addresses the pervasive systemic issues that contribute to the disproportionate discipline and marginalization of Black male students.

Holding these assertions together, the claim that I am able to make from my research is that educational practices and policies have to reflect equity and inclusivity if there is any chance of the system being fair and just. It is an injury to society to keep doing the same and arrive at the same results from an institution whose stated purpose is to improve society. If this study means anything, it means a change is needed in our approach to educating the youth who are falling out of the system. Though my claims are bold, I do not pretend to overlook the limitations of my study, which I discuss in the following section.

Limitations of the Study

One of the primary limitations of this study was my own subjectivity and potential bias. Although I made efforts to minimize the influence of my personal views by critically reflecting on them in memos and discussions with my research committee and peer, Dr. Jada Frazier, my background as an African American male and former educator who has witnessed the unfair and discriminatory treatment of African American male students within the school system may have introduced some unavoidable bias. One area of particular concern is the development of the data categories. While the categories made sense to me, it is ultimately up to the knowledgeable reader to determine the relevance under academic scrutiny. What I mean by this is it is important to understand that biases work under our awareness and I, as well as I could, accounted for them but it is the critique of the reader that will ultimately decide the how my biases impacted the findings and assertions.

Additionally, this study is limited to the rural setting in which it was conducted. Unlike quantitative research, this qualitative study aimed to understand participants

within their specific context using purposeful sampling, not to generalize findings (Maxwell, 2013). Although my review of existing literature revealed a research gap in the exploration of school discipline experiences of African American males in rural contexts, this limited setting should be considered when interpreting the findings.

The nature of discipline is also a limitation I want to discuss. My participants were selected whose suspensions were primarily due to fighting. Although it was not my initial intention, this commonality among participants may have influenced the findings. It is possible that African American male students suspended for other reasons may have different perspectives on their experiences or cope differently than others.

Last, due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, this study was conducted in a community setting, namely outside of the school environment. Because I did not want the participants to face any retaliation, my committee and I decided to use a community program to assist with selecting and identifying participants. I was not in the school setting and could not observe the environment or interactions within it.

Recommendations

This study calls for a comprehensive approach that integrates empirical research, theoretical insights, and practical interventions to foster more equitable and inclusive educational environments. The findings underscore the urgent need for systemic reform in school discipline, urging educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders to reimagine disciplinary practices. Inherently, there are recommendations for policy, research, and future actions that I was able to identify as a way to utilize this study in a material way.

For Policy

Based on the study's findings and the insights offered by the Disciplinary Progression Model, several policy recommendations seemed appropriate. First, educational policymakers should prioritize the implementation of culturally responsive disciplinary practices that recognize the unique challenges faced by African American male students in rural settings. This includes shifting from punitive measures to restorative justice and mediation approaches.

Second, policies should support the development of comprehensive bias training programs for educators. By raising awareness of implicit biases and providing practical strategies to counteract them, such training can help ensure that disciplinary practices are applied fairly and consistently. This change is essential for reducing the disproportionate impact of discipline on marginalized students.

School systems should invest in initiatives that strengthen the link between families and schools. Given the significant role of familial support in mitigating the adverse effects of discriminatory discipline, policies that facilitate stronger family-school partnerships can have a lasting positive impact. Parent engagement programs, family counseling services, and community outreach initiatives are potential strategies that foster a collaborative approach to student well-being.

Lastly, policy reforms should be informed by ongoing research that uses frameworks like the Disciplinary Progression Model to identify key intervention points. Continuous evaluation and adaptation of disciplinary policies based on empirical evidence will help create adaptive, equitable systems that better serve all students. These

reforms should be part of a broader strategy aimed at dismantling systemic inequities and promoting inclusivity in education.

For Future Research

The findings of this study open several promising avenues for future research. One key area is the exploration of critical turning points in disciplinary practices, particularly around the fifth-grade mark. Further investigation into why this shift occurs could yield valuable insights into the dynamics of racial bias and institutional change. Future studies should aim to identify specific factors, such as changes in teacher behavior or school policies, that contribute to this turning point.

Another important area for research is the role of Black male teachers in mitigating the negative effects of discriminatory discipline. The data suggest that the presence of same-race educators positively impacts student engagement and self-concept. Investigating this relationship further could inform strategies for recruiting and retaining Black male teachers in rural schools, ultimately contributing to the broader effort to counteract systemic inequities.

Additionally, future studies should examine the interplay between school discipline and familial support. The unexpected finding that disciplinary practices sometimes strengthen child-parent bonds warrants deeper exploration of these dynamics. Research that focuses on how familial support mechanisms operate as protective factors could provide insights into long-term outcomes for marginalized students.

Finally, research should extend to evaluating interventions based on the Disciplinary Progression Model. By testing targeted interventions at critical turning points, future studies can provide empirical support for policy reforms aimed at reducing

discriminatory disciplinary practices. This line of inquiry is essential for translating the insights of this study into practical strategies that promote equity in educational settings.

For Future Action

Future action should build on the insights gained from this study by fostering collaboration among researchers, educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Such collaboration is essential for translating research findings into tangible changes that improve educational outcomes. Stakeholders must work together to develop and implement strategies that address the systemic issues identified in this study.

One key recommendation is to establish pilot programs that implement restorative justice practices and culturally responsive interventions in rural schools. These programs should be carefully monitored and evaluated, with lessons learned used to inform broader policy reforms. Such initiatives have the potential to transform the disciplinary landscape by offering more equitable alternatives to traditional punitive measures.

Additionally, there should be a concerted effort to amplify the voices of marginalized students in policymaking processes. Their lived experiences provide invaluable insights into the shortcomings of current practices and can guide the development of more inclusive policies. Empowering students to participate in educational reform is essential for creating systems that reflect their needs and aspirations.

Finally, continuous research is needed to evaluate the long-term impact of implemented reforms. Establishing longitudinal studies that track changes in disciplinary practices, student outcomes, and overall school climate will ensure that policies remain

responsive and effective. This commitment to ongoing evaluation is critical for sustaining progress toward a more equitable educational system.

Final Reflections

As I sat isolated and sheltering in place, distant from the outside world during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the volume of media flooding televisions and my phone, a new debate emerged about the importance of school in the lives of developing children. I was astounded to see so much support for getting students back to school and the supporting data that accomplished it, when I witnessed for years educational districts and court systems arguing for keeping out African American students because of disciplinary reasons. It almost seemed as if the reasons did not apply before or did not extend to the kids who were unredeemable because of their rule-breaking. I understood it to be the greatest act of hypocrisy I had witnessed in a long time. I understood that they were not talking about all students, namely Black and Brown students, because, as we often see, action is not important until there is a deficit acting upon the dominant culture. It was simply another act of white supremacy and oppression in America, to have the privilege of hypocrisy, not considering how, under different circumstances, those same positions still need to apply.

By dismantling the masks of white supremacy and oppression imposed upon Black male students, we can start to create educational spaces that truly embrace the diverse identities and experiences of all students. My participants' stories challenge conventional perspectives on school discipline and reveal the deep-seated impact of systemic bias on student identity and engagement. Ultimately, the voices of these students are reminders that educational reform is not only a matter of policy but also a profound

moral imperative. Their stories of struggle and resilience offer hope and serve as a call to action for creating systems that support every student's potential. The analysis, framed by CRT and synthesized through the Disciplinary Progression Model, offered counternarratives that emphasized resilience, agency, and transformative potential. The ongoing objective is to foster a future where every child truly has an equal opportunity to thrive. Mistaking these findings as purely academic would be a profound injustice to these students and a failure to address the systemic inequities that plague the American educational institution. As we move forward, continued research and collaborative efforts are essential for driving the transformative change needed in our schools.

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Appendix A
IRB APPROVAL



Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants

EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL REPORT

Protocol Number: 04501-2024 Responsible Researcher: Joshua Deriso
Supervising Faculty: Dr. Richard Schmetzing Co-Investigator: n/a
Project Title: A Qualitative Study of Male African American Students' Experiences in Rural Middle Schools.

Level of Risk: [X] Minimal [] More than Minimal
Type of Review: [X] Expedited [] Convened (Full Board)
Approval Categories: 6 & 7
Approval Date: 07.16.2024
Expiration Date: 07.16.2027

- Consent Requirements: [] Adult Participants - Written informed consent with documentation (signature).
[] Adult Participants - Written informed consent with waiver of documentation (signature)
[] Adult Participants - Verbal informed consent (Research Statement)
[] Adult Participants - Waiver of informed consent
[X] Minor Participants - Written parent/guardian permission with documentation (DocuSign permitted)
[] Minor Participants - Written parent/guardian permission with waiver of documentation (signature)
[] Minor Participants - Verbal parent/guardian permission
[] Minor Participants - Waiver of parent/guardian permission
[] Minor Participants - Written assent with documentation (signature)
[X] Minor Participants - Written assent with waiver of documentation (minor signature not collected)
[] Minor Participants - Verbal assent
[] Minor Participants - Waiver of assent
[] Waiver of some elements of consent/permission/assent

Comments:
You are required to seek approval of the IRB before amending or altering the scope of the project or the research protocol or implementing changes in the approved consent process/forms. You are also required to report to the IRB, through the Office of Sponsored Programs & Research Administration, any unanticipated problems or adverse events that become apparent during the course or as a result of the research and the actions you have taken.

Approval:
This research protocol is approved as presented. The approved consent form, bearing the IRB approval stamp and protocol expiration date is attached. If you prefer the original stamped consent, please email tmwright@valdosta.edu and the form will be sent via inter-office mail, or you may come by the OSPRA office to obtain the original.

Elizabeth Ann Olphie 07.16.2024
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator Date

Form Revised: 07.09.2024 - tw

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR RESEARCHERS:

If your protocol received expedited approval, it was reviewed by a two-member team, or, in extraordinary circumstances, the IRB Administrator, the Chair, or Vice-Chair of the IRB. Although the expeditors may approve protocols, they are required by federal regulation to report expedited approvals at the next IRB meeting. At that time, other IRB members may express any concerns and may occasionally request minor modifications to the protocol. In rare instances, the IRB may request that research activities involving participants be halted until such modifications are implemented. Should this situation arise, you will receive an explanatory communique from the IRB.

Protocol approvals are valid for three years unless otherwise noted. In rare instances, when a protocol is determined to place participants at more than minimal risk, the IRB may shorten the approval period so that protocols are reviewed more frequently, allowing the IRB to reassess the potential risks and benefits to participants. The expiration date of your protocol approval is noted on the approval form. You will be contacted no less than one month before this expiration date and will be asked to either submit a final report if the research is concluded or to apply for a continuation of approval. It is your responsibility to submit a continuation request in sufficient time for IRB review before the expiration date. If you do not secure a protocol approval extension prior to the expiration date, you must stop all activities involving participants (including interaction, intervention, data collection, and data analysis) until approval is reinstated.

Please be reminded that you are required to seek approval of the IRB before amending or altering the scope of the project or the research protocol or implementing changes in the approved consent process/forms. You are also required to report to the IRB, through the Office of Sponsored Programs & Research Administration, any unanticipated problems or adverse events that become apparent during the course or as a result of the research and the actions you have taken.

Please refer to the IRB website (<https://www.valdosta.edu/academics/graduate-school/research/office-of-sponsored-programs-research-administration/institutional-review-board-irb-for-the-protection-of-human-research-participants.php>) for additional information about Valdosta State University's human protection program and your responsibilities as a researcher.

Appendix B

EMAIL INVITATION TO SITE FOR PARTICIPATION

Date: February 08, 2024
Attn: Dewitt Harris, Boys Club Founder/CEO
Re: Boys Club (Americus, GA)

Study: The Rural Review: A Qualitative Study of Middle School African American Male Students' Experiences with and Perceptions of School-based Discipline in Rural Georgia
This study is hoping to recruit participants who will assist me in exploring the role of school-based discipline in impacting the lives of African American male middle school students in rural school systems. I would like to do this by investigating the lives of six youths between the ages of 10 and 17 years of age through one-on-one interview sessions and focus groups with them. It is my hope that you or someone else could assist in sharing the information to recruit youth who have been suspended from school at least once during their middle years. This would include providing a list of names of the students and their parents with contact information.

The research topic is African-American male middle school students' perception of their school discipline. This study seeks to understand how this population makes sense of their experience when they are disciplined. Furthermore, the goal is to understand if there are any connections between discipline and their beliefs about themselves, school, and the larger world. It is the goal to start and complete the fieldwork during the Spring Semester of 2024.

If you and/or a representative of your organization choose to participate, your name and the name of your organization will not be disclosed in my research documents. If you would like to participate, please provide a corresponding letter stating that you would provide a list of names of the students and their parents with contact information. If you have any questions regarding this study or would like to validate the study, please contact me at 229-401-8174 or jaderiso@valdosta.edu to learn more about the study or contact my supervising faculty and dissertation chair, Dr. Richard Schmertzinger at lschmert@valdosta.edu or (229) 333 – 5633.

Sincerely,
Joshua Deriso, Candidate

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Joshua Deriso at jaderiso@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu

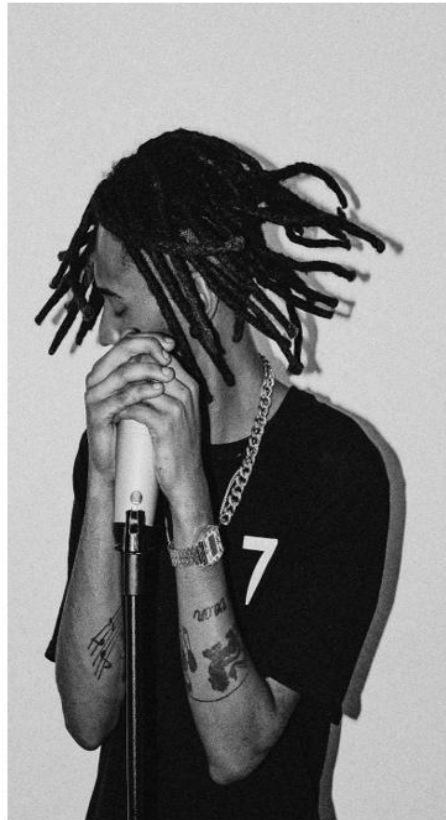
Appendix C
RECRUITMENT FLYER



Trouble in School?

I want to hear your side of the story!

"If you are in middle school and have been in trouble in school over the last year, I want you to be a part of this study."



Topic: African American male students' experiences with and perceptions of school-based discipline.

Purpose: I am researching the school discipline of African American male middle school students like you and hearing about your experiences or how you see things.

Participants will:

- Be interviewed one-on-one with a [researcher](#)
- Talk with other students about their [experiences](#)
- Have a chance to share your side of the [story](#)

Location

- Over 6 weeks, we will meet at a convenient place (TBA)

Are you eligible?

- Identify as a Black (African American) [male](#)
- In grades 6, 7, or 8
- Been in trouble at [school](#)
- Live in this area

If you're unsure if you meet the requirements, [call](#) or [email](#) a member of the study team:

Joshua Deriso,
Student at Valdosta State University
229-401-8174
jaderiso@valdosta.edu

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Joshua Deriso at jaderiso@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu

Appendix D

SURVEY TO SCREEN PARTICIPANTS

Survey: The Rural Review Info Sheet

We are conducting a study that investigates the lives of African-American males who experience disciplinary action during their middle school. The purpose for this survey is to gather information to make sure participants meet the criteria.

Please answer each question truthfully and to the best of your knowledge.

* Indicates required question

1. Name *
(First, Last)

2. Age *

3. Date of Birth *
(Month/Year) (ex. 01/2012)

4. Race *

Mark only one oval.

- African American or Black
 Hispanic
 Asian
 American Indian or Alaska Native
 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 Bi-racial (two or more race)

5. City and State of Residence *
(ex. Cordele, GA)

6. If you have ever lived anywhere other than current City and State, please tell us where. (City and State)

7. Have you ever been suspended from school while in middle school? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1vB8kqT0D8F0P_gdG6ZcVdGhL_ahgJm-pw4ed/

10

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1vB8kqT0D8F0P_gdG6ZcVdGhL_ahgJm-pw4ed/

20

2/12/24, 12:13 AM

Survey: The Rural Review Info Sheet

8. How many times have you been suspended? *

9. When was the last time you were suspended from school and what grade? *

10. What was the stated reason for your suspension?

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Google Forms

Appendix E

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS 1-3

Interview 1: Life History

1. I want to understand more about you, and how would you describe your childhood experience?
2. Describe what your relationships were like. At home? School? In your neighborhood?
3. Tell me about the first time you remember getting into trouble. At home? At school? In the neighborhood?
4. When you were younger, what did you think of yourself?
5. How did your surroundings (home, school, neighborhood) influence who you were then?
6. Were there a moment or time when you came to identify as Black or felt that you needed to? Tell me about that experience.
7. When you were a kid, say 6 to 10, what was getting into trouble? How would you describe it?
8. Tell me about any experiences you have had with authority figures or disciplinary actions.

Interview 2: Present Detailed Experiences

1. Today we are going to focus on your recent experiences. I want you to share with me the last time disciplinary action was taken against you. What happened that day? Who was involved? Tell me like you are telling one of your friends. Tell me all you can remember and all that you felt on that day.
2. Share with me a specific incident where a disciplinary experience affected your relationships. With peers? Parents? Teachers? Principals?
3. How do you cope with being suspended from school?
4. Did you internalize any of that as meaning it defined who you are as a person?
5. In terms of fairness, how do you experience the disciplinary actions you've faced?
6. What experiences you've faced helped you understand discipline, authority, and fairness in your daily life? as a child to your parents? a student to your teachers? and a community member?

Interview 3: Making Meaning: Reflection/Future Implications

1. How do you think your experiences with discipline have influenced your motivation and engagement in school?
2. Reflecting on your experiences with discipline, how do you think it has influenced your sense of identity and self-concept?
3. How do you think your experiences with discipline have affected your sense of belonging in your school and community?
4. How have your experiences with discipline influenced your perceptions of fairness and authority?

5. How do you think your cultural background or race has influenced your perceptions on discipline, fairness, and authority?
6. How do you think your past experiences with discipline have shaped your worldview?

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Joshua Deriso at jaderiso@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu

Appendix F
INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

Seidman's (2013) Interview Stages	RQ1: <i>What social, familial, and education-related experiences have middle school African American (AA) male students with a prior out-of-school suspension on their record had related to discipline and what meanings do they attribute to those experiences?</i>	RQ2: <i>What aspects of the context in which they were raised and schooled, begin to influence them and how—their self-identity and self-concept?</i>	RQ3: <i>How do experientially-based meanings of disciplinary practices influence AA middle school male students' construction of their worldviews in terms of authority, fairness, discipline, family, society, school, and community?</i>
Interview 1: Life History Central Question: Tell me about yourself, family, and your life.	I want to understand more about you, and how would you describe your childhood experience?	When you were younger, what did you think of yourself?	When you were a kid, say 6 to 10, what was getting in trouble to you? How would you describe it?
	Describe what your relationships were like. At home? School? In your neighborhood?	How did your surroundings (home, school, neighborhood) influence who you were then?	Tell me about any experiences you have had with authority figures or disciplinary actions.
	Tell me about the first time you remember getting into trouble. At home? At school? In the neighborhood?	Were there a moment or time when you came to identify as Black or felt you needed to? Tell me about that experience.	
Interview 2: Present Detailed Experiences Central Question: I want you to tell me about a day when you got in trouble at school.	Today we are going to focus on your recent experiences. I want you to share with me the last time disciplinary action was taken against you. What happened that day? Who was involved? Tell me like you are telling one of your friends. Tell me all you can remember and all that you felt on that day.	Share with me a specific incident where a disciplinary experience affected your relationships. With peers? Parents? Teachers? Principals?	What experiences you've faced helped you understand discipline, authority, and fairness in your daily life? as a child to your parents? a student to your teachers? and a community member?
		How do you cope with being suspended from school?	
		Did you internalize any of that as meaning it defined who you are as a person?	
Interview 3: Making Meaning (Future)	How do you think your experiences with discipline have influenced your motivation and engagement in school?	Reflecting on your experiences with discipline, how do you think it has influenced your sense of identity and self-concept?	How have your experiences with discipline influenced your perceptions of fairness and authority?
		How do you think your experiences with discipline have affected your sense of belonging in your school and community?	How do you think your cultural background or race has influenced your perspective on authority and discipline?
			How do you think your past experiences with discipline have shaped your worldview?

Appendix G

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP

Focus Group 1:

So today, let's talk about who we are!

So, could any one of you start us off by telling us about yourself?

What makes you, well, you?

What things around us help us know who we are?

Does our schools help us know who we are?

What about when we get in trouble in school?

Can you share any personal experiences you've had with discipline?

So today, let's talk about our experiences.

Could any one of you start us off by telling us about your most memorable day at school in the last year?

Thinking about that day, what happened?

Take a moment to think about what that day means to you now. Why does it stand out to you as important?

Does that day say anything about how you behave when you in school?

Can you share any personal experiences you've had with discipline?

Can you discuss any experiences where you felt unfairly targeted or disciplined at school?

Can you discuss any positive or negative experiences you've had with authority figures at school?

How do you think discipline affects our relationships with teachers and peers?

How does race impact how you think others see you? School? How others might see you?

Have you observed any differences in how discipline is administered to students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds?

So today, let's talk about our future.

Could any one of you start us off by telling us what we want to do for money once we are older?

How did you come to want to do that?

Does school have an impact on you deciding this way to make money? What role does education play?

How do you think our experiences with discipline shape our perceptions of ourselves and our future opportunities?

What do you believe are the consequences of disciplinary actions for African American male students in the long term?

How do you think disciplinary practices impact our views on authority, fairness, and community? What about our relationships with authority?

What do you believe are the biggest challenges facing African American male students regarding discipline in our school? What are some causes of disciplinary issues among African American male students in our school?

How do you think our school environment could be improved to better support African American male students in disciplinary matters?

What suggestions do you have for making disciplinary practices more equitable and effective for all students, particularly African American males?

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to

Joshua Deriso at jaderiso@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu

Appendix H

RESEARCH STATEMENT OF CONSENT

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled “African American Male Students’ Middle School Perceptions and Experiences with School-based Discipline in Rural Georgia,” which is being conducted by Joshua Deriso, a student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of middle school African American male students who has at least one out-of-school suspension during the last year and their perception of the role that race plays in the school-based discipline. The interviews will be audiotaped to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Your parent or legal guardian must sign a consent form for participation in the study. Your returned consent form, signed by a parent or legal guardian will serve as an agreement between the researcher and the parent or legal guardian to participate in this research project, and consent is given.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Joshua Deriso at jaderiso@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu

Appendix I

READABLE CODING TETRIS ACTIVITY

Coding Tetris- Reduction Activity (the goal in the game of Tetris is to clear horizontal rows of blocks...the idea here is to reduce the data into categories that make sense)

Trust	Race	Fairness	Support	Self-perception	Experiences	Avoidance	Normalizing	Preference of alternative setting	Caring	Freedom	Hopeless	Expectations	Gender	Exclusion	Belonging	Honesty	Resilient	Barriers to success	Judgment	Student-Teacher Relations
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1. From the initial coding, I started out with 21 value codes from the data.

Experiences	Avoidance	Normalizing	Expectations	Student-Teacher Relations	Honesty	Resilient
Race	Preference of alternative setting	Exclusion	Fairness	Trust		
Gender	Freedom	Hopeless	Support	Self-perception		
Judgment	Belonging		Caring			
Barriers to success						

2. After, I moved the 21 codes into other codes that made sense to me, I came to 7 codes (noting that honesty and resilient did not seem to fit with the others).

Experiences	Student-Teacher Relations	Expectations	Avoidance	Normalizing	Participants Characteristics
Race	Trust	Fairness	Preference of alternative setting	Exclusion	Honesty
Gender	Self-perception	Support	Freedom	Hopelessness	Resilient
Judgment		Caring	Belonging		Positive self-concept
Barriers to success					