From School Pushouts to Graduating College: A Counter-narrative of Highly Educated
Black Males

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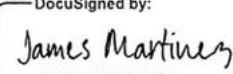
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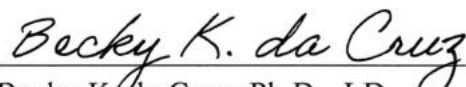Professor of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce Development

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ABSTRACT

To provide stories of how successful Black males made meaning of their educational experiences and offer current students motivation for focusing on their education, I conducted a qualitative study of four successful Black males from an urban area bordering a large southern city. Successful meant earning a college degree. Data collected through using Seidman's three-phase interview process was transcribed and then analyzed in MAXQDA software using in vivo, emotion, axial, and pattern coding. Sports, relationships, and goal setting were found to be the main reasons for academic success. However, seven themes were constructed from the data and presented as a counter-narrative: succeeding through sports, building relationships with school personnel, setting goals and positive attitudes for success, influencing others to succeed, learning from mistakes, choosing good people, and succeeding through friendships. A discussion of each theme synthesized participants' experiences to provide ways these Black males perceived their success, to inform educators of beneficial experiences, and to encourage young Black men to finish their education. Institutional racism was experienced and exposed in the counter-narrative.

Keywords: Black males, deficit thinking, counter-narrative, in vivo coding, axial coding, pattern coding, institutional racism

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dedication

All Black Males

You the reason for this. Dream. Dream big. People will doubt ya, and haters will
discourage ya, but you are a strong proud Black man. Own it. Stand tall and support ya
brothas. Apply the words of Tupac Shakur and Drake to your own life.

When writing the story of your life, don't let anyone else hold the pen. – Drake
(Ovsyannnykov, 2020)

Just cause you live in the ghetto doesn't mean you can't grow.
I know it seems hard sometimes
but remember one thing.
Through every dark night,
there's a bright day after that.
So no matter how hard it get,
stick your chest out,
keep your head up
and handle it. – Tupac Shakur (1995, track 3)

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

My study was born from personal experiences brought to realization during my first qualitative research class, which I took early in my doctoral degree program. While I knew race would be the overall topic of my study, the design and specific focus did not become apparent until I began to connect my personal experiences to scholarly literature. Background information ranging from my personal experiences to societal stereotypes and expectations shows how and why I designed my study. Realizing that I had unknowingly come to accept society's expectations and racism, I saw a problem I wanted to investigate. If this study is noted by the education community, the potential significance to education could be noteworthy. To introduce the study, I shared background information related to the state of Black males in the education system, a problem related to Black males and education, the potential significance of this work, my goal for doing it, and the research questions that guided it.

Background of Study

The academic success of Black males is important to me because I am a Black male; I am a teacher, and I am annoyed by what Patton (2012) referred to as the unending majoritarian stories rampant inside and outside of school presented about Black males that further promote stereotypes. Guy (2014) provided a chronological history of the development and progress of many stereotypes seen in both education and society. An entire chapter in *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education* was dedicated to

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issues facing Black males and to describing how Black males were commonly associated with crime, violence, poverty, and many more negative situations that could and often do occur (Guy, 2014). Specifically, in education, Guy (2014) pointed out Black males were often associated with academic failure, suspensions, unnecessary placement in special education and remedial services, classroom disruptions, and low expectations. On the other hand, Theune and Braddock (2016) noted Black males were often seen as great athletes who, at times, were passed along to the next class or grade level in order for them to participate in sports. These majoritarian stories continued even with the increase in Black student enrollment.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2019), the most recent school enrollment data disaggregated and provided by the Office of Civil Rights was from the 2017-18 school year showing 51.4% of U.S. students were male with 7.7% being Black males and 24.4% being White males. Black males have been and will continue to be a vital part of American society, and they have been oppressed in the American education system far too long (Patterson, 2014). As the only Black male teacher at a school in the same district in which I attended school, I observed the increase in Black male student enrollment and the ever-present inequalities that persist.

Typical of families in the area, I attended the designated public elementary, middle, and high schools that were districted for where I lived; however, I moved around within the area many times. I was that fast-running kid proficient at grabbing the candy I wanted at Walmart, running across the highway, and jumping the fence before anyone caught me. One day, however, I was trapped by store security at the exit. After my father finished with me, I was a different kid. No longer the stereotypical Black male,

my brief life of crime was over, and I succeeded at school. Sure, I still got in my fair share of trouble, but it was mild. Later, working with my nephew to learn the alphabet, I decided I wanted to be a teacher. Therefore, before I ever graduated from high school, I had my path before me: major in early childhood education, earn a master's degree in education, and finally, complete my doctoral degree. I did anything I had to do to achieve my goals. Raised in the same area as many other Black males who did not achieve academic success, I often wondered how my life was different from theirs.

Being a Black male, I adhere to Wellman's (1993) definition of racism "as a system of exclusion and privilege and as a set of culturally acceptable linguistic or ideological constructions that defend one's location in that system" (p. 25) because I believe racism to be a system encompassing more than merely prejudice or individual beliefs. Being a Black male, I am familiar with Wellman's (1993) description of the superior positions of Whites ideologically, culturally, and structurally in long established systems or operations, like education, that create and sustain racism and inequality known as *systemic racism* or *institutional racism*. Being a Black male, I have experienced the advantage of White ideology, culture, and structure over other groups. Black people verbally respond back to speakers, like preachers in church; however, in White-led schools, we receive consequences for being disrespectful by shouting out or interrupting the teacher. Giving consequences for cultural behaviors sends the message that our culture is wrong. In high school, I was questioned for walking in the hallway during class time; however, a White student also in the hallway was not. I wanted so much to confront the teacher who stopped me about why she did not stop the White student, but I was afraid I would be viewed as being disrespectful. Being a Black male, I frustratingly

dealt and still deal with the unconscious actions of others that indicate I have a lesser status, referred to by Sue et al. (2007) as *microaggressions*. Going to school as a Black male, I witnessed school operations privilege White people. I witnessed it, and I still see it.

As defined by critical race theorists and researchers, Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000), microaggressions are "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (p. 60). I believe microaggressions are the most prevalent expression of racism today, and I experienced microaggressions on many occasions in many places by many people. Some past microaggressions were only realized after I learned about critical race theory (CRT) and reflected upon my life. Unfortunately, one of the most painful places microaggressions occur for me is in an environment where we should be respected and led by people who care—school! During my master's program, I had an instructor in an online class who was hard but fair and very complimentary of my work. Therefore, I registered for another class with her. The first week of classes I had to speak with her on the phone. After hearing my voice and, I believe, realizing I was Black, I could do nothing right. She no longer believed my work was good enough, and, I had to drop the class. As a result, I lost my financial aid. That was one of several examples from my school experiences. After beginning my doctorate, I was asked in a surprised tone, "You're getting your doctorate? Ed.D. or Ph.D.?" When I answered Ed.D., one coworker said, "Oh, well, I heard the Ph.D. is harder." The downgrading tone of the remark is reflective of the thoughts that were behind it. I firmly believe the person making this remark was suggesting I was completing the Ed.D. program because I was not capable of completing

Ph.D. studies. It has been my experience as an educator for 7 years that most Black males have to deal with racism and microaggressions from White students and White staff throughout their school career; however, academic success is still possible. I believe academically successful Black males have lots of experiences that can help teachers understand the needs of Black male students, but their stories are rarely heard. Black males have been silenced far too long, and there is a wealth of information they could share with educators, who could learn from their experiences and perceptions; their insights could inform and improve educational practices. I believe educational practices require frequent modifications and improvements to positively impact achievement and increase test scores.

Every year when state end-of-grade standardized test scores arrive, it becomes clear Black students do not perform at the same level as White students (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.). In 2017, 37% of Black students in Georgia were proficient in English/Language Arts compared to 70% of White students; similarly, 33% of Black students were proficient in math compared to 68% of White students (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.). Someone needs to ask what we can do to increase the scores and academic achievement of Black students to help them succeed in school. For the 7 years I have been teaching, we have data discussions when the state achievement test scores return to identify the student subgroups achieving below expectations. Black students, especially Black males were discussed every year; however, only discussing low achievement but never modifying current practices wastes our time and the instructional time of Black students. The aforementioned scores show Black students' academic achievement remains well behind their White counterparts.

From my observations and conversations with teachers in a predominantly minority school, it appears many of them have lower expectations when it comes to behavior and scholastic achievement for their Black students than they do their White ones. I believe this is especially true for those boys entering the next grade with below grade level reading and math scores on assessments from the previous year than either Black girls or White students. I actually saw one teacher reassign seats by test scores with students having the lowest scores seated closest to the teacher; of course, Black students were closer to her. Likewise, I saw another teacher assign certain Black males a seat closer to her after verbalizing to me those students were known to be a problem. In another example, two teachers were discussing which families probably would not show up for the Meet and Greet at the beginning of the school year. The families to which they referred were of Black students who had low test scores. These examples explain how I concluded that some teachers had low expectations of Black students, specifically Black males. As explained more thoroughly later, *deficit thinking*, which is what I believe was driving these teachers, is the belief that an individuals' cultural group and cultural background (different from the norm) is to blame for lower achievement (Valencia, 2010). However, Delpit (2012), in her book *"Multiplication Is for White People": Raising Expectations for Other People's Children* about the failure of reform efforts to narrow the achievement gap (Carter, Welner, & Ladson-Billing, 2013) for poor Black students, discussed increasing expectations because students will perform when they are expected to perform and at the level to which they are expected to perform. A teacher's *deficit mindset* and low expectations of Black students, specifically males, may be part of the reason academic performance is poor (Alliman-Brissett & Turner, 2010). I believe an

unrealized deficit mindset stimulates low expectations for Black male students, which bolsters my belief that Black males must be a top priority in education.

In school and society, Black males are consistently labeled at-risk with horrifying stories being reported nightly on the news about violent crimes and school failure (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). In 2016, Smiley and Fakunle reported murders or shootings in the Black community from the night before as a constant headline on the news. Like in 2016, murders and shootings in the Black community still appear to be frequent stories when I turn on the nightly news, leading me to believe that negative news about Black males is intentional. Even when Black males were unarmed victims in situations they were referred to as *thugs,* a term believed to be used in place of the word *nigger* (Jackson, 1997; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). With all the negative publicity, I agree with Smiley and Fakunle (2016) when they pointed out many young Black men are simply meeting the behavioral expectations of society. I often wonder how hearing positive stories about the Black community, especially Black males, would impact others. By others, I am referring to the achievement of other Black males and the beliefs of those who are not Black. Throughout school, stories of influential Black men like Frederick Douglas, Thurgood Marshall, George Washington Carver, Martin Luther King Jr., and Barack Obama have been shared, but there are other Black men who graduate and become providers for families, educators, and businessmen to name a few—everything other than the stereotypes. Although very little has been heard about them, there are Black males who have taken a different path in education and in life. These men who completed their baccalaureate degrees and experienced triumphs and successes deserve the recognition of society. Warde (2007) conducted a study of 11 Black male graduate students using focus

group questioning and discussions to investigate factors leading to their success in completing a baccalaureate degree. He relayed stories of successful educational experiences and indicated having an epiphany about educational importance, having access to needed resources, having a mentor, and having resilience were significant contributors to the completion of their degree. Unlike the stories provided by Warde (2007), majoritarian stories or most stories about Black males are problematic for Black male achievement, and they negatively influence societal beliefs.

Statement of Problem

The problem is Black males perform lower than their White male counterparts in school; embracing the traditional norms of White culture, educational institutions have changed little, and stereotypes and racism persist negatively impacting the education and opportunities of Black males. This section briefly provides reasons why Black males' education is problematic. Black males have historically been portrayed in an undesirable manner all across American society (Guy, 2014; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016), and these negative portrayals harmfully impact academic achievement and behavior while promoting stereotypes. There are success stories of Black males that could potentially inspire others and provide valuable information for teachers regarding strategies and ideas for possible classroom use, but those experiences are rarely heard and negative stereotypes and low expectations persist. Martin, Martin, Gibson, and Wilkins (2007) directed a study to determine the impact participation in a 2-year after school program that provided tutoring, counseling, skills training, and cultural/recreational activities had on the public-school progress of 33 Black male students in an alternative school with a history of suspension or expulsion for aggressive behavior. Negatively impacting

academics, Black males in the Martin et al.'s (2007) study, like many other Black male students, had high instances of discipline referrals for classroom disruptions and aggressive behaviors; however, the researchers' results showed achievement increased and discipline issues decreased after participation in the after-school program. Delpit (2012) described a similar idea in her book about increasing expectations for Black males and incorporating their culture in the classroom. Causing lots of instructional disruptions for Black males, Delpit (2012) described how many Black male students are sent to the office or removed from the classroom for a behavior characteristic of their culture, like shouting out. Supported by current Georgia Milestone test scores (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.), Dyce (2013), in his article "Disappearing into the Unknown: The State of Black Male Achievement in American Public Schools," reported pervasive educational failure for the Black male subgroup began years ago. During my school career as a student and now an educator, I witnessed many Black male students struggle academically and behaviorally because of a lack of understanding of Black and White cultural differences. I believe educators' efforts to "fix" behaviors that are not deemed acceptable in the White cultural norm embraced by schools have prevented them from seeing and understanding the good choices and actions of Black males. In fact, having repeatedly heard at my current school the stereotype that Puchner and Markowitz (2015) studied about school personnel believing Black families did not care or value education, I can say that stereotype that helped set Black male students up to struggle in school did not exist in the families of those children with whom I worked or in my own family. This stereotype based on cultural differences and specific study are further discussed in the literature review. Matrenec (2011), who completed an ethnography of

15 Black males at a predominantly White affluent high school in an attempt to understand their perception of race and racism from their school experiences, found that Black males entered classrooms set up for failure because schools were designed and operated from the dominant White culture. Because Black males are the ones being repeatedly labeled as problems (Allen & White-Smith, 2014), we need to listen to how they view having that label. I hope to shed light on that with this study and thereby provide a significant contribution to the literature through Black male students' stories of educational experiences told in their own words and determine what helped make them successful.

Significance of this Study

Concluding their study of the experiences of 12 African American college males attending a predominantly White institution (PWI) in a post-racial and colorblind society, Robertson and Chaney (2017) suggested further research gathering stories of Black males from southern institutions could be significant in revealing how racism and microaggressions are experienced and expose continued systemic racism. My study will add to this literature. Current practices born from majoritarian stereotypes of Black males have failed to guide Black males to academic success; therefore, stories and experiences of academically successful Black males were used in this work to provide strategies and insights they found instrumental for their academic success while at the same time exposing racism still common in educational institutions. Specifically, by studying the perceptions and experiences of successful Black males pertaining to school and sharing their stories, educators could use the findings from these stories to provide a more beneficial academic experience for Black male students. It is hoped they will do so. With education being connected to all areas of life and all areas of life impacting

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education, experiences that influenced participants' success spanned societal, cultural, familial, and educational realms. My work is significant in that it demonstrates the complexity of success for Black males and things that were done that helped them achieve academically, which is something of which educators should be aware. Understanding how successful Black males perceived their interactions with school staff should inform teachers how to employ strategies that may promote greater motivation for Black students; yet, the teachers will likely need to be held accountable for trying something different if change is to come. The mere knowledge of strategies communicated in participants' stories must be applied in actual practice before others get the benefits these Black males had. Therefore, sharing the information in accessible prose is significant and intended to inspire and encourage educators to read, understand, and apply. If we can understand how to provide effective school experiences and put that understanding in play, then it is hoped that many Black males could have more positive school experiences and, consequently, better life experiences. With minority groups increasing faster than the White population (Poston & Sáenz, 2017), the academic success of Black males is only going to become more important for the future of the country. Allen (2014), who sought to challenge deficit views on Black male education, presented counter-narratives of four academically successful Black males in secondary school; however, he reiterated the continued need to study Black males who were successful in all levels of education and make their voices heard. In this work, I answered this call. Anumba (2015) concluded her qualitative study of factors influencing college persistence using the voices or stories of eight successful Black males indicating further research is needed to gather perspectives of Black males regarding their

persistence in education. Describing my definition of successful in Chapter 3, I took up

this challenge and examined the perspectives of four successful Black males on

experiences from grades K-college and how those experiences impacted their education.

Knowing my focus, I will next present my goals and research questions.

Research Goals and Questions

Maxwell (2013) described three types of goals in a qualitative study: personal

goals that motivate the researcher, intellectual goals that help with understanding

something that is happening, and practical or policy goals that focus on accomplishing or

changing something. With hopes of positively impacting the education of Black males,

my overarching purpose was to provide stories showing how successful Black males

made meaning of their educational experiences that lead to academic success.

Personally, I wanted to know the stories of other successful Black males from the same

community as me because this is my home—the community in which I was raised, now

live, and teach. Intellectually, I wanted to understand what helped them be successful so

that together the five of us can facilitate others' understanding of what these four Black

men believe it is like to be a Black child, student, man in the south. Finally, my practical

goals were to inspire other Black males to continue their education, to make their stories

accessible and available to educators so they can apply participants' experiences to their

own instructional practices for the improvement of the learning environment specifically

for Black male students, and to change the reputation of this community from one that is

nonsupportive of Black male students to one that all families want to be a part of because

the educational environment is respectful, welcoming, supportive, and successful. In

order to accomplish these goals, I used Seidman's (2013) three-phase interview method

to collect data from four Black male college graduates, which I then analyzed to answer the following questions:

1. What were the experiences of four successful Black male students in a predominantly Black urban community near a large southern city?

2. How did experiences in and with education influence the way Black males' made sense of their success in educational environments?

3. How did experiences in and with family influence the way Black males' made sense of their academic success?

4. How did experiences in and with society influence the way Black males' made sense of their academic success?

5. How did experiences in and with cultural norms influence the way Black males' made sense of their academic success?

After transcribing the interviews and coding the data with in vivo, emotion, pattern, and axial coding as described by Saldaña (2016), I developed a counter-narrative that told experiences counter to what one who holds stereotypical beliefs would expect. These stories demonstrated how various experiences influenced the participants' attainment of an effective education and exposed racism along the path to a college degree. Stories of successful Black males were added to current research as evidence that some Black males can and do succeed academically and socially in school.

Conclusion

The academic and behavioral struggles of Black males in public schools where embedded White cultural norms strongly influence practice and decision-making are known problems. Being a Black male, I have experienced and witnessed these struggles

in my own community. Previous research by Robertson and Chaney (2017), Allen (2014), and Anumba (2015) recognized the significance of continuing to study the education of Black males to add to the current literature, relay stories of Black male success, inform educators of effective strategies for Black male students, and expose racism still present in schools. Taking their advice, I constructed research questions and goals to add to the literature while attempting to positively impact my own community. The conceptual framework containing my personal experiences, identity and positionality, current literature, and theoretical framework is included in the next section to provide a more thorough understanding of the background that influenced my study.

Chapter II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework has been defined in different ways by different authors. In fact, Maxwell (2013) stated, "Many writers identify the part of a research design, proposal, or published paper that deals with the conceptual framework of a study as the literature review. This can be dangerously misleading" (p. 40). Furthermore, a conceptual framework "for an individual's research is something that is constructed and not borrowed from other publications" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 41). Similarly, Ravitch and Riggan (2017) stated that "a conceptual framework is an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are *appropriate and rigorous*" (p. 5). Ravitch and Riggan (2017) proposed personal experiences, current literature, and theory framing the study make up the conceptual framework. Even though the definitions from Maxwell and Ravitch and Riggan are similar, there are slight differences in their components of a conceptual framework. Closely adhering to Maxwell's (2013) ideas to develop my study, I strayed slightly from his conceptual framework pieces in favor of the conceptual framework structure outlined by Ravitch and Riggan (2017). For my conceptual framework, I used the following components as suggested by Ravitch and Riggan (2017): personal experience, identity and positionality, theoretical framework, and literature review or topical research.

Personal Experiences

Being a Black male reflecting on my own experiences, I realized now institutional racism in school was a part of life, and I had unknowingly deemed it normal by accepting whatever happened without standing up for myself at the time. While my actions reflected acceptance, I did not realize that was what I was doing until learning about critical race theory (CRT) as part of a class that focused on race and culture. Taylor (2016) described the eventual acceptance of racism as the norm because of the permanence of racism in American society. Looking back, I experienced stereotypes throughout my life. In elementary school, I was one of those failing kids because I struggled in reading. I was expected to struggle. In fact, I still struggle with reading, but I do not give up.

"Sit down and read" was all I ever heard throughout elementary school. "If you would follow directions, you could read better," my 4th grade teacher told me. If I tried to tell them I was not reading because I had no idea what the words were saying, I was talking back and off task, so I stayed quiet. Many of the other students were called over for reading instruction together but not most of the Black kids. Sometimes, all of us were called over at once; after all, we were the ones below level. At the time, I was glad to get out of reading group because it was embarrassing when I was called over to the teacher's small group table. I had to read baby books. Constantly being told that I struggled in reading, my parents found me a reading tutor. Soon, I improved and became a reader, a proud reader. I just needed internal self-confidence and external teacher confidence along with a little instruction.

Then, middle school and sports came. During those years, my talents as an athlete became evident, so I became known as a jock. In actuality, I received more academic help and class-related instruction as my athletic talents improved. My junior high coaches would check on me often and ensure I kept my grades up. Even the high school coaches, I was told near the end of middle school, inquired into my academics. Later, I realized Georgia had a rule that student athletes must pass their academic classes in order to be eligible to compete in sports; therefore, I realized the coaches wanted to keep me eligible to play, and it worked. I continued to get in a little trouble, but I escaped major infractions like fighting and disrespect because of my laidback personality and athleticism. If I got suspended, I could not play. Many of my friends did not play. They were suspended for minor infractions or blamed for behaviors they honestly did not do. For example, my friends and I formed a club that the school staff decided was a gang. Evidently, gangs were migrating into our community at the time because the community was changing to mostly Black residents. All my friends got suspended for gang activity, but I did not. Being an artist, I designed the club logo, but I did not sign the paper with the logo on it like the others. I made sure my name stayed out of everything. In fact, I still put little in writing if it is the least bit controversial. The suspension negatively impacted my friends' progress in school. Two of them failed 8th grade. Looking back, as I moved from one grade to the next, the number of Black students enrolled seemed to increase; however, fewer of the same classmates were progressing at each school level. Many of my early classmates did not go to middle school or high school with me. In fact, ninth grade was the end of many of their school careers. Using focus groups and surveys across 25 states throughout the United States, a

report funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2006) and carried out by Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) regarding school dropout found 45% of the over 500 diverse dropout students participating in the research dropped out of school because they believed they were not prepared for high school. This leads me to think they were pushed out of school, which I believe occurs in educational institutions throughout the United States. Even though I passed, I saw my peers' struggles increase as they progressed through school. Now, I understand that we were expected to perform low, and many classmates were unprepared for the next grade. Ineffective reading instruction, low expectations across all subjects, and constant behavior consequences were a part of school life for me as well as my peers. My parents made sure I received reading tutoring to increase reading achievement, and sports influenced my desire to progress in my later years.

Throughout high school, my prowess as an athlete continued to increase. I was adored because of it and cruised through high school. High school was the first time I actually had Black teachers, but the Black and White student divide was evident. As peers, we all got along fine; however, the logistics of school divided us. The White students were in the upper-level classes and received the academic awards. The Black students were recognized in sports. At that time, that was normal; I think I unknowingly believed the stereotype that Black people were better than White people in sports, and White people were better in academics than Black people. Honestly, I did really want an academic certificate.

In my experience, when life seems to be going well, something bad happens. Junior year my friend and little league teammate was murdered in a gang-related drive-by

shooting by a rival gang member from the other high school in the community. I was aware of the violence plaguing Black communities, but this was the first time it struck my life. After that, violence seemed to become even more common. Riding the players' bus to the Friday night football game against a rival high school in close proximity, someone shot at our bus. The next year, the rival game had to be played on a Saturday morning. Our football team rarely won because the same players were not there for consecutive years. Many dropped out or were deemed ineligible due to grades. My close friends and I remained determined to finish high school and higher education. While everyone seemed the same, something was different about my group of friends. We graduated when so many others did not. While I am what I believe most people would say is a typical Black male known to love sports, listen to rap music, and embrace Black culture, I was not a stereotypical Black male student who was regularly suspended and failing or dropping out of school, but that was not due to my angel-like behavior as much as it was my coaches covering for me and my dad's notorious chest punch. Even though my home area was transitioning to predominantly minority, schools did not seem to recognize that change, and Black males continued to fail.

The southern area of a large county bordering a major urban city in the south is the focus of my study because of its transition from a White middle-class community known for high achieving schools to a poor minority community with Title I schools. I am a product of the community graduating from one of the two high schools. Currently, the geographic area has a bad reputation in the county and, quite frankly, was progressively ignored by the school system as minorities became the majority. On a consistent basis, Black students seemed to constantly be in trouble. We, many Black

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students, always wondered if some teachers were just looking for us to do something wrong. I constantly was redirected for "shouting out," but I was only answering questions the teacher asked. I was punished for running, but I have always been an athlete and very active. We were expected to be bad, so teachers made sure we were! However, I successfully completed my high school education, and I believe other Black males can also. After graduating high school, college became my next challenge.

College is where I found myself struggling and, surprisingly, facing more explicit racism. I no longer had my close group of friends constantly with me as a support group. I turned to a new sport for me, rugby. I was the only Black guy on the team, but I did not care. On a sports team with all White guys, lots of name calling (nigger) and microaggressions (remarks about being Black and fast; repetition of plays to make sure I understood) occurred, but I did not expect anything different. As mentioned earlier, I struggled with the professor changing her treatment of me when she realized I was Black.

As a student in school, I did not understand what Taylor (2016) meant when suggesting schools were operating on norms of White middle class, and I simply accepted things the way they were. I just knew that I was not as good as most of the other students. I liked to stand and move; I was made to sit! I answered questions when the teacher asked the class; I got in trouble for shouting out! I was asked if I was ready to go home at the end of the day; I got my behavior card flipped for not having my homework written down! Never was I told to record my homework. Now, I realize I was not a bad student. I was just a Black student!

Although I teach in a school where over 80% of the more than 1,000 students are minority (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.), I am the only Black

male teacher. Until being on the teaching side, I never truly realized the absence of all things Black in American educational institutions. I never questioned what I just thought was normal.

The third semester in my doctoral program I enrolled in a race and culture class where *critical race theory* (CRT) (Taylor, 2016) was introduced. Learning tenets of CRT, memories of my school experiences came flooding back, and I began to wonder how I made it through school myself. The race and culture class paved the way for my current study. With so many Black males continuing to make headlines for school failure, violent crimes, and family breakdowns, I read about counter-narratives in CRT as a way to study the experiences of Black males who successfully navigated school to become academically successful by graduating college with a 4-year degree. In Black culture, community is important. For that reason, I collected data through stories from four college-educated Black men who grew up in the same schools I did. The data were related to all factors impacting achievement: school, family, society, and/or culture. Data collection and analysis led to counter-narratives I wrote from a cross-case analysis in which I compiled themes from the men's stories and related them to schooling, which I hoped would offer ways Black males can have success in school and inform educators of strategies or opportunities successful Black males found beneficial. Additionally, systemic racism and unequal opportunities were highlighted throughout the presentation of data to bring attention to their continued presence in schools.

Contrary to common majoritarian stories of problematic Black males, I hoped the stories my participants and I shared would motivate current Black males in school to pursue academic success through the sharing of atypical Black male success stories. If

we can understand from their successes and struggles how to provide more effective school experiences and apply that understanding to inspire change, then many Black males could have a more positive school career and better life experiences. Because of my personal experiences with both success and struggles and my experiences dealing with microaggressions and systemic racism, I have become the person I am today creating my own identity with my own beliefs.

Identity and Positionality

Being a typical Black male socially (not academically) according to majoritarian opinion, I developed some beliefs that may or may not be considered acceptable to other cultures. Rather than stumble upon one's subjectivity in the midst of a study as he did, Peshkin (1988) proposed researchers identify, acknowledge, and seek their subjectivities before data collection and analysis to recognize how those beliefs may shape their actions and outcomes. These were termed *subjective I's* (Peshkin, 1988). Reflecting over several weeks, I discovered I possess three subjective I's that had the potential to impact my study.

My first subjective I is *Feds I*. In my world, White people are called *the Feds*. The common belief is that White people were born talking and learning other people's business. In the school building where I work, which is mostly White females, I do not think anything stays secret. They know and talk about everybody's business: evaluations, meetings with administrators, other's conversations, and even spread rumors about each other based on what they think is going on. No matter what I am doing, I am always aware of the Feds. While I am accustomed to keeping to my own business, the Feds are ready to tell any and everything. Many times, I have seen White students tell on or blame

Black students for anything that may happen. Of course, I believe people in authority expect the Black kid to be guilty. Therefore, I am very cautious with what I say and how I act around the Feds so that my words and actions cannot be used against me or others. Being a Black male myself, I believed Black male participants would not hold back and would be honest because I am not the Feds. I am a person that looks like them—Black!

Another subjective I that I possess is the *Argumentative I*. No matter the topic of conversation, I always challenge a person's point of view. Even if someone shares my same views, I argue or challenge his/her beliefs. I think I developed this trait because I had to keep quiet so much of my life without challenging authority, so I challenge everything I can now. During my interviews, I was aware of my tendency to argue beliefs and ideas but fought it off as much as possible because I was gathering the stories of other academically successful Black males as opposed to challenging them.

Finally, I would be dishonest if I did not acknowledge my *Revenge I*. Facing racism, both explicit and unintentional, my whole life, I learned to keep my mouth shut when needed, but I never forget. I have a gift of remembering details. When the time comes, I get my revenge. During college, a White female friend was riding in the passenger side of the car. With the windows down, a large truck stopped beside me at a traffic light, and the driver yelled, "Nigger lover." She begged me not to do anything, and I did not at that time. I worked at a restaurant and was called to deliver some wings one night. That truck was across the street. Regretfully now, I slashed all four tires. While my anger seems to mellow with age, I still have difficulty handling unfairness and meanness. Therefore, when talking to my participants, I was aware of myself becoming angry and wanting revenge when stories of unfairness or meanness were told.

While understanding the concept of subjective I's and realizing my own subjective I's was difficult at first, I believe reflecting on them and being aware of them helped me be a better researcher. As Peshkin (1988) wrote in his conclusion about identifying his own subjectivities, reflecting on my subjectivities enabled "myself to manage it-to preclude it from being unwittingly burdensome-as I progressed through collecting, analyzing, and writing up my data" (p. 20). Right or wrong, my subjectivities were constructed from my experiences over the years of my life. To deal with them I memoed every time I recognized one of my subjectivities creeping into my thoughts. As I continue to gain life experiences, my subjectivities will continue to evolve. My experiences, beliefs, and subjectivities pointed me toward the theories and parts of theories that guided my work, helped answer my research questions, and helped explain my findings.

Theoretical Framework

While reading research regarding the education of Black males, three theories were prominent. *Cultural deficit theory*, while discussed but not used as the leading theoretical framework in any of the studies I read, was a widely accepted theory throughout the 1960s (Valencia, 2010). Critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 2016) was used as the leading framework in every study I read and provided the framework for my study. Finally, while relatively new, *African American male theory* (AAMT) closely parallels CRT (Bush & Bush, 2013). I did not read any studies using AAMT as the theoretical framework; however, I read an article describing the principles of AAMT and adopted some of the principles for my own study. Parts of AAMT will be used to explain the experiences of Black males in schools.

Cultural Deficit Theory

Throughout my initial search of the literature, I encountered several theories explaining the low achievement of Black males. One of those theories was *cultural deficit theory*, which attributed low achievement to inferior culture and lesser genetics thereby blaming the student for his low performance as a result of his deficits (Puchner & Markowtiz, 2015; Valencia, 2010). While I am strongly anti-cultural deficit theory, I believe I would be remiss in totally excluding its mention in the theoretical framework. Even though most researchers and educators do not knowingly subscribe to this theory, its historical popularity and presence in current stereotypical ideas make it mentionable for my study and applicable to many more educators than would admit it. In *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice* edited by Richard Valencia, Pearl (2012) wrote the second chapter explaining the popularity of cultural deficit model during the 1960s. The cultural deficit model proposed Black families (father, mother, and home environment) and "low-grade genes" (p. 18) created deficiencies (Pearl, 2012). Summarily, Black fathers were abusive, neglectful, and absent; Black mothers were inadequate showing little affection, little regard for education, and decreased ability to care for her children; and finally, the poor home environment did not promote the development of children, created strained parent-child relationships, and produced intellectually and linguistically impaired children (Pearl, 2012). Therefore, cultural deficit theory suggested Black students (or students outside the dominant group) from deficit backgrounds routinely scored below middle-class students, came to school without prerequisite skills, had significant language deficits (Valencia, 2010), and "in scholastic achievement they [were] retarded an average of 2

years by grade 6 and almost 3 years by grade 8" (Hess & Shipman, 1965, p. 870). In other words, whether people did it in their conscious mind or unconsciously, many people looked at Black skin and automatically associated being less capable than those with White skin. Described next in the literature review section, Du Bois' (1898) *Talented Tenth* concept that suggested 1 out of 10 Black males had superior skills to potentially influence others seemed to reflect deficit thinking about Black males by an early activist and scholar. I do NOT believe having darker skin means anyone is less capable than someone with lighter skin, but I do believe that many teachers ascribe to this belief in ways that interfere with their effectiveness in teaching. People who assume lesser of me because I am Black are likely grounding their actions in a deficit model whether they know it or not. Even though many people to whom my participants were exposed during education exhibited signs of cultural deficit thinking, I do not practice or encourage application of or belief in the deficit model, so my theoretical framework will not be based on this old (yet still present) idea; however, acknowledgement of this theory was necessary because it is still very present in society, pervasive among teachers, and influential in the educational environment.

Critical Race Theory

After learning about critical race theory (CRT) in a race and culture class, it was clear to me how the basic tenets of CRT reflected my beliefs and helped explain race-related issues. Therefore, CRT was at the core of theoretical components related to my conceptual framework and was used to help explain findings of this study on the success of Black males. In *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* by Derrick Bell (1992), the author penned a preface describing his thoughts on the treatment of Black people in America.

Interestingly, he sequentially described how Black people, seeing their slavery heritage as shame, struggled to be like White people, and Civil Rights, which were won with great difficulty, were slowly being weathered away (Bell, 1992). Evolving from earlier work in critical legal studies and the ideas of Derrick Bell, CRT consists of tenets or principles seeking to explain the lack of Black male achievement in America's schools (Taylor, 2016). As CRT was increasingly embraced, ideas surrounding it grew in relation to education. Specifically, the ideas or tenets of CRT described in this section include permanence of racism, colorblindness, Whiteness as a property, counter-narrative, interest convergence, and social justice.

Permanence of racism. Critical race theory maintains that racism, a social construct, is so ingrained in society that it is permanent and actually appears as a normal function of the political, social, and economic areas of society (Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Taylor, 2016). With microaggressions and systemic racism being so normal, racism is not distinctly recognized making it difficult to eradicate (Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016). Delgado et al. (2012) described microaggressions as deep-rooted racism present in the lives of people of color on a daily basis. Replacing some of the explicit racism, microaggressions, along with systemic racism, remain a constant part of the school experience (Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Solórzano et al., 2000).

With CRT being a permanent part of society, racism must be studied in a historical and contemporary manner to understand its permanence because racism and the roots of racism have been disguised in society for years (Delgado, 1989; Delgado et al., 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000; Taylor, 2016). Bell (1992) wrote, "We simply cannot

prepare realistically for our future without assessing honestly our past" (p. 10). Reading

textbooks, many White Americans are portrayed as heroes, but those same heroes owned

slaves. Studying history, one cannot understand how people wanting justice and freedom

for all can treat human groups in such a manner. Even today, microaggressions are still

hard to fathom in this democratic nation (Bell, 1992). From Jim Crow laws in the past to

White normed behavioral expectations today, the rights of Black people have been

blocked with requirements and expectations paralleling White cultural norms (Delgado,

1989; Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995;

Solórzano et al., 2000; Taylor, 2016). The historical roots of racism should be studied

and acknowledged before change can come and the permanence of racism can be

diminished.

  Colorblindness. CRT challenges society's claim of colorblindness and ever-

present *White privilege* norm (Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995;

Solórzano et al., 2000; Taylor, 2016). With the claim of colorblindness comes the idea

that people of color are invisible, racism no longer exists, and their culture is ignored

(Taylor, 2016). The claim of colorblindness minimizes covert or common acts of racism

primarily addressing only the most blatant inequalities while maintaining the privilege or

power of the dominant White group (Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995;

Solórzano et al., 2000; Taylor, 2016). Even though educators claim not to see color

differences, and they honestly believe they do not, observed actions seem to negate this

claim. The idea of colorblindness denies differences between Black and White people

and seems to make an entire group of people nonexistent, suggesting White norms of

society are superior (Delgado et al., 2012).

Whiteness as property. Whiteness is a prized human property because privilege and benefit come with identifying as White, being White is a valuable asset that Whites protect, and the benefits of being White seem to be legally protected (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). In *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education*, Bernal and Villalpando (2016) defined *White Privilege* as unearned opportunities and benefits given to someone for merely having White skin. Like property, Whiteness comes with rights of possession, use, exclusion, disposal, and social advantages (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). For example, White privilege included increased access to higher education, higher-paying careers, better neighborhoods, and higher quality schools focused on White perspectives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). From my experience, White people primarily have a positive relationship with law enforcement, whereas Black people do not. Whiteness is rooted in White supremacy with people of color, specifically Black people, being the social group targeted for oppression in the form of racism by the White privileged social group, according to the Matrix of Oppression (Collins, 1990). Historically and presently, school culture is geared toward White middle-class norms, or White supremacy, reflecting expectations and classroom culture learned from the experiences of White teachers and White leadership (Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Solórzano et al., 2000). Therefore, with colorblindness camouflaging the more common and hidden acts of racism, White privilege of society continues to be empowered through racial privileges granted to the dominant White group.

Counter-narrative. Experiences of Black males are used to teach about racism in CRT (Ladson-Billings, 2016; Martinez, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016; Taylor, 2016). According to Delgado (1989), storytelling creates meaning and challenges myths.

Counter-storytelling, as defined by Solórzano and Yosso (2002/2016), is "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (p. 133) and challenge majoritarian stories of dominance. Knowing the experiences of Black males is critical for understanding and teaching them (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). Valuing and presenting the experiences of Black male students' places racism in a realistic context which is essential in the quest to eliminate it (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). Specifically, CRT uses *counter-narratives* (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016), or the opposite of what is commonly heard in society, to expose racism, (Bell, 1992) and present success stories of marginalized Black males (Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Martinez, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). Merriweather Hunn, Guy, and Manglitz (2006) described three types of counter-stories: *personal stories, other people's stories*, and *composite stories*. The first two are self-explanatory; however, composite stories are created from accumulating and synthesizing several individual stories (Merriweather Hunn et al., 2006). In fact, counter-stories can be realistic fiction and enhanced by blending people, places, and events collected from interviews and conversations (Hairston, 2010). Using actual experiences of Black males, discrimination is highlighted, their interpretations of policy or issues is voiced, and the stereotypes about Black males are challenged (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). With Black males more often talked about than heard, counter-narratives present their voice (Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Martinez, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). Counter-stories challenge often heard majoritarian stories and cast doubt on stereotypes held by the group in power (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). Used as a method to present research findings, counter-narrative, used interchangeably with counter-story in this

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study, values the thoughts and ideas of an ignored group of people in a way that counters common stereotypes.

Interest convergence. *Interest-convergence* is the idea that the White power structure supports racial advances when their interests are also benefitted (Delgado et al., 2012). Critical race theorists contend Black people are "disadvantaged unless whites perceive that nondiscriminatory treatment for us will be a benefit for them" (Bell, 1992, p. 7). Social, political, and economic gains only occur if it aligns with the group in power and benefits both groups, especially the White elite (Taylor, 2016). Therefore, interest convergence suggests racial equality increases when the interests of both groups converge.

Social justice. Critical race theorists are committed to true equality, or social justice, in educational institutions and the entire United States society (Delgado et al., 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000; Taylor, 2016). With CRT committed to promoting social justice, schools are a vehicle to achieve that goal (Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016; Taylor, 2016). Schools are the one place where people of all races gather for the same purpose – an education! Therefore, schools should be operated in a manner that promotes success for everyone. Crenshaw (1989), a Black female theorist, coined the term intersectionality when reviewing the portrayal of Black women in legal studies. While Black males are different from Black women, they certainly have their own issues reflecting Crenshaw's (1989) idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). In the fight for social justice, intersectionality plays a major role with race intersecting class and gender further influencing the oppression of Black males (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016; Taylor, 2016). Poverty is

often associated with people of color, and the presence of both furthers oppression creating additional stereotypes (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016; Taylor, 2016). Because CRT is grounded in resisting inequalities, critical race theorists are committed to fighting racism and empowering marginalized groups socially, politically, economically, and culturally (Delgado, 1989; Delgado et al., 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016; Taylor, 2016). Educational institutions play a major part of CRT because they are the vehicle for increasing social justice (Ladson-Billings, 2016).

These tenets of CRT played a prominent role in my study. Since CRT described racism as permanent, critical race methodology reasons that experiences with and responses to racism be sought in the data (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). As a result of my full belief in the tenets of CRT, I correctly believed data from my participants would demonstrate or support each tenet. Through the presentation of participants' experiences as a counter-narrative, the permanence of racism and colorblindness were exposed, White privilege was visible, interest convergence was evident, and social justice was promoted. In my study, CRT provided the framework for the experiences of academically successful Black males presented as a counter-narrative to suggest strategies for educators to support current and future Black males in their school experiences, to encourage Black males to finish their education, to lessen societal racism, and to begin changing stereotypes. Another theory, African American Male Theory, described in the next section also played a role in my study.

African American Male Theory

While the use of CRT provided an underlying framework for my study, parts of African American male theory (AAMT) also added to the frame or foundation that

"explains the lives of African American boys and men" (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 7).

AAMT revolves around ecological systems theory believing that "human beings exist in a symbiotic and bidirectional relationship with one another, their environment, and other phenomena" (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 7) with many environmental factors affecting Black males. This is the key principle in AAMT I used to understand behaviors and outcomes from an ecological system approach where interactions among family, home, peers, neighborhood, school, biology, personality, beliefs, and spirituality interact to influence experiences (Bush & Bush, 2013). This principle informed my study because, even though I was researching academic success, I collected stories of experiences not just from school but also from the interrelated areas of society, family, and culture to find meaning for the academic success of Black males. While AAMT recognizes differences in everyone, AAMT theorists are particularly interested in or focused on the uniqueness of being male and being African because these distinctions are needed to create specific curricula in programs and education (Bush & Bush, 2013). Additionally, AAMT, similar to CRT's tenet of studying historical and contemporary racism (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano et al., 2000; Taylor, 2016), suggests teachers consult literature on Africa and the African culture as a means of understanding Black male culture (Bush & Bush, 2013). This connected to my study because of the importance and impact of culture-related experiences that did and did not occur in the experiences described by successful Black males. Another tenet of AAMT contends that Black males are resilient and resistant (Bush & Bush, 2013). Black males are resilient for their ability to rise up in adversity, and resilience combined with resistance allows them to reject White norms and oppression (Bush & Bush, 2013). Throughout desegregation Whites were resistant to

change and used their power to slow the desegregation of school with some districts not desegregating until the 1970s, even though the law called for immediate desegregation (Bush & Bush, 2013). Other tenets of AAMT, very similar to CRT's intersectionality and commitment to social justice, are that racism intertwined with classism and that sexism impacts the lives of resistant Black males (Bush & Bush, 2013). The purpose of AAMT is to eliminate oppression by investigating and exposing it not by telling stories of oppression, which give the oppressor the power to dictate the existence and importance of oppressed people, but "to examine why African boys and men are resilient, healthy, and thriving" (Bush & Bush, 2013). Like CRT, the goal of AAMT is social justice (Bush & Bush, 2013).

The theoretical framework for my study was influenced by cultural deficit theory, critical race theory, and African American male theory. Cultural deficit theory was acknowledged because of its historical importance and evidence of its continued presence. While I do not embrace or believe cultural deficit ideas, some teachers' behaviors and words indicated they saw my participants through the lens of the deficit model. On the other hand, all tenets of critical race theory are embraced and used as the theoretical framework for my study. Finally, AAMT, closely aligned with CRT, provided additional support. The final section of the conceptual framework is the literature review that provides previous research on the topic of academically successful Black males.

Literature Review

As one would imagine, much literature exists regarding the struggles of the Black population in America. The academic and behavior struggles of Black males are widely

reported and studied. Stereotypes about Black males formed and remain present in educational institutions. Much of the literature presents Black males in a negative manner (Alliman-Brissett & Turner, 2010; Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016; Robertson & Chaney, 2017; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). While I recognize there are many disturbing stories and trends regarding Black males, not widely known are the stories of those who succeed (Anumba, 2015; Goings, 2016a; Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015; Warde, 2007). They are the ones who need to be heard. However, the good comes with the bad, and to truly appreciate these success stories, the troubling statistics must be known. To understand the context of this study, I believe it is important to be familiar with influential Black theorists and leaders, current reality of Black male students, school pushout or dropout, the increase in subtle racism, the incorporation of culture into the classroom, common experiences of Black males, the search for social justice and the interrelation of success, and the Afrocentric Worldview as a successful strategy to increase the success of Black males. Therefore, this literature review addresses each of those topics and how they relate to the study.

Black Leaders for Equity

While Martin Luther King Jr. is probably the most well-known Civil Rights leader, there were others who worked alongside him and even came before with their work in research. Higginbotham (2014), a law professor who penned an article describing the history of racism and encouraging others to remove racial divisiveness, gave an overview of racism. The following synopsis of that history as reported by Higginbotham (2014) sets the stage for understanding Black leaders through history. From the Jim Crow laws in the early history of the United States until the 1960s, Black

and White people were separated physically, socially, economically, and in all areas by government policy preventing any type of Black advancement and giving rise to the notion of Black inferiority. Making Black people separate but equal to eliminate the threat of integration into society and competition with Whites, *Plessy vs. Ferguson* was passed in 1896 with the U.S. Supreme Court effectively separating people by race for decades. Even as courts began to invalidate some of the separation practices in the early 1900s, White flight and resistance kept separation the norm. By the 1950s, a campaign was launched to protest segregation and fight for equal rights. As a result, legislation was passed overturning Jim Crow laws and making segregation illegal. Antidiscrimination laws increased equality in public places, housing, and voting; however, inequalities continue. Effective leaders were needed for speaking, writing, motivating, and organizing the protests and fight for equality. Throughout Civil Rights history, there have been many influential scholars and activists. W.E. B. DuBois, Derrick Bell, Malcom X, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Sandy Grande, and Cornel West are a just few of the great leaders who had an impact on scholarly thought and were influential in progressing equality. In the following sections, their work is briefly mentioned, and their legacy is briefly described by a single reviewer for each person.

W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois (1898) described the idea of the Talented Tenth*,* suggesting the top minds of Black community pursue higher education to guide the rest. According to the Talented Tenth concept, an ordinary education may be fine for 90% of Black men, but 1 out of 10 has superior abilities that need to be trained because they could become great influencers. In 1900, Du Bois spoke at the Pan-African Conference in London where he addressed nations proclaiming that a color line consisting of the

color of the skin and the texture of the hair was a problem for the 20th century (Du Bois, 1903). The problem of the color line and the idea that Black people looked at themselves through the eyes of others were discussed in Du Bois' (1903) book T*he Souls of Black Folk.*

Appiah (2015) chronicled Du Bois life as an early scholar in Black studies. He described Du Bois as an activist, scholar, and intellectual, conducting some of the first scientific African culture studies and Afro-American life studies that were critical of racism around the world and globally called for people of African descent and other people of color to join together to end White supremacy. This eventually led to the formation of the African Union and influenced decolonization in Africa and the Caribbean. Du Bois supported the thought that differences in people, particularly class and economics, were cultural. From Du Bois' work, racial solidarity helped bring Jim Crow Laws to an end.

Derrick Bell. As an intellectual, activist, professor, and writer, Derrick Bell used his roles to encourage awareness of racial inequalities and progress toward equality, as reported by Goldberg (1992). Working at Harvard Law, Bell protested the exclusion of minorities from advancement and tenure in college positions, wrote fictional allegorical accounts of inequalities (counter-stories), and used his legal background to pioneer critical legal studies that formed the foundation of CRT. One of Derrick Bell's influential literary works was *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism,* a collection of fictional allegorical stories that sought to bring awareness to the realities of Black life, and Black people are the faces mentioned in the title. Known more for being fired from Harvard than teaching there, Bell led a sit-in to protest the college

leadership's refusal to grant tenure to a Black female professor. Because of his efforts seeking equality in higher education, Bell's work paved the way for an increase in Black people becoming lawyers and teachers.

Malcolm X. Influenced by his childhood experiences, Malcolm X was a well-known political activist, civil rights leader, and speaker. Though ruled accidental, Malcolm was forever affected as a child when his father, closely following civil rights activist Marcus Garvey, was killed by a lynch mob after being laid across railroad tracks (Clasby, 1988). Still in his childhood, his house was burnt, and his mother was institutionalized for insanity—this caused the children to be placed in foster care after Malcolm was caught stealing food and his mother refused welfare pork for religious reasons (X & Haley, 1966). Living with a White family who treated him like a pet and attending a White school, a teacher called Malcolm lazy and dumb (X & Haley, 1966). Realizing he would never be viewed as equal, he developed a strong dislike of White people (X & Haley, 1966). Born Malcolm Little, he changed his name to Malcolm X after converting to Islam in prison to represent the African name his ancestors would have had if they had not been kidnapped and enslaved (X & Haley, 1966). In prison after burglarizing wealthy White families and for his relationship with White women (X & Haley, 1966), Malcolm began following Elijah Muhammed with the Black Muslims and liberation theory, which suggested that to be liberated from the master/slave relationship the slave must be seen by the master and that happens by acting like him – through violence (Clasby, 1988). Exiting prison, Malcom X called for a hostile revolution (Clasby, 1988). Near the end of his life, Malcom X, remaining Muslim, rejected the Black Muslim ideology and left the Nation of Islam; however, he continued to differ

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from other civil rights leaders with his belief in violence and call for a separate nation for Black people (Clasby, 1988). Malcom X was fatally shot in 1965 while giving a speech in New York City, but his influence on the civil rights movement helped pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 making discrimination based on race illegal (Clasby, 1988).

Patricia Hill Collins. Publishing scholarly work in the 1960s, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) was an important figure in Black feminist thought and the development of intersectionality, an influential part of CRT. Specifically, Collins (1990) developed the *Matrix of Oppression* detailing social identities, the privileged groups, the targeted groups, and the form of discrimination. Beginning with her own educational experiences as one of the few students being Black and female and middle class, she analyzed the interactions of race, class, and gender in the experiences of women whose voices were suppressed (Zinn, 2012). While the intersection of inequalities was previously recognized, their intersection had not been applied or analyzed as a system of oppression working together (Zinn, 2012). Through her work with sharing the perspectives of marginalized Black females, Collins (1990) advocated for community building by uniting all marginalized (poor, Black, female, etc.) community members to use the power of people to achieve change.

bell hooks. bell hooks, a leading scholar in Black studies, penned the book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004) specifically about issues facing Black males. Conversing with Black males schooled from the early 20th century until today, hooks (2004) described how Black males' views of education changed and how educational institutions impacted Black males. In segregated schools, Black males excelled because they were expected to excel, believed they could excel, and thought

critically in their community. As schools integrated, stereotypes and prejudice increased

with poor Black males deemed unteachable and White teachers failing to effectively

teach Black males who excelled in segregated schools. Additionally, hooks wrote that

"unenlightened black teachers often stereotype black boys as much as non-black teachers

do" (p. 35). Curiosity exhibited by White students was seen as genius; however,

curiosity by Black students as hooks described was seen as trouble making. With

opportunities tamped, expectations decreased, and Black males conformed. Many of the

images, symbols, products, promotions, and authorities of White America subtly taught

White supremacy and led to low self-esteem which increased self-destruction. Socialized

to believe that physical strength and stamina were important, the self-esteem of Black

males suffered and became the predominant issue hooks (2004) believed plagued Black

males, especially in education.

Most Black males want to learn to read and write, to retain those skills, and to

think critically; however, many are pressured by White people to prove they are "really

Black" (hooks, 2004, p. 40) causing them to believe stereotypes. Even with Black

females encouraged to read by their families, Black males who like to read were apt to be

viewed as a sissy. Black males did well in all Black schools because they were cared

about, given attention, and perceived to be learners who could excel academically. They

often regressed in predominantly White schools where they were stereotypically

categorized as non-learners. Hooks found Black males who excelled academically in

public educational institutions without self-esteem issues usually had an advocate—a

parent, caregiver, or teacher who intervened.

Sandy Grande. Working with Native Americans and indigenous people, Grande (2004) proposed a *red pedagogy*, moving away from a White supremacy society toward multiculturalism, multilingualism, and coalition to make education a right of the people and reconcile the rights of a nation with the rights of the people. Red pedagogy "promotes an education for decolonization where the root metaphors of relationship, sovereignty, and balance provide the foundation" (Grande, 2010, p. 204). It embraces hope; hope that colonization of minds, bodies, and souls can be resisted, and everyone works together for solidarity (Grande, 2004). A proponent of critical theory, Grande (2010), advocates questioning, challenging, and rejecting dominant ways of thought forced on marginalized groups throughout history.

Cornel West. West (2017), a political activist and scholar in African American studies, proposed in one of eight essays comprising his book *Race Matters*, that a primary hindrance to harmonious race relations was *nihilism*, which is the idea of worthlessness prominent among Black community because of hopelessness and lovelessness; however, eliminating White supremacy was also a goal. Furthermore, he believed that race mattered in everything American; therefore, there is no colorblindness today or in the past. West (2017) deemed that self-worth, or Black pride, is an important issue. Additionally, he argued the need for strong Black leadership that does not identify with conservatism or liberalism but promotes social justice by fostering peace between Black and White people (West, 2017).

Summary. The civil rights leaders discussed are a few of many important people who have and still fight for social justice. People with different talents played a role in

the quest for equality: speakers, writers, thinkers, and researchers. All of them played a part in the current reality of our society and education.

Current Reality

Released educational statistics by The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (n.d.) regarding Black males are concerning. Many years after the integration of schools, Black males still struggle academically compared to their White counterpart (Anumba, 2015). Like the experiences of Black men in societal history, Black males' educational history has been interrupted with stereotypes, academic failures, and marginalization (Irving & Hudley, 2008). Goings (2016b) surmised that previous low test scores produced low academic expectations. National databases that provided disaggregated statistics by race reported low achievement of Black students with 14% in grade 12 on or above level in reading compared to 56% of White students on or above level in reading (The Nations Report Card, 2015), high discipline rates with only 15.5% of America's students being Black students yet they have 39% of school suspensions compared to 50.3% of America's students being White but accounting for only 32% of students suspended from school (U. S. Government Accountability Office, 2018), and disproportionate incarceration rates of Blacks with 33% of the prison population in 2016 being Blacks compared to 26% being White (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). Alexander (2010), a civil rights lawyer advocating for prison reform, wrote *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* exposing systemic racism in the criminal justice system with mass incarceration, the *New Jim Crow*, overwhelmingly consisting of Black males due to the war on drugs specifically targeting Black males

while stripping them of their rights and delegating them to the lowest class citizens. In actuality, this sounds really similar to happenings in the institution of education.

Alliman-Brissett and Turner (2010) conducted a survey of 108 Black middle school students to examine the association among perceived racism, expected outcomes, and math and science efficacy. Specifically, results of the study indicated that racism was related to achievement (r range = .220 to .595, p range = .023 to .000); self-efficacy and outcome expectations were positively related ($r = .217$; $p < .023$) suggesting self-efficacy influenced how students performed in math and science; and self-efficacy was negatively related to racism ($r = -.2499$; $p < .011$) signifying the presence of racism lowered students' beliefs in their abilities (Alliman-Brissett & Turner, 2010). With only 9% of Black males in grade 8 proficient in math, perceived racism and low expected outcomes were significant contributors to low math self-efficacy and achievement leading to less interest in future math and science careers (Alliman-Brissett & Turner, 2010). To overcome the racial wall and emerge as the norm in educational society, Alliman-Brissett and Turner (2010) concluded high math outcomes needed high math self-efficacy and high teacher expectations. In a qualitative study by Anumba (2015) seeking to understand the experiences of eight Black males who persisted through college, analysis of multiple interviews with participants influenced the researcher to suggest the need for access to more enrichment opportunities, and to report the "K-12 system they experienced failed to teach critical thinking, study habits, and basic college survival skills" (p. 46); thus, high expectations for Black males were not present in many of these participants' public school classrooms.

While enrollment of Black males in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) decreased 45.8% between 2011-12 and 2012-13 due to changes to financial aid opportunities for Black males at HBCUs (Johnson, Bruch, Gill, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic (ED), ICF International, and National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (ED), 2017), lower graduation rates, lower test scores, and higher dropout rates of Black males compared to White males continued to be highly publicized throughout the United States (Irving & Hudley, 2008; Kunjufu, 2010; Patton, 2012; Warde, 2007). With only 17% of Black men having a college degree in 2013 and that statistic growing to only 18% in 2017 (Black Male Statistics, n.d.), negative stereotypes and racist views of Black males' intellectual abilities, violent behaviors, gang activity, and school performance have continued to grow (Anumba, 2015; Irving & Hudley, 2008; Kunjufu, 2010). Likewise, prominent news outlets like the *U S. News & World Report's* unrelenting reporting on the lagging education of Black males continues to support and expand majoritarian stereotypes (Leins, 2018). Racism remains but is often hidden in educational institutions (Delgado, 1989; Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Solórzano et al., 2000; Taylor, 2016). When Robertson and Chaney (2017) interviewed 12 Black males from a predominantly White institution (PWI) to study their experiences as students in these institutions, the researchers found that racial incidences correlated to school completion. Specifically, higher numbers of racist experiences at PWIs were associated with higher dropout rates of Black males (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). While schools were legally desegregated and reportedly providing an equal opportunity for Black males, Matrenec (2011) gathered stories from interviews with 15 Black male students in a typical White affluent high school who were

in the process of navigating stereotypes and constructing their own identities but were not able to find true equity occurring from the racial-laced experiences. Hence, these studies provided support for the tenet of CRT that argues racism is so much a part of society, and has been, that its presence is permanent and normal (Delgado, 1989; Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Solórzano et al., 2000; Taylor, 2016). While participants in Matrenec's (2011) study clearly articulated their experiences handling racism at school, the nature of racist experiences should continue to be explored by considering what kind of racism is being experienced in society and, more specifically, in schools.

Dropout or Pushout

According to a National Center of Education Statistics (2020) report, the graduation rate of public high school students in school year 2017-2018 was 85% nationally with 89% being White students and 79% being Black students. Of students who dropped out of high school, 73% reported their parents tried to persuade them to stay in school; however, only 37% reported the school trying to persuade them to stay (EDUCATIONDATA.ORG, n.d.). Additionally, 53% of students dropping out reported family offered to help them with personal problems, but only 24% reported the school offering help (Educationdata.org, n.d.). In 2018, 5.3% of students between the ages of 16 and 24 were high school dropouts (National Center on Education Statistics, 2020).

Ladson-Billings (2013) posited achievement "disparities are a result of historical, economic, political, and moral decisions that we as a society have made over time" (p. 13). She called the differences in educational opportunities *educational debt* because of the accumulation of educational deficits impacting students of color. Poverty correlated with high school dropout; students from families with a low socioeconomic status (SES)

were 10 times more likely to leave school early than students from a higher SES (Educationdata.org, n.d.). Looking closer at the data, in 2018, 7.8% of Black students dropped out, and 4.8% of White students left school (National Center on Education Statistics, 2020). Furthermore, 37.2% of the Black dropouts were due to institutionalization (National Center on Education Statistics, 2020). Even though the percentages seem low, they represent the entire United States; therefore, these small percentages equate to thousands of students.

Over the years, education initiatives have included programs to increase graduation rates, but states have circumvented legitimate ways of increasing scores (Educationdata.org, n.d.). Alabama inflated 2012 graduation percentages by dropping underperforming students from cohorts either on paper or by expelling problem students (Educationdata.org, n.d.). Likewise, Florida, in 2016, sent 455 students in Orange County to a for-profit charter alternative school with 85% of those students being minority (Educationdata.org, n.d.). Therefore, many students have no choice but to leave school early.

The statistics are presented as school dropout rates, but there are reasons that students drop out of high school. Influencing the lack of achievement, Ladson-Billings (2013) suggested marginalized students are pushed out of school because of the *opportunity gap,* which is the lack of opportunities Black students have compared to most White students in White operated schools. The report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) found schools in low-income (SES) communities have more at-risk students needing support; however, the funding is not typically provided for them to receive increased support. Bradley and Renzulli (2011) conducted a study based on

the pushout/pullout theories of school dropout. When students drop out of school for reasons caused by issues within the school that discourage them from finishing, those students are *pushed out* of school (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). In contrast, students are *pulled out* of school by outside factors, like working to take care of family, that compete with school responsibilities (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). Using data from the Educational Longitudinal Study conducted in 2002 and narrowing her participants to 5,130 10th to 12th graders in public schools nationwide, Bradley and Renzulli (2011) found that SES impacted Black males being pushed out of school. The top four reasons, in rank order, Black males dropped out of school were because of academic issues and lack of preparedness, frequent absences, suspension or expulsion, and failure to get along with others (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). All of these reasons stem from issues within the educational environment.

In Bell's (2014) general qualitative study of 15 Black males in rural North Carolina, he found a major reason for Black males dropping out of school was because classes were not interesting and had no application to them. *Academic socialization*, the knowing and following of the routines and expectations of school, was absent (Bell, 2014). Bell (2014) concluded that "participants detected a cultural mismatch with their teachers" (p. 5) reporting that teachers were prejudiced against them, and "the participants felt that teachers and the schools did not care about them" (p. 5). While academics were a factor in Black males being pushed out of high school, it was not the primary reason in Bell's (2014) study. Even though strategies exist that could be used to keep students in school, like offering more student services and integrating relevant

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topics, Bell (2014) believes "the Black community must lead the charge" (p. 3) to keep Black male students in school.

In southern California, Mireles-Rios, Rios, and Reyes (2020) interviewed 39 Black and Hispanic former high school students in an attempt to understand why they left school before graduating. Initially, 90% of those interviewed said a meeting with the counselor or an administrator revealed they did not have enough credits to graduate and could not earn enough to graduate (Mireles-Rios, Rios, & Reyes, 2020). One student described how an administrator told him he did not have enough credits to graduate, so he had to leave the school so the school would not look bad (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020). Delving deeper into reasons for low credits, 45% of the participants felt they entered high school not prepared, likely falling behind in elementary and middle school and not being able to catch up (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020). Additionally, students were disengaged from school because they were not represented or valued in the curriculum and were pushed out by truancy issues and zero tolerance policies (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020). To lower pushout rates, Mireles-Rios et al. (2020) suggested graduation initiatives should begin in elementary and middle school rather than high school. Even though educational institutions have little control over issues that pull students out of school; they can influence pushouts by closing the opportunity gap, acknowledging Whiteness and the permanence of racism in education, and working decrease it.

Whiteness and Permanence of Racism

Unlike blatant racism of the past, *microaggressions*, a more subtle type of racism, increased in the United States as the struggle for equality progressed (Solórzano et al., 2000). Previously, many racist behaviors were explicit and purposeful (Bell, 1992). For

example, three White men in Spalding County, Georgia went to prison 35 years after dragging a Black man to death for conversing with a White woman (McLaughlin, 2018). According to a CNN news report, the men claimed to have murdered the Black man to save the White race from Black people (McLaughlin, 2018). Unlike explicit racism, microaggressions are unintentional or unconscious acts of racism and are often found in schools where White teachers teach predominantly marginalized students (Henfield, 2011). Henfield (2011), claiming to be one of the early explorers of Black male students' perceptions of racial microaggressions in predominantly White schools, conducted a study that gathered five Black male middle school students' perceptions and experiences with microaggressions in a traditionally White midwestern middle school. Findings from Henfield's (2011) study consisted of three major themes surrounding participants' perceptions and experiences with microaggressions by White teachers: assumption of deviance, assumption of a universal Black American experience, and assumption of White cultural superiority and communication styles. To overcome racism, some successful Black males deemed microaggressions in school as normal societal behavior with which they must contend in order to remain resilient and finish their education (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Irving and Hudley (2008) reported a common folk saying in the Black community, "Get a good education because that is the only thing the White man can't take away from you" (p. 691). With the constant struggle against racism being a normal way of life in the Black community, Black males who successfully complete their education gain something White men can never remove.

Cultural differences can perpetuate racism in schools when the culture of the faculty is different than the culture of the students. The education of many Black males

has been negatively impacted by the superiority of White culture in operating and leading educational institutions (Henfield, 2011; Irving & Hudley, 2008; Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Irving and Hudley (2008) asked 115 Black male participants at an urban high school to complete a Likert-type survey for their study regarding cultural identity, cultural mistrust, and the achievement of Black males. The participant survey results indicated White teachers teach in a manner that favors White students, and Black students should be on their guard when around White people. Likewise, behavioral expectations, classroom strategies, and classroom materials reflect the dominant White culture of the teaching force (Allen, 2014). In a study of four Black males deemed academically successful at a large suburban high school near a large western city, Allen (2014) interviewed the students and their families finding that Black fathers had high family expectations in order to prepare their children to survive and be successful in a White world having low expectations for them. On the other hand, in Goings' (2016a) study of the experiences of two high achieving successful Black male students from two historically Black college and universities (HBCU), Black male participants overcame early academic and social barriers to complete their degrees with supportive Black teachers and peers who held high expectations, who shared many of the same life experiences, and who they identified with. Even though the participants and professors related culturally and participants agreed their Black professors were imperative to their success, both student participants believed education was important for their future and ensured they "maintained steady focus on their studies despite numerous opportunities to engage in destructive behaviors" (Goings, 2016a, p. 68). Studying the academic achievement of Black male athletes, 10 participants (one principal, two counselors, two

teachers, one coach, two parents, and two varsity student-athletes) were interviewed by Harris, Hines, Kelly, Williams, and Bagley (2014) regarding factors considered critical for Black student-athlete success. Harris et al. (2014) found having and communicating high expectations to all Black students increased cultural trust and a sense of belonging. Along with cultural trust and belonging (Harris et al., 2014), determination and perseverance from within was found to be important in Goings' (2016a) study. However, perseverance from within may be useless, as Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) proposed Black students may question the necessity of a commitment to hard work when accomplishments likely would not change how they or other Black people were viewed or valued in society. Whiteness that dominates America's schools is often unrealized by White staff because it is part of their culture (Allen, 2014; Irving & Hudley, 2008), and they generally set the tone for school culture as they hold the power.

Characteristics of Success and Culture

Black males who succeeded in school had at least one commonality: high self-efficacy. Cornel West (2017), a well-known scholar of African American studies, believed a feeling of worthlessness was a primary problem of Black males, and Goings' (2016a; 2016b) studies supported his thought. High self-efficacy, studied and explained by Bandura (1994) as the belief in one's abilities, helped Black males in Goings' (2016a; 2016b) studies to accept, embrace, and conquer academic challenges. As reported by several researchers, strong self-efficacy aided Black males in overcoming intentional and unintentional persistent acts of racism that occurred in the American educational system as they experienced it (Allen, 2014; Anumba, 2015; Goings, 2016b). While high self-

efficacy was a characteristic of the learner, there were other characteristics evident within schools that impacted Black male academic success.

After interviewing 29 Black males between the ages of 14 and 18 and an unspecified number of teachers to study "the relationship between Black male learning styles and their teachers' teaching styles" (p. 434), McDougal (2009) specifically suggested using the interconnectedness or harmoniousness of Black culture to engage students through relating information to the real world. Using real-world experiences and situations from Black culture in the curriculum was more engaging for Black students (McDougal, 2009); however, many White teachers lack knowledge or experience with Black male culture (Allen & Boykin, 1992). According to an article by Allen and Boykin (1992), failure of Black males was often contributed to the cultural gap between the home and school where the home embraces Black culture while school environments reflect White culture evident with the staff, behavioral expectations, and school programs. Puchner and Markowitz (2015) found that to still be true nearly 25 years later. With culturally responsive teaching suggested as a way to value other cultures, teachers "respond to differences in students' communication and learning styles, by altering their own teaching techniques and methods of classroom management" (Billings, 2009, abstract) to address the ways schools have failed minority students. Culturally responsive teaching has been suggested in more recent times to counter this cultural disconnect and increase Black male success in the classroom (McDougal, 2009).

One of the four participants interviewed from predominantly White institutions (PWI) in the west and midwest for Hotchkins' and Dancy's (2015) study of Black student leaders at PWIs stated that White people "don't understand my drive to belong, to give

back to communities of color . . . but keep me around to show they are accepting of differences" (p. 39). A part of CRT suggests an *interest convergence* where White groups are accepting of Black culture when they benefit from that acceptance (Bell, 1992; Taylor et al., 2016). Sports is the most common area in which interest convergence can be seen because many people love a good football game with great athletes who win for the home team (Bell, 1992). Irving and Hudley (2008), in their study on cultural identification and academic achievement, discussed a common stereotype was Black males being more successful than White males in nonacademic areas, like athletics. Because winning sporting events is important to White stakeholders and needed for making money for the school, Black males who are talented athletes tend to perform better in academic subjects (Irving & Hudley, 2008). Because the performance of Black athletes benefits the interests of White people, many Black athletes' interactions with academics tend to be more successful than nonathletes because of privileges afforded them in order to maintain their status as a playing athlete (Harris et al., 2014). While some athletes were passed along due to their athletic status, Harris et al. (2014) found other Black student athletes benefitted from increased accountability, teamwork, and scaffolded support provided. If all Black students received the aforementioned supports, academic achievement would increase.

Another component that disadvantages Black male students noted by Robertson and Chaney (2017) was the prominence of White privilege or cultural differences and the exclusion of real-world content related to the interests of Black males. Two themes were determined from Robertson and Chaney's (2017) qualitative study seeking to understand factors impacting Black male students at PWIs in the south: *racism and racial*

microaggressions and *African American experience is not important to faculty and the university*. Results from the study showed 9 of the 12 participants expressed concern that few college courses were offered for studying the accomplishments of Black people, specifically in predominantly White colleges (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Hotchkins and Dancy (2015), however, noted that school organizations and sports provided Black students a way to build relationships with others, gather internships and scholarship information (already commonly known to White students), and increase the likelihood of college completion. Even with reported microaggressions during these activities, Black male students refused to quit (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015; Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Negative stereotypes were, and still are, evident in American education (Henfield, 2011); however, successful Black males as noted by Anumba (2015) and Goings (2016b) refuse to allow the perceptions of them to negatively impact their self-efficacy and drive for college completion. To combat cultural differences, Wood and Jocius (2013) wrote a descriptive article published in *The Reading Teacher* that discussed providing culturally relevant texts to Black males with Black characters experiencing Black culture, which they believed could increase engagement, motivation, and help students find value in reading. Still, few experiences reflecting Black culture were provided in schools (Robertson & Chaney, 2017); therefore, the message of inferiority of Black culture continues to be commonplace. With the need for increased representation of Black culture in schools, the experiences of Black males need to be heard to be understood.

Experiences

People respond to, listen to, and learn from stories and experiences (Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016; Taylor, 2016). Peter, one

of 11 participants in Warde's (2007) qualitative study of factors contributing to the success of Black males who earned a baccalaureate degree, stated, "I used to hang out with my now brother-in-law drinking and so forth. I just thought this couldn't be the life for me. I needed to find a way to get to college" (p. 64). Peter had a realization, went to college, and eventually finished his degree (Warde, 2007). More clearly explaining another factor contributing to school success found in Warde's (2007) study, a predictor of success noted by Wood, Newman, and Harris (2015) from their work with the data of first-year Black male students in community college was the need for improved self-efficacy to increase integration into the community college. As described previously, self-efficacy was a significant predictor of Black males' likelihood of talking with professors and advisors regarding academics and using resources to maximize learning (Wood, Newman, & Harris, 2015). Not being from White culture and subconsciously recognizing Whiteness, Black male students were hesitant to interact with White instructors (Warde, 2007). Low self-efficacy could explain the reluctance, or hesitancy could suggest prior negative experiences when interacting with teachers, as proposed by Warde (2007). Throughout literature describing the educational experiences of Black males, White normed culture oppressed them; however, as self-efficacy increased, success increased.

Some of the Black males' school experiences were influential on their success. Using individual and group interviews, Tucker, Dixon, and Griddine (2010) studied the experiences of nine academically successful Black males in a large midwestern high school to determine the effect *mattering*, or being important to other students and adults, had on their academic success. Summarized from Black males' experiences, a feeling of

being important to other students and faculty created acceptance, promoted belonging, and increased achievement even in a school with White norms (Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010). In a study by Wood and Palmer (2013) using 2,200 student surveys to understand personal goal differences between Black males and other males in community colleges, Black males were 219% more likely than White males to have a goal of being a community leader and 108% more likely to desire to be financially well off. Ironically, even though 68% of Black males had the goal of being a community leader, they reportedly experienced social and cultural isolation in many schools while reporting increased feelings of rejection (Wood & Palmer, 2013). To reverse feelings of rejection and promote inclusion in his study, Tucker et al. (2010) suggested, especially for the school counselors, ensuring every Black male had someone at the institution who mentored him or mattered to him. While the study by Tucker et al. (2010) recommended an increase in faculty mentorship of Black males, Bottiani, Bradshaw, and Mendelson (2016) conducted a quantitative study of 19,726 Black and White students from 58 different high schools to learn about perceptions of inequality in school support. At the conclusion of the study, Bottiani et al. (2016) reported increased engagement, improved behavior, and overall success stemmed from positive relationships with school staff, even though supportive relationships were few in minority schools. In fact, a significant ($y = -.08$, $p = .02$) negative association was found between school diversity and high expectations, especially for Black students in high socioeconomic schools (Bottiani et al., 2016). Therefore, racial disparities were found in Black males' perceptions of caring by school staff (Bottiani, et al., 2016).

While teachers' caring about Black male students was shown to be beneficial in research by Adelabu (2007), Harris et al. (2014), Tucker et al. (2010) and Wood and Palmer (2013), it also provided students with a partner or mentor whom they knew believed their success mattered. These qualitative studies, and the one by Warde (2007) using a focus group of 11 Black males in graduate school to investigate factors beneficial to successfully complete a 4-year college degree, that relayed the stories of Black males who succeeded were an indication that more studies like them are needed. With limited research focusing on positive experiences, the study of academically successful Black males helped understand how Black males successfully experience school at all levels of education; however, for Black males to feel included and accepted, they need to see more of themselves in the curriculum.

Incorporating Culture

Historically, educational institutions operated according to White norm, but all cultures need to be valued. A common sentiment I have observed by White faculty of students from Black families is the belief that Black culture does not value education. Puchner and Markowitz (2015), as reported from a qualitative study of the evolution of six White teachers' understanding about race, found all participants initially believed that Black families did not value education and were neglectful. This belief often does not give credence to recognize that Black parents may not be as involved due to their time-consuming jobs and feelings of inferiority planted in them by school personnel, but that should not be interpreted as a lack of caring (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). With teachers that hold the belief that Black families do not value education come low expectations; therefore, Puchner and Markowitz (2015) suggested schools begin

transforming faculty and staff members' beliefs about Black parents or families to help increase achievement. Historically, Black males and families conformed to White culture and beliefs, as stated in CRT, for school success (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Irving & Hudley, 2008; McDougal, 2009), but Black families should still be valued.   In *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African American Students*, Perry et al. (2003) suggested educational institutions turn from finding problems with Black families to examining how day-to-day school practices create underachievement.

A culturally responsive learning environment takes into consideration "the cultural background, experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and values of others in the planning" (Whitaker, 2019, p. 30). To promote change through social justice, the experiences of two first-generation Black male college graduates from a rural area in Hines, Borders, and Gonzalez's (2015) phenomenological study described their determination to succeed and refusal to quit as motivation to complete their college degree. While the presence of cultural mistrust significantly decreased the grade point average and achievement of Black males, similar to the study by Hines et al. (2015), determination proved influential in Irving and Hudley's (2008) study on cultural identification and achievement for 115 Black males in 11th and 12th grades in an urban southern California high school. In addition to support and determination, culturally responsive teaching that embraced the incorporation of Black culture into instruction was needed (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). In Robertson and Chaney's (2017) qualitative study mentioned in a previous section the 12 Black male students at PWIs interviewed reported the university did not offer African American studies, professors did not engage issues relevant to Black students, and relationships with Black students were not a priority (Robertson & Chaney, 2017).

Paralleling the White norm of American education, Robertson and Chaney (2017) found the perception of a lack of quality positive interactions between the four Black males they interviewed and their White teachers. They further noted participants indicated most of their White instructors at the PWI did not use culturally responsive teaching (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). As described, schools appear to cater to White culture by embracing a Eurocentric worldview (Glocke, 2016).

Eurocentric Worldview

While schools operate according to White norm (Eurocentric Worldview) and racism persists, there are researched strategies and ways to integrate cultural characteristics shown to be beneficial to Black male students (Glocke, 2016). Currently, schools adhere to the Eurocentric Worldview (Glocke, 2016; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015). In an article written from her experiences using an Afrocentric Worldview when teaching her own college courses, Glocke (2016) described the current Eurocentric Worldview as a one-size fits all approach using competition and individualism where students are expected to sit quietly and individually recall information to answer questions with only one answer and no practical application. McDougal (2009) concluded different cultures were not recognized in White educational institutions. Black males come from a culture different than the Eurocentric Worldview—the Afrocentric Worldview (Glocke, 2016).

Afrocentric Worldview as a Strategy

Characteristics of the African Worldview are reflected in Black culture and in Black male students, yet the Eurocentric Worldview remains the norm for schools (Glocke, 2016). A school culture modeled after Black culture would look different. Glocke (2016), in her article, described her experiences using the Afrocentric Worldview

to conduct her college level classes. She explained the African Worldview as social, cooperative, and family and community oriented where discussions and stories are valued (Glocke, 2016). Incorporating oral traditions, students participated in *call and response* at all times (even during lessons), which is constant discussion and verbal interactions as seen in Black churches (Glocke, 2016). Other characteristics of Glocke's (2016) African Worldview class included oral narratives and assessments, communal assessments, comprehensive feedback, interconnectedness, classroom as a family, extra credit for attending class related events, and relationship building. Given the opportunity for discussion on assessments, 62% of the students who completed a survey at the conclusion of her classes reported less test anxiety (Glocke, 2016). Assessment questions were open-ended, required students to explain their thinking, and provided opportunities for partial credit (Glocke, 2016). Additionally, the teacher walked around answering questions during assessments (Glocke, 2016). This assessment strategy used by Glocke (2016) promoted the learning of critical thinking through debating, questioning, and reasoning.

In the African Worldview, Glocke (2016) described personal relationships as the most important aspect of life. In her earlier study, McDougal (2009) concluded Black males in an Afrocentric classroom increased retention and academic performance when completing cooperative projects using relevant content. With some tweaking of the school environment, Glocke (2016) believes more Black males could access increased academic success in the Afrocentric Worldview classroom. From her experiences, Glocke (2016) found other cultures, even White culture, increased success when the African Worldview methodology was used. Using a characteristic of African

Worldview, I believe adding the stories of successful Black males to the current literature adds more strategies and ideas to a teachers' toolbox to help Black males increase achievement, provides Black male students with increased motivation and tools for academic success, and encourages more equity and acceptance of Black culture in American education.

Conclusion

The conceptual framework provided the foundation of my study. My personal experiences as a student and now a teacher helped guide the development and implementation. Being a Black male, I have different experiences and perspectives than most of my classmates and colleagues. I acknowledged my beliefs and subjectivities that included Feds I, argumentative I, and revenge I that were developed throughout my experiences as a Black male. Using CRT as my theoretical framework, I better understood my own experiences as I collected and analyzed the experiences of my participants. Finally, while much literature was found detailing the struggles of Black male students, the literature I reviewed confirmed the need for more stories of successful Black male students. The next chapter describes my research design which includes all steps taken to collect, analyze, and present data

Chapter III

RESEARCH DESIGN

Creating a counter-narrative was the goal of the qualitative data gathering and analysis methods I used for this research. The experiences of four separate cases (Abjiel, Ant, Sting, and Davis), or individual participants, were analyzed and combined to understand how the participants' experiences resulted in success contrary to the majoritarian narrative that Black males are behavior problems and failures in schools. A cross case counter-narrative was constructed to present the data and demonstrate how themes were generated from the stories. More specifically, counter-narrative was the qualitative research method used with a few characteristics of case study included. This chapter begins by specifying the research questions that guided my study and continues by detailing all steps taken when choosing participants, collecting data, and analyzing data. The chapter ends with a discussion of validity.

Research Questions

As Maxwell (2013) suggested, research questions drawn primarily from the conceptual framework were used to focus and guide the study, and overall, they addressed what I wanted to learn and understand by doing this research (Maxwell, 2013). My research questions were, as Maxwell (2013) prescribed, in flux throughout the research process. From the very beginning of my doctoral program, I was interested in Black males who beat the odds and graduated from college. However, the research questions were not as clear, so they evolved as I designed my study and read literature.

Eventually, I realized I wanted to gather the experiences of several Black males near a large metropolitan southern city who successfully completed a college degree, understand how they handled institutional racism in order to achieve academic success, and discover strategies teachers could use to help promote the academic success of Black males who are similar. Throughout the study, I sought to answer the following overarching question: How did the experiences of four young Black men impact attainment of an effective education and where did those experiences intersect with institutional racism along the path to a college degree? This overarching question guided the study as data were gathered, analyzed, and reconstructed to form a counter-narrative. After IRB approval (Appendix A) I set out to answer the more specific subquestions:

- How did experiences in and with education influence the way four Black males' made sense of their success in educational environments? This question was answered specifically through the stories about experiences related to the school or educational environment that either aided or potentially hindered academic success. Following CRT (Ladson-Billings, 2016; Taylor, 2016), narrative recreations of experiences were gathered to answer the question.

- How did experiences in and with family influence the way Black males' made sense of their academic success? Answering this question required stories of family experiences that challenged or promoted academic success. Knowing the stereotype that Black families do not value education (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015), the stories shared with me showed this stereotype null. If enough of these stories are told maybe they can help offset the stereotype and

show that racism is indeed a permanent fixture in American society (Delgado et al., 2012).

- How did experiences in and with society influence the way Black males' made sense of their academic success? Because much of Black culture is communal (Glocke, 2016), society and peers played a role in academic experiences that lead to academic success. Answering this research question helped me fulfill the purpose of the study. By using stories of experiences with peers and community members, I gained insight into another dimension of the men's worlds that helped lead them to academic success while exposing racism ever-present in educational institutions.

- How did experiences in and with cultural norms influence the way Black males' made sense of their academic success? Finally, I used stories relaying experiences with culture to identify the influence culturally based life experiences had on the academic success of these Black male participants. Being from a different culture than the one leading their schools, these four academically successful Black males navigated White school norms. I further used these stories detailing Black males' experiences in school to provide teachers with useful strategies for helping students like them succeed academically and install confidence in students to the level of motivating them to continue their education.

My research questions provided guidance and organization to collect data across all areas of the participants' lives. Answering these questions provided rich data needed to understand their success and present that data as a counter-narrative. The next section

explains the methods I used to find answers to these questions and construct the counter-narrative.

Research Methods

Because the research questions related to gathering descriptions of experiences, qualitative research was the most appropriate method as it uses interviewing as a key data gathering tool (Maxwell, 2013). The research methods section details my choices of research design, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and data presentation (Maxwell, 2013). Other decisions related to my research topic and purpose are included as well.

Research Design: Counter-narrative + Case Study

Entering the doctoral program, I knew I would conduct my research on the topic of Black males; however, I had no idea there were so many options for research design. Then, I heard about counter-narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016), and I was hooked. Solórzano and Yosso (2002/2016) defined the counter-narrative as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)" (p. 133). Unlike counter-narratives, majoritarian stories are more often heard and presented as narratives about marginalized people with the negative stereotypes in society that are standard or expected (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). For an example of Solórzano and Yosso's thought, if a White person was injured in gang violence in a White neighborhood, common sentiment would be shock that it happened in a "good" neighborhood with "good" schools. Their explanation of majoritarian thought emphasized how the words implicitly suggest the violence would be expected in bad neighborhoods housing people with darker skin and

poverty. They continued to point out along with the belief in biological deficits,

majoritarian stories present cultural deficits pointing to ideas like Black families do

not value education and posing the solution to what they see as a problem. That

solution is cultural assimilation, yet this thought still keeps the blame firmly pointed at

the Black families. Unlike most majoritarian stories, the counter-narrative used in

CRT provides positive stories of people of color, my people, to expose, analyze, and

challenge "the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016,

p. 133).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002/2016) described three types of counter-stories or

counter-narratives: personal stories or narratives, other people's stories or narratives,

and composite stories or narratives. Combining my own experiences as a Black male

and what came to me in first person and I made third person as I re-narrated the

biographical stories of participants' experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016),

composite story or composite narrative was my counter-narrative of choice for this

study. The composite counter-narrative illuminated how Black males experienced and

responded to their personal educational journey. Using my personal experiences as a

Black male meeting participant criterion, I created a fictional counter-narrative

composed of stories that were told to me and included all of the story elements

traditionally used in fictional literature (e.g., beginning, middle, end, character

development, etc.). Finally, the final counter-narrative was constructed by combining

participants' experiences and organizing them according to themes I constructed

during data analysis. I specifically looked for themes with the goals of exposing

racism in the educational setting, challenging the established stereotypes, showing

possibilities beyond current experiences, and constructing a rich story to teach others (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). The composite counter-narrative allowed me to achieve my goal of using a fictional counter-narrative to share academically successful Black males' experiences in the specific geographic area in which I live as well as providing them an opportunity to express their voices in ways those living out the negative stereotypes may understand. With storytelling being an important aspect of Black culture (Glocke, 2016), the presentation of results as a counter-narrative was appealing to me as I thought it most effective for magnifying the voices of the people my study sought to spotlight—Black males!

Some elements of a case study were also used in my study. According to Merriam (2009), case studies focus on a few instances of a phenomena. While success in school typically would not be a phenomenon, I believe academic achievement is a phenomenon for Black males as Black male academic success stories are not the norm. Because a case study analyzes a phenomenon in depth (Merriam, 2009), I had a small number of participants to conduct in depth interviews. Four participants completed the interviews. Taking Yin's (2009) suggestion of focusing on a single social unit, I focused on the social unit of successful Black males in a particular geographic area to find components of their lives that contributed to their academic success. After collecting and analyzing data, I created the counter-narrative using each participant's experiences as data to support the themes I constructed during data analysis of the transcripts and explain the tenets of CRT that were at work in their academic journeys. In the counter-narrative, I reconstructed participants' experiences to show how these four Black males made meaning of their individual experiences, and consequently, I

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was able to expose the racism they faced in various educational institutions. To present the data, the participants' experiences were retold using actual events and direct quotes to preserve their understanding of their experiences and retain their thoughts, feelings, and point of view to maintain the richness of the experiences as suggested by Daher, Carre, Jaramillo, Olivares, and Tomicic (2017). Using the counter-narrative approach gave me focus as a storyteller of Black males' stories describing their experiences. I followed the lead of other critical race theorists (Ladson-Billings, 2016; Martinez, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016; Taylor, 2016) and used the counter-narrative my participants and I created to contrast the majoritarian stories often heard about Black males in education. I was able to ensure these Black males received positive recognition and exposure that is so needed in American society. To collect these stories, I selected the setting of the study and secured participants.

Setting and Participant Selection

When deciding upon the site and participants for my study, I spent a great deal of time merely thinking and reflecting. I tried to place myself in the shoes of my participants to realize how I would feel about participating in this study. My intention was to make the setting and participants as comfortable as possible. Therefore, for every decision I made, I asked myself if I would be comfortable, and if I would participate until the end of the study. After selecting the setting for the study, I began securing participants.

Setting. The study took place in the metro area of a large southern city. This setting was deliberately chosen because it is the area in which I was raised and now

teach. Being in a metro area community approximately 4 miles from the large

metropolitan city limits, the community's demographics began changing a few years

before I was born. *White flight*, which is White people leaving an area as Black people

move in, occurred, and the community shifted from a predominantly White middle-

class neighborhood to a community comprised of predominantly impoverished Black

families. Living in the community for the entirety of my life, I repeatedly heard how it

changed over the past 20 to 30 years. According to local longtime residents, White

flight began in the early 1980s, not long after the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. Black

families began moving from the large downtown inner city bordering two counties.

When public transportation increased, the small community just over the county/city

line that was the setting for the study grew. As Black families moved in, White

families moved out. The small community in the neighboring county bordering the

large city is the setting for my study. Population for that specific community is not

available in the unincorporated city; however, county demographics illustrate a change

in demographics, and visiting the community, it is evident the area is predominantly

people of color. According to the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (n.d.),

Black student enrollment increased in the county over the last 25 years. Specifically,

in 1994 there were approximately 6,000 Black male students and 33,000 White male

students in the county; as of March 2020, there were approximately 17,000 Black male

students and 21,000 White male students (The Governor's Office of Student

Achievement, n.d.). The number of Black males almost tripled over the 26-year span

(The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.). Like the population, the

reputation of the schools changed. Twenty years ago, the county was known for

"good" schools and high achievement. With the influx of a marginalized culture, the part of the county bordering the large city developed a bad reputation throughout the rest of the county, and non-White people were blamed for decreased test scores and increased negative social issues. Despite the shift in demographics and culture, my experiences as a student and a teacher in the area were that schools operated in the same manner year after year.

Physically, with the exception of a few schools, most school buildings are old and beginning to crumble as this is the oldest community in the county. The area consists of two high schools, four middle schools, and 10 elementary schools. When recruiting participants in the area, I sought Black males who had been a part of these schools. Set entirely in the community described, this study was designed to raise the voices of members of that community and bring attention to the small representation of academically successful Black males raised and educated in the community. They varied in the degree to which they represented the majority of residents, but by highlighting their academic success stories and describing the environment the students experienced on the margins of society, the stories are intended to inspire other Black males in the community.

Even though the study focused on the specific community and all participants were raised and schooled in the community, interviews were not required to take place in the community. The setting for the interviews was discussed with each participant. Being more comfortable in familiar environments, I suggested the participants' own home or a place of their choosing as the interview spot. In the end, each participant

chose their own home for the interviews. Participant requirements are described in the next section.

      Participants. Before seeking participants, criteria for participation in the study was determined. Because there was a relatively small number of Black males from the community who completed a 4-year college degree, there was little sampling involved, but participants were chosen purposefully using homogenous and maximum variation in order to target a very specific group of young men, a method Patton (2015) described. They were homogenous in that I was needing all participants to be Black males who attended schools in the specific community for their entire public-school career and who graduated from one of the two high schools. The reason for this criterion was to keep the study grounded in the community of interest. For the sole purpose of my study, the definition of successful was Black males having graduated from college with a degree and a minimum grade point average of 2.75. Therefore, all participants earned a degree from a 4-year college with a 2.75 minimum grade point average. All participants had a job and were contributing members of society; however, because academic success was the focus, these two descriptors were not required but happened to apply. Participants were heterogenous or different in that they differed in the schools attended, years of enrollment, age, socioeconomic status, and family characteristics. Regarding age, participants were required to fall in the age range of 23-30 years of age. The beginning age of 23 was selected because that is the age most people graduate from college. However, I topped the age at 30 because I did not want participants' memory of experiences so far removed from their public education that important details might be overlooked or omitted. Additionally, the age

of 30 allowed for those participants who may have furthered their education with graduate degrees (two participants earned a graduate degree).

While following the established criteria, my goal in choosing participants was to represent how Black males in the general population of the community were educated. Because the general population of Black males in the study location learned in general education classrooms, I also considered possible circumstances that would cause me to not invite a particular volunteer participant in the study even if they met the previously mentioned requirements. Black males in special education and accelerated or honors classes did not reflect the majority of the general population; therefore, potential participants educated in those programs were not considered because that was atypical to the general population. Additionally, one of the high schools offers a performing arts magnet program. Students enrolled in the performing arts magnet program did not qualify because they were not typical of the general population. Participation is these programs was asked on the questionnaire (Appendix B) each potential participant completed.

At the time of recruitment, I was teaching at an elementary school in the suburban community that was foundational to my work. Looking for six to eight potential participants, I asked teacher friends of mine if they knew previous Black male students who might be interested in participating. Following their leads, I located two participants. My teacher friend who located the participants called them for permission to give me their phone number. Then, I called each of the potential participants on the phone to give them a very short overview of the study and discuss initial requirements for participation. Abjiel and Ant were the initial participants

contacted. Both young men met initial requirements and were willing to be possible

participants. Therefore, introductory meetings were scheduled. Individually they were

given a choice of a basketball game or meeting for coffee. Both chose an introductory

basketball game, which was scheduled at a local gym.

During the individual introductory meetings, potential participants completed

the questionnaire (See Appendix B). After I reviewed Abjiel and Ant's questionnaires,

both of them met all requirements for participation. Interestingly, Abjiel attended high

school with me. Going by a different name, I recognized him when we met for our

basketball game. At our introductory meeting, he provided me with the name and

phone number for three other prospective participants. Likewise, Ant gave me

information for two potential participants. I contacted each person they suggested,

explained the goal of the study, and invited them to an introductory meeting. All three

prospective participants given to me by Abjiel met participant requirements and agreed

to meet, and one potential participant given to me by Ant met requirements to meet.

The other person only attended high school in the community. Therefore, the final

four of the six original participants were met as a result of contact with the first two

participants. All potential participants chose to meet for basketball except for Sting.

He opted for coffee at Waffle House, and when he knew he met requirements, he

wanted to go ahead and begin the first interview. Five days after the individual

introductory meeting, I called each participant to invite them to participate.

Surprisingly, all six contacted agreed. Therefore, data collection in the form of

interviews and field notes from observations began.

Beginning the study, I hoped to have six to eight participants, and six participants were confirmed after initial introductory meetings; however, I ended up with only four participants who completed the study. Even though they initially agreed to participate, two participants changed their mind. When I arrived for one participant's first scheduled interview, he was not there. I waited for 30 minutes and tried to call him, but his phone number was no longer in service. I never heard from him again. The other potential participant, who would have been my last person to interview, never returned my calls to schedule the first interview. With my interviews started already and the richness of the data I was getting, I did not secure more participants deciding to continue with just four. Table 1 provides a brief overview of my four participants. Thus, data collection continued.

Table 1

Overview of Successful Black Male Participants

Participant	Age	GPA	Attend HBCU	Graduate Degree	Employed
Abjiel	29	2.8	No	Yes	Yes
Ant	27	3.5	Yes	No	Yes
Sting	29	3.2	No	Yes	Yes
Davis	26	3.0	Yes	No	Yes

I pondered including interviews and perspectives of peers, teachers, parents, and other people influential in the lives of the participants but chose not to as I was specifically interested in the experiences and perspectives of Black males. While other

people were important in their lives, other people could not tell me the experiences, emotions, and perspectives of Black male students. Therefore, I kept focused on the successful experiences of Black males through their eyes. The role of others was evident from the stories of Black male participants. To gather the most information possible, I built trusting relationships with each participant so they would be comfortable describing their experiences and telling me their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about race in their educational journey.

Research Relationships

Being a Black male, I had no concern building relationships with participants. Black culture embraces respectful and trusting relationships with peers, and I am a part of Black culture. Glocke (2016), a professor of Africana Studies at California State University, wrote an article defining an African Centered pedagogy (ACP) and demonstrating how ACP is influential for the success of Black students. Describing aspects of Black culture, she specifically wrote of the importance of oral traditions, community, and relationships that closely align with native African culture. More specifically and observed in her beginning Black studies college level classes, many Black males, who do and do not know each other, met with an unwritten and unspoken understanding of a communication protocol. Even though we were all Black males likely having that communication protocol as part of our culture, to build trust and community before beginning interviews, as briefly mentioned in the previous section, I had individual meet and greet sessions with each participant. With my love of basketball, I hoped to connect with participants by inviting each to a one-on-one game or to a meeting for a cup of coffee. I was following Maxwell's (2013) lead with this

and starting with an ice breaker and familiarity activity of some type. After a rapport was established, we moved on to the interview and data collection processes detailed later in this chapter. Confidentiality of identity and stories shared were discussed and measures taken to decrease any instances of identification and association of experiences. Being of the same ethnicity and gender, relationship and trust building was minimized, and no obstacles were apparent.

Data Collection

As previously mentioned, data collection came from interviews of Black males about their experiences. Seidman's (2013) three-phase interview method was used as it was designed to get information in contextualized segments; therefore, it helped with organization of the interviews. His approach recommended the use of three 90-minute interviews for interviewer and participant to "plumb the experience and to place it in context" (p. 17). Using Seidman's (2013) method as a protocol, a starting interview guide (Appendix C) was created and used to ensure my interviews were complete and focused.

Abiding by Seidman's (2013) protocol, the first interview focused on the life history of the participant. Thinking back to their earliest school memories, participants were asked to tell as much as possible about experiences that influenced their educational path (Seidman, 2013). The interview guide (Appendix C) indeed helped me stay on track and ensured that minimally the same topics were discussed with each participant. The second interview followed Seidman's (2013) lead of gathering details by asking participants to describe the process of succeeding in school and to give detailed descriptions of school experiences. Again, an interview guide

(Appendix D) was used. The goal of this interview was to reconstruct details of participants' experiences (Seidman, 2013) that influenced their academic success and contributed to their determination to complete their college degree. Participants were asked to describe relationships with other people and reconstruct events they believed led to their success and/or illustrated that success. The gathering of details in the form of rich description embedded in their stories was the ultimate goal of the second interview. In the third interview, participants were asked to reflect on the "meaning of their experience" (Seidman, 2013, p. 18). Where the second interview had the goal of gathering details about experiences, the goal of the third interview was to understand the emotional and intellectual connections the participants made among school, home, society, and culture that contributed to their academic success. Again, an interview guide (Appendix E) was used. Finally, I did as Seidman (2013) suggested and combined the past experiences and present life experiences by conversing about how they thought their past experiences impacted their success and life today to explore, clarify, and understand their academic success. In the end, the data were constructed as a counter-narrative to present the findings and show there are "possibilities for life other than the ones we live" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2414).

While conducting interviews, my greatest struggle was listening to the stories without interrupting. I have a tendency or need to talk, so I wrote "Shhhh!" on a sticky note and had it on my interview questions that were used as a guide to keep myself focused and on task; however, the participant dictated the direction of the interview through the stories told. Each interview was approximately the same length of time, varying by only 10-15 minutes. Realizing 90 minutes seemed like a long time

for an interview, Seidman (2013) suggested the time frame be verbalized before the interview; if needed, the 90 minutes was flexible. In actuality, the time passed very quickly and stayed around the 90-minute suggested limit.

Because there were three interviews with each participant, Seidman (2013) suggested spacing the interviews at least 3 days to 1 week apart. Even though I intended to space the interviews 1 week apart to allow for data analysis and everyday life in between, most interviews were 2 weeks apart because of schedules and the busyness of life. While Seidman (2013) suggested strictly adhering to this method, he advised there could be modifications as far as the logistics of spacing and time to accommodate the needs of participant and interviewer; however, the substance of the three interviews remained intact. Using Seidman's method provided guidance so I could collect the in-depth information sought.

To begin the interviews, I asked the participant to give me a pseudonym or a name to be used in his story. I wrote the pseudonym on a label and placed it over his real name, which I colored over with a black permanent marker, on the previously answered demographic questionnaire. Then, I read the research statement as required by the IRB (Appendix A) before reviewing information on the questionnaire with each participant in hopes of jumpstarting their memory and conversation. Additionally, this double checked that participants met the criteria to participate in the study. I asked participants to think back to elementary school stating, "Think back to your earliest school experiences. Tell me about those" (Appendix C). Participants were asked to describe the impact their experiences had on their education. More specifically, I asked, "How does that relate to your success?" One of the last questions was about the

participant's perspective on the impact of race on their school experiences. All interviews were recorded using the Garage Band program on my MacBook Air laptop computer, and the voice recorder app on my iPhone was used for backup. A microphone headset was available but not needed. After the first interview with each participant, I had the recording professionally transcribed to include exact words, sounds, pauses, and dialect characteristics. I attempted to transcribe my own interviews, but I did not have the patience. Transcription usually took a couple of days. Then, the transcripts and research journal notes were uploaded into MAXQDA. The data were coded using in vivo coding, emotion coding, axial coding, and pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016), which are described later in this chapter. Next, data were identified that needed further information or clarification in the next interview, and those topics were added to that participant's interview guide.

Subsequent interviews followed the same format: reading of the research statement, reviewing anything unclear from the previous interview, consulting the interview guide to stay focused (Appendix D and Appendix E), having data transcribed, coding data while listening to the recording and reading the transcripts, and determining any clarifications needed for the next interview; however, I was cognizant as the interview progressed to allow participants to shape the direction of the interviews. From these interviews, I hoped to collect stories/data to benefit current students by motivating them to be like one of these participants and benefit current teachers with strategies for helping Black males be successful academically.

While interviews were the main source of data collection, I followed Maxwell's (2013) suggestion of maintaining a research journal (Appendix F) to record specific

memos and detailed information about my participants' body language, their experiences, and my reflections. This was referenced and used alongside the interview data to enhance the data gathered in the interview. After interviews and aligning my research journal to the transcripts, I began data analysis for the purpose of writing the counter-narrative that would add my participants' voices to the literature.

Data Analysis

When I first learned about qualitative research, I was unclear about how to analyze the data. Always considering numbers to be data, I was quite confused. Through classroom discussion about qualitative research, I realized that words were also data, and we can learn much from words. However, I was still confused about exactly how to analyze word-based data until I bought *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* by Johnny Saldaña (2016).

Saldaña (2016) provided many options for coding and categorizing data. Having a difficult time deciding on the methods for my data analysis, I eventually found methods I believed would help me analyze the data to answer my research questions. I described the methods in further detail later in this section, but the following strategies were used to analyze and organize data: in vivo coding, emotion coding, axial coding, and pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016). In vivo began first cycle coding and used exact words, phrases, or idiosyncrasies of the interviewee to pull out important data, which was used to construct the counter-narrative. Also, during the first cycle, emotion coding was used to mark emotions recalled or experienced by the participant and inferred by me using my background knowledge and information from the transcripts. In vivo and emotion codes were combined and sorted to create

categories. Axial began second cycle coding to help identify important codes while

reducing and sorting the data into related categories to determine themes and build

meaning by noting their meaning making and, mostly, by interpreting their data.

Pattern coding was then used to determine themes by sorting material into more

meaningful groups to help explain the data and examine any patterns I previously

identified as a result of in vivo, emotion, and axial coding. Figure 1 gives a visual

overview of how the data were analyzed. Colors in the diagram have no meaning.

The broken border around "categories" represents the data broken apart, pulled out of

the transcripts, and sorted into categories. The heavy border around "themes"

symbolizes the synthesis and combining of categories that helped construct themes and

build meaning by interpreting their data. All analysis techniques assisted with

construction of a counter-narrative to give voice to my marginalized participants.

First Cycle Coding   Second Cycle Coding

in vivo   emotion   categories   axial   pattern   themes
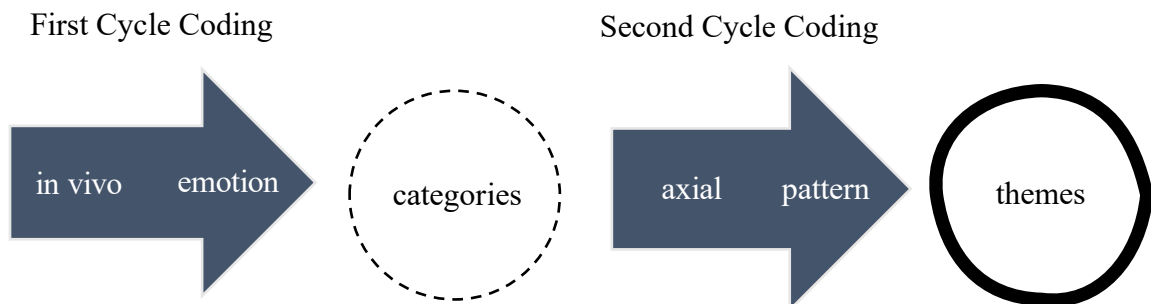
Figure 1. Overview of data analysis

To easily organize and access my data, I uploaded each transcript into

MAXQDA computer software for coding. Knowing my data were going to be

presented as a counter-narrative, I knew that a large amount of participants' exact

words could be used to maintain their voice in the counter-narrative and write dialogue

using their vernacular. Therefore, I chose in vivo as my initial coding of the raw data

after transcription. In vivo coding uses the exact words of the participant (Saldaña,

2016). Following Saldaña's (2016) guidance, I highlighted actual words or phrases that were emphasized by participants on the recordings; were related to education, society, culture, or family; were related to the literature; were interesting to me; or were deemed important by me as I coded the transcript while reading it and listening to the recording. Additionally, the highlights included words and phrases that were repetitive or that were cultural in vernacular. Table 2 shows examples of my final in vivo coding.

Table 2

In Vivo Coding of Successful Black Male Interviews

Participant	Original Statement	In Vivo Code
Abjiel	Middle school was rough. That's where I think the turning point of my life was in middle school or the part where I started venturing out on my own.	middle school rough turning point started venturing
Ant	So then I started, used to playing outside on the playground, but then they got rid of the basketball goal. There was no rim. So it was just a goal. So we used to just air play basketball. We played basketball on air. Then we got tired of doing that. So we started playing football and then they took the football away because we were too aggressive.	got rid basketball took the football away too aggressive
Sting	Some vulgar words. Like boy you're sorry as hell, yeah something like that yeah. Or you're dookie. Yeah.	You're sorry as hell you're dookie
Davis	It wouldn't have been nothing big because when I knew them, they would've help me kept on the right track.	been nothing big would've help me right track

When I initially began in vivo coding, I found that I was coding long sections of the transcript, and that was not true in vivo coding. However, the unintentional pulling

out of the longer sections was helpful because it gave me a reduced amount of important text making it easier to code using in vivo coding. I also sorted those longer chunks of data chronologically by school level: elementary, middle, high, and college. That provided me with organization for the construction of the counter-narrative.

Even though the goals of my study were to present the experiences of successful Black males, understand what those experiences meant to them, and expose racism that exists in educational institutions, I felt it was important to pull out exact words and phrases of participants to see how they fit together when constructing categories. Using words of the participants through in vivo coding "enhances and deepens an adults' understanding of their cultures and worldviews" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 104). Being a Black male hearing and reading the experiences of the participants helped me to reflect on my own experiences, realize similarities across our lives, and better understand how Black people in Black culture have similar experiences and beliefs. Holding true to participants' own events and words helped me construct a counter-narrative that amplified their voices by using their actual words in ways they actually intended. Therefore, in vivo coding was an appropriate method to use for initial coding of the raw data.

After in vivo coding, or pulling out relevant words and phrases, the transcripts and memos in my journal were read again and coded for emotions. Emotions were identified in what the participants said, their tone, gestures noted in the field notes, and inferences made by me. When Ant was describing his expulsion from kindergarten, he gave the impression he did not care by laughing and waving his hand, but that was the first story he told, and he referenced it frequently. I made notes in my observation

journal when Ant referenced this experience throughout his interviews. Similarly,

when talking about his brother being led out of the principal's office in handcuffs,

Abjiel said he had "tears running down [Abjiel's] face." This was an emotional code

from his words in the transcript indicating he was upset and disappointed. Likewise,

as he was telling the story, he teared up. I noted that in my research journal. Figure 2

shows a snippet of notes from my journal where I quickly jotted down observations

during interviews. Notes were entered into MAXQDA for emotion coding. I believe

emotion coding was important to understand participants' experiences and to construct

the counter-narrative that portrays those emotions.
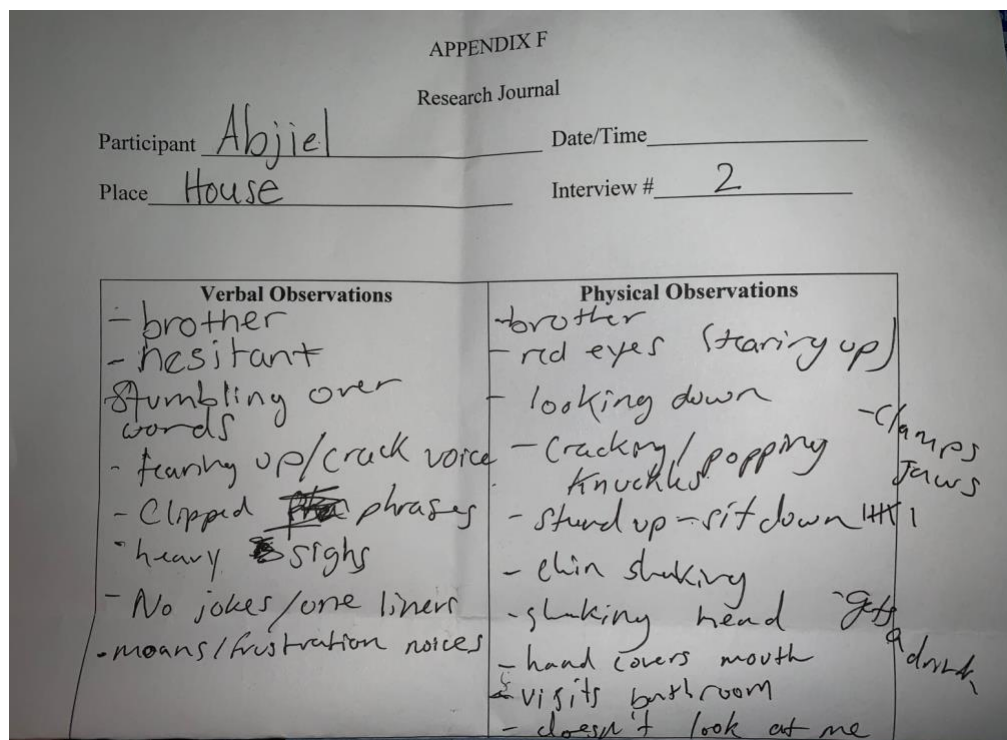
Figure 2. Observation journal notes.

After completing in vivo and emotion coding, I began sorting, combining, and

categorizing according to similarities in meaning as I saw them and my understanding

of the data, which developed through reflection. Following Saldaña's (2016)

guidance, exact words and emotions of participants were sorted for similarities and

category headings were developed. Specifically, I sorted similar codes into groups. Then, I combined the ideas in the groups to create a category. For example, basketball, football, and track were all sports that were discussed; therefore, they were all combined to create a group with a main idea heading of "sports." Figure 3 shows the related categories into which the in vivo and emotion codes were sorted. The colors provide visual contrast and have no meaning; however, the size of the words represent frequency of the codes. The larger headings contained more passages coded with that particular code. Data from all participants were sorted into these categories.
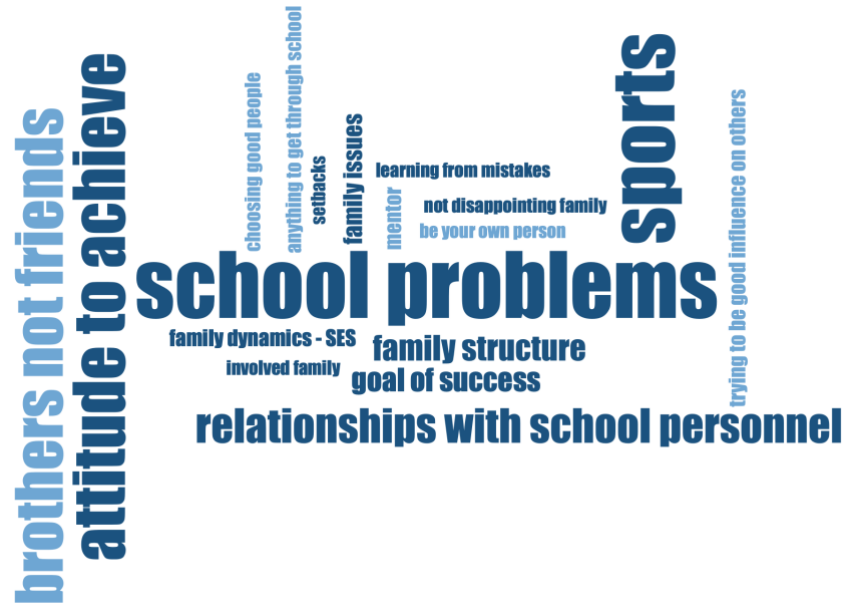
Figure 3. Categories made from in vivo and emotion codes.

For the second round of data analysis, I used axial coding and pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016). First, I used axial coding to reduce and combine the categories from initial coding to determine themes. Beginning axial coding, I returned to each category, where synonyms and repetitive phrases from the in vivo and emotion coding were removed and dominant phrases identified as suggested by Saldaña (2016). To

me, this first step was "cleaning up" or purging the data. Once they were reduced and combined, I recreated a chart of code frequencies detailing the number of different codes within a category as shown in Figure 4. Figure 4 shows the categories used for axial coding and the frequency of those codes in each participants' transcript.

Code System	Sting	Abjiel	Ant	Davi...
▼ Categories				
setbacks		■	■	■
be your own person	■		■	■
attitude to achieve	■	■	■	■
mentor	■	■	■	■
school problems	■	■	■	■
choosing good people		■		■
anything to get through school		■		■
family structure	■	■	■	■
family issues		■	■	■
family dynamics - SES	■	■	■	
learning from mistakes		■	■	
brothers not friends	■	■	■	■
trying to be good influence on other		■	■	■
not disappointing family	■	■	■	■
relationships with school personnel	■	■	■	■
sports	■	■	■	■
goal of success	■	■	■	■
involved family	■	■	■	■

Figure 4. Frequency of codes in categories after reducing and combining as generated by a MAXQDA report.

Seeing the frequencies after my first step of axial coding helped me determine similarities and differences in the four participants' data and helped me combine the categories during the next step of axial coding. To determine the main themes, I used the categories with the highest frequency of uses of a code among all participants. The seven categories with the most uses of a particular code were pulled out and became the new category heading or topic. Then, the long list of remaining categories was sorted, combined, and placed under one of the new related category headings to determine themes. For example, *sports* was a category that I consistently used and frequently assigned the correlating codes across all participants, so *succeeding through*

sports became a theme without combining other categories. However, the remaining themes were constructed by combining categories. *Family issues* was a category frequented by Abjiel's data. Because the information was still valuable and Abjiel learned from the difficulties of his family, I combined *family issues* with *learning from mistakes* and *setbacks*. Once the categories were combined, the theme was determined. For example, *learning from mistakes* and *setbacks* was combined to *learning from mistakes and difficulties*. The categories *attitude to achieve* and *goal of success* were merged into a theme called *setting goals and attitudes for success* because they related to each other. This process continued until seven themes were determined: *succeeding through sports, building relationships with school personnel, succeeding through friendships, learning from mistakes and difficulties, setting goals and attitudes for success, choosing good people,* and *influencing others to succeed*. Figure 5 shows how the categories were sorted and combined into themes.

succeeding through sports	**building relationships with school personnel** • mentor • family dynamics - SES	**succeeding through friendships** • brothers not friends • not disappointing family
learning from mistakes and setbacks • school problems • family structure • family issues	**setting goals and attitudes for success** • be your own person • attitude to achieve	**choosing good people** • anything to get through school • brothers not friends
	influencing others to succeed • trying to be a good influence on others • involved family	

Figure 5. Themes determined from categories

Axial coding shows relationships among categories and subcategories to construct the context (who, what, when, where, why, and how) (Saldaña, 2016). Like cycle 1 coding, axial coding is important for thinking deeply about the data to determine conceptual categories, which became themes, and adding the elements of context (setting), conditions (routines or problems), interaction (exchanges between people), and consequences (outcomes) (Saldaña, 2016). Because these elements found in most good stories, I reread the codes in each theme, sorted them by similarities again, and created subcategories for each theme to construct the context. For example, reading the codes from the theme *setting goals and attitudes for success*, I found they fit into four subcategories: *lead don't follow*, *have a plan*, *have an end goal*, and *be positive*. Figure 6 shows the theme subcategories determined during axial coding. The themes are bolded in the chart and the subcategories are the bullet points.

Themes and Subcategories

choosing good people	**building relationships with school personnel**	**influencing others to succeed**	**succeeding through sports**	**succeeding through friendships**	**setting goals and attitudes for success**	**learning from mistakes and difficulties**
• friends to look after you • relating to a teacher • friend's families	• with administrators • with teachers and coaches • impression you want others to have	• communicating with them • helping the brotherhood • leading friends from trouble • be and love yourself • unspoken expectations • bringing struggling friends into the crew	• escape from life • builds character and discipline • with buddies • mentor coaches • Black people like sports • had to do well with grades • keeps you on right track	• made each other better • create a brotherhood • not disappoint each other • encourage each other	• lead don't follow • have a plan • have an end goal • be positive	• admit mistakes • find a solution • racism • know what you want • work to get what you want

Figure 6. Axial coding themes and subcategories

To provide a closer glance at how the initial in vivo codes and emotion codes combined to construct themes and theme subcategories, I created a table to show an example. The theme, *succeeding through sports*, is shown in Table 3. One subcategory constructed during axial coding was *built character and discipline*. That subcategory included the codes "doesn't just teach you about sports," "patience," and "responsibility." These codes supported the role participants' believed sports played in their lives, and the subcategories supported the theme. Summarily, the codes were resorted to develop subcategories within the theme. During this level of coding, the data were analyzed across cases. The themes and subcategories became the outline for my counter-narrative. I chose axial coding because I believed it was an effective way to combine categories from initial coding into themes and then break them down again for deeper understanding and to construct the counter-narrative.

Table 3

Themes and Subcategories with Data

Theme	Subcode	Initial Codes
succeeding through sports	escape from life	don't beat him up they're down team player
	built character and discipline	doesn't just teach you about sports patience responsibility
	builds relationships	this day we're friends builds friendship bond good coaches believed in me
	Black people good at sports	just be used base runners

	our speed
	African Americans, we're fast
had to do well with grades	never see the field
	continued
	these type of grades
	reality moment
	wanted to play
kept you on the right track	football
	look forward to
	accountable

Finally, pattern coding as suggested by Saldaña (2016) was used to find rules, causes, and explanations in the data, especially when examining interactions and relationships with school personnel. This second level coding was specifically used to address the goal of exposing any racism present in the educational institutions in which participants were schooled. After I finished my axial coding, I returned to the categories constructed from initial coding (those shown in Figure 5) and coded specifically for the presence of racism in educational experiences. For example, when reading through the category labeled *sports*, two of the in vivo codes also identified in pattern coding were "just be used" and "African Americans, we're fast." This process for pattern coding was repeated for the remaining categories and helped identify racism the Black male participants experienced in school.

As my data analysis progressed, I found that it also evolved. Planning to conduct initial in vivo coding and second level axial coding, I discovered I needed to add emotion coding during my initial round to help understand the impact of the participants' experiences and to capture those emotions in the construction of my counter-narrative that is presented in Chapter 5. Additionally, including pattern

coding helped me identify racial experiences and begin to understand how racism

unintentionally remains an active part of educational institutions. I strongly believe

my coding strategies helped me find credible and thorough answers to my research

questions because careful consideration of the data was required during the entire

process. In order for me to find a broader concept or idea from the raw data I made

connections and links within the data. I did this by memoing, sorting, and constantly

reflecting on the data through all stages of coding. Using the coding software

MAXQDA made working with the data manageable because it was easy to code and

organize the massive amount of data that were collected. Because the data were

manageable and organized, creation of the counter-narrative using some of the

participants' exact language was an easy and engaging way to present the data.

Construction of the counter-narrative as the method of data presentation is described in

the next section.

Data Presentation

After the data analysis, themes and subcategories were used to present the data

as a counter-narrative. I chose counter-narrative for two reasons: I love stories

opposite of what is expected, and CRT uses counter-narratives (Ladson-Billings, 2016;

Martinez, 2014; Taylor, 2016). Specifically, CRT uses counter-narratives, or the

opposite of societal beliefs, to expose racism (Bell, 1992) and present success stories of

marginalized Black males (Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Martinez, 2014;

Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016). Because exposing racism and providing oppositional

stories of marginalized people is the goal of counter-narratives (Merriweather Hunn, et

al., 2006) and my goal for this study, I chose counter-narrative as the way to present the

experiences of these four young Black men. By accumulating, analyzing, and synthesizing their stories, I created as Hairston (2010) suggested a counter-narrative as realistic fiction by blending people, places, and events collected from the 12 interviews I conducted. They are realistic in that all incidents occurred, but fictitious in that at times stories came from different participants and were stitched together to create one counter-narrative.

I took several steps creating the counter-narrative. Before writing the counter-narrative, I began by creating an outline of the themes with the subcategories and used it as a guide to make sure I included all of the important data for each theme. Then, I revisited the data to determine the events from the interviews to recreate in the counter-narrative. Even though data from each participant was combined to determine every theme and subcategory, the frequency of data coded for each theme and subcategory varied by participant. I wrote the name of the participant with the highest frequency of a particular code beside each theme as a reminder to include their stories in the counter-narrative to portray that theme; however, stories of other participants were also included to depict each theme. Specifically, Sting and Ant wee listed minimally beside the list of themes, but their stories were included in the counter-narrative supporting other themes. For example, Abjiel's name was beside the theme *building relationships with school personnel* because he had the most passages coded from his transcripts that were placed under that theme; however, Ant's story about working with his coach each Saturday was included in the counter-narrative to support the theme as well. The names were simply a reminder for me to include that participant's experiences to represent that particular theme. As I wrote the counter-narrative, I highlighted the sections in the counter-

narrative text according to theme and drew a line through the subcategory on the outline as it was included. The colors and lines were used as a personal checklist to ensure I included stories from all participants with each theme and subcategory. Figure 4 shows the outline I created before writing and used while writing the counter-narrative. Because the codes used to determine the theme *succeeding through friendships* were close in frequency across all participants, characters in the counter-narrative were presented as a group of friends who are as close as brothers. Knowing that sports played a major role and was one of the most frequent themes, sports was prominent throughout the counter-narrative. All events in the counter-narrative were actual events told by the participants. When telling their stories, participants often used different voices, tones, and movement to mimic how a person spoke to them. Actual words of the participants were taken from the transcripts and included in reconstructed stories for the biographical sketches and counter-narrative when possible to stay true to the words of the successful Black males.

1) Abjiel – Succeeding through Sports
   a) Escape from life
   b) Built character and discipline
   c) Had to do well with grades
   d) Kept you on right track
2) Abjiel – Building Relationships with School Personnel
   a) Impression you want others to have
   b) Communicating with them
   c) With teachers and coaches
   d) With administration
3) Sting, Abjiel – Setting Goals and Attitude for Success
   a) Have an end goal
   b) Have a plan
   c) Lead don't follow
   d) Be positive
4) Ant – Influencing Others to Succeed
   a) Be and love yourself
   b) Helping the brotherhood
   c) Leading friends from trouble
   d) Unspoken expectations
   e) Bringing friends into the crew
5) Davis, Abjiel - Learning from mistakes
   a) Admit mistake
   b) Know what you want
   c) Work to get what you want
   d) Find a solution
6) Davis - Choosing good people
   a) Friends to look after you
   b) Friends families
   c) Relating to a teacher/mentor
7) Brothers not Friends – Succeeding through Friendships
   a) Created a brotherhood
   b) Made each other better
   c) Encourage each other
   d) Not disappoint each other

Figure 4. Outline of themes with subcategories used when writing counter-narrative.

I was the narrator of the counter-narrative which is which is written in third person. Even though I met all requirements of a participant, I did not include any of my experiences or events in the counter-narrative. However, being the narrator of the realistic yet fictious counter-narrative written using literary story elements, dialogue and movement were enhanced when needed to develop the emotions of the characters based on observations during the interviews and my experiences as a Black male meeting the requirements set for study participants.

Summarily, the counter-narrative presented in Chapter 5 is a realistic fictitious presentation of the participants' experiences that reflect the themes and subcategories

crafted from the interviews. Additionally, the counter-narrative exposes racism throughout the plot that the participants faced in their experiences. The final section of this chapter describes measures taken to increase validity.

Validity

People trust what they believe to be true. Even though data were presented as a realistic fiction counter-narrative, all events are true to the way they were told to me. It is fictitious because experiences from all participants are combined into one counter-narrative. As mentioned, all events in the counter-narrative are actual events in the lives of the participants with my own experiences as a Black male used to interpret and enhance the counter-narrative and incorporate story elements. Keeping the events as they were told in the transcribed narrative increased validity.

To increase credibility, validity threats must be addressed in every study (Maxwell, 2013). Raised, schooled, and now employed in the same district as the participants in my study, I held my own perceptions and beliefs about the participants' stories. As I conversed with participants, interpreted the data, and drew conclusions from the coding, I was careful to minimize my preconceptions and beliefs from impacting the data I collected by following Maxwell's (2013) suggestion of memoing about my experiences and beliefs. Additional checks for validity that were used throughout included internal validity, reactivity or reflexivity, peer checking, respondent validation, and triangulation.

Internal validity was the first check. Seidman (2013) suggested that internal validity or consistency is evident when concepts from experiences and themes from data analysis become consistent across interviews. Even though the frequency of

codes for each participant varied within the themes determined from data analysis, all categories were evident in each participant to some degree. As I completed coding of the interviews, I saw consistency of themes across interviews.

Reactivity or reflexivity is the influence the researcher has on the participants or setting studied (Maxwell, 2013). I, a Black male meeting the requirements set for study participants and looking like participants, observed and experienced events throughout my life similar to those of my participants. Having connections with participants, I had to keep my influence on participants to a minimum. Additionally, I had to be cognizant of my body language, tendency to speak out, and reactions to stories. We are human, and we all have our own beliefs and perspectives on information; however, I did not want my reactions to influence participants' stories. Participants chose the location for the interviews to maximize participant comfort in order to gather thorough data. Because interviews occurred in participants' homes by a Black male, I believe their comfort level was maximized and threat level minimized as much as possible. However, Maxwell (2013) asserted the goal of minimizing reactivity or reflexivity was not a feasible goal; rather, understanding how the researcher is influencing what the participant says and how it impacts validity is important (Maxwell, 2013). I was the human data gathering instrument, and I constantly reflected on my verbal language, body language, and actions while conducting this study through memoing. Using rich or in-depth descriptions as provided by participants, which I attempted to do, increased validity because of the addition of details (Maxwell, 2013). My interviews were in-depth with the gathering

of as many details as possible. Therefore, conclusions from the data are well supported to decrease researcher bias.

Currently, I hold strong beliefs that CRT can be used to accurately explain most of the education in America. Therefore, informing me about my experiences over the years, I thought the tenets of CRT found in the participants' stories that exposed educational racism might overshadow the experiences of Black males that influenced their success. To minimize this threat to validity, a White female peer and fellow graduate student reviewed my coding and counter-narrative for an overemphasis. Conducting her own study framed by CRT and having different experiences than my own, I believe she helped balance my potential to overemphasize racial issues with her tendency to underemphasize racial issues because of her lack of race-related experiences. She found a few codes that we discussed, and I modified. For example, when conducting pattern coding, I included "just used us" as a code showing racism. She thought it needed to be in the *sports* category because it was talking about baserunners. I explained how Sting did not consider himself a baseball player because he was only used to run the bases saying, "African Americans, we're fast;" on the other hand, she interpreted it as his way of saying he played baseball. I included it both – under the *sports* heading and with the race-related codes. As the data were interpreted, themes determined, and counter-narrative constructed, all stayed focused on the participants' meaning. When constructing the counter-narrative, I focused on all experiences of the participants because I wanted to do something other than blame the participant or further the majoritarian narrative. The peer checker also read the

counter-narrative to check the intended focus. I believe using a peer checker was an effective check for validity.

Maxwell (2013) suggested checks for identifying validity threats. I identified respondent validation as useful for my study to reduce the threat that my reconstruction of the stories and interpretations of the data skewed participants intended meaning. Respondent validation is obtaining feedback from the participants themselves regarding the conclusions drawn from the data (Maxwell, 2013). Using MAXQDA, the analyzed data of each participant were pulled out for review to ensure the concepts determined reflected his meaning when describing the experience. Their own analyzed data were emailed to each participant. Each person was asked to read their analyzed data that were in the form of a hierarchical diagram containing the theme, subcategory, and codes. Then, they were asked to respond with any discrepancies. Three responded saying no discrepancies. One participant, Sting, did not respond.

Having strong beliefs regarding microaggressions, I had to be very careful in data collection and analysis not to focus on the negatives and the numerous examples of racism. Again, I used respondent validation where the participants reviewed their analyzed data to clear any misconceptions and strengthen the data analysis procedure (Maxwell, 2013). Frankly, using respondent validation was the only way I knew that my data analysis reflected the shared meanings of the participants' experiences. Because I used my background as a Black male meeting requirements to participate in the study to enhance the realistic fiction counter-narrative, I used respondent validation to increase integrity of the stories by asking participants to read the

completed counter-narrative for any misconceptions the enhancements might have caused. No misconceptions or inaccuracies were reported to me.

In my study, data were collected mainly through interviews with four different Black male participants, observation notes, and a basic demographic questionnaire. If participants thought of additional information, stories, or questions after the interviews, they were asked to email me. I did not receive any emails. I wrote personal subjectivities and reflection memos and revisited them throughout the study to acknowledge my bias and add to the setting and context of the stories. To increase validity, data were collected using various methods.

When interviewing participants, there was a chance they would embellish a story or withhold critical details; however, what was important was how they remembered their experiences. As a way to increase the likelihood of obtaining complete and accurate information, Maxwell (2013) suggested developing long-term intensive involvement with participants. Therefore, relationships of trust and respect were built through continued contact and communication. Additionally, Maxwell's strategies were implemented as needed to decrease any threat to validity and maintain the integrity of the study. My goal was to construct a study that was reliable and valid in order to add my study to the available literature.

Conclusion

From the moment I learned about counter-narrative as a research design, I knew that was the method I would use. Being a Black male, I believe counter-narrative was a valuable tool for presenting positive stories of Black males and unmasking the various ways in which racism is impeding students' success. If we want to avoid

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blaming the victims of racist policies, we must include the ways in which racism (and racist policies) impede Black males' efforts to succeed. Using in vivo and emotion coding seemed natural for counter-narrative so the voice of the marginalized participants was preserved. Axial coding and pattern coding helped determine the themes from the data and expose institutional racism. Finally, identifying validity threats helped keep me aware of my bias so accuracy of the data in the counter-narrative and findings was increased. The next chapter, Chapter 4, uses a biographical sketch to introduce each of the participants and their character in the counter-narrative.

Chapter IV

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF CHARACTERS

Before the counter-narrative, a biographical sketch of each character is provided. Data from participant interviews and my research journal were used to create these sketches and, subsequently, the counter-narrative. Some participant experiences not storied in the counter-narrative were used in the biographical sketches. As mentioned, exact words or quotes taken from transcripts of the participants were used in reconstructed stories. Reconstructed stories are noted. The following biographical sketches introduce Abjiel, Ant, Sting, Davis, and, briefly, the narrator to familiarize readers with the study participants and conclude with a synopsis of the participant as a character in the counter-narrative.

Abjiel

Abjiel was a 29-year-old Black male born in Houston, Texas to immigrant parents from the continent of Africa. His parents attended school and married while living in Ghana. Because his parents did not grow up in the southern United States, their language was heavily influenced by their native Ghanaian language, which continued to be spoken at home. Likewise, Abjiel's home language influenced his speech slightly. After leaving Ghana, they lived in London before moving to the United States. His older brother, Phillipe, was born in London. Two years after arriving in the United States, Abjiel was born. Not long after his younger brother was

born, the family moved to a single-family home on the border of a large urban city in the south when Abjiel was 3 years old.

When Abjiel was in fifth or sixth grade, his parents divorced. Originally, his mother remained in the house with Abjiel and his two brothers, but she could not provide for them. Therefore, she moved out, and his father moved back into the family home where he still lives. Abjiel's father drove a limo from midevening through the early morning hours, often being stationed about 40 minutes away at an international airport. In order to provide for his family, Abjiel's father was working and was rarely home. Therefore, his older brother was the caretaker and became a father figure to his younger brothers.

Abjiel's family had a tough time. It might not have been the best childhood, but his mom and dad wanted to be somebody. Phillipe once told his brothers, "They put a roof over our head. It was only right that we repay them by graduating."

Phillipe did. He was the valedictorian. He could have gone to any college he wanted, like Georgetown, but he stayed home to take care of his brothers. Abjiel did not want to disappoint Phillipe either.

Abjiel made pretty good grades in elementary school, but things changed and became hard. After Christmas break during his last year of elementary school, Abjiel had to switch schools when a new school opened, so he had friends from both schools when he got to middle school. Middle school was a difficult period for Abjiel, and the divorce made it worse. Often in trouble, he was held back in sixth grade after falling behind because of missing 40 days of school due to a suspension for having a BB gun on school property and missing another 40 days of alternative school instruction

because of a lack of transportation before being allowed back into his districted middle school. Because of his sixth grade retention, Abjiel was the oldest in his group of friends. Looking back, he realized he deserved consequences stating, "I understand BB guns cannot come to school, and it is my responsibility to check my bookbag. I just think practically a whole semester was extreme. Each case should be considered rather than enforcing a zero-tolerance policy. There are always extenuating circumstances."

During middle school, Abjiel developed an interest in football and began playing for the high school's junior team. Because his father was working, a teammate's family took him to practice and to the games. Throughout his high school years, his talent as a quarterback grew, and he became highly scouted by several division II colleges. However, his prowess for football required him to pass his classes and behave in school. Both were difficult but not impossible.

Abjiel had a love for skipping school, and this story was reconstructed from his interview in first person:

"Yo, look at tomorrow's agenda. Nothin' important. How 'bout lunch at Cookout?" I would tell my bro sittin' beside me. Teachers always gave a heads up on what was happening in class the next day. Sometimes, you just needed a break. A buddy and I skipped fourth block a lot junior year. If there was something to do that counted, we were there. We learn the system to know exactly what we needed to do to pass and play ball. Otherwise, we out—just walked to one of our cars after 3rd block. School police dude didn't say nothin'. We not fightin' or sellin', so he didn't care.

However, Abjiel began to think about his future. "There comes a time you take responsibility and do what you need to do. It was all on me, bruh," he said hitting his chest, "I figured it out. I had to make it happen. No one else." Abjiel matured and set goals for himself with the help of relationships built with others.

The semester before graduating high school, October of 2009, Abjiel received a full football scholarship to a major college in Tennessee, pending all graduation requirements were met. His mom and dad both attended the signing. That was the first time they saw him in his football jersey, and the first time his parents were with him for something having to do with football. He was going to college, he was playing football, and he was not going to pay for it.

Abjiel started as the team's quarterback all 4 years while earning a degree in mass communications. During his sophomore year in college, a former high school teammate and full football scholarship recipient was murdered in a murder-suicide in their hometown—the small community bordering a large city. As a tribute to his friend, Abjiel wore the friend's football number on his practice jersey that season. His show of support for his hometown friend made the local newspaper in his college town. Abjiel remembered thinking, "If not for the grace of God, it could have been me."

College quickly came to an end. His parents and Phillipe were there to see him graduate in this reconstructed third person story:

"With a Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication, Abjiel . . .," Abjiel heard his name announced as he began his walk across the stage to receive his diploma with a smile that reached to Ghana. After working for a few years, he returned

to school and graduated with a master's degree in Information Technology. "With a Master of Science in Information Technology, Abjiel . . .," he heard again. The kid suspended for a gun and whose brother was in prison even went back to college. That degree led to a promotion. "Welcome to the team," Abjiel heard as he shook hands with the men around the table in the company's conference room. He was welcomed to the team as a Clouds System Engineer.

At the time of our interview, Abjiel was still a Clouds System Engineer and father to a baby daughter with his girlfriend from high school. "I still can't believe my life, man," Abjiel said he thinks often.

Abjiel has a group of eight friends who met during middle and high school who remain brothers to this day. To clarify, he referred to them as brothers even though "they ain't no biological connection." As an adult, Abjiel stands approximately 6 feet tall with a muscular build. His deep black skin reflects his family's long native African heritage. Having close cut hair and a long full beard, Abjiel was extremely soft spoken with a quiet yet confident demeanor. Within his group of friends, he is considered the patriarch, or the unofficial leader. One of his brothers (from his group of friends) was arrested for marijuana possession when he was 25 years old. Abjiel was contacted by the young man's mother. In turn, Abjiel organized the rest of the group to gather funds and bail the friend out of jail—the patriarch!

Abjiel is well-connected. Knowing several professional football players from his college days, he frequently travels to major cities to watch a buddy play in the National Football League (NFL) and is involved in some type of business with that buddy. However, he would not elaborate on the business. Some areas of his life were

off limits, but not his heritage. Referring to his homeland often, he was proud to be from Africa—specifically Ghana. A frequent traveler, he visits family in Ghana periodically.

Both of us being athletes, Abjiel and I played a game of one-on-one basketball at our initial meeting while I explained my study to him. Of course, I won! It was a hard-fought game, and a rematch was discussed. For the interviews, Abjiel chose to meet at his house, which was newly built according to his specifications in an area of gentrification. Older dilapidated houses in a previously crime-ridden neighborhood of the large urban city were torn down and the lots sold for new houses to be built in an effort to revitalize the area while catering to primarily young Black families. Entering the front door of the tall reddish brick house, stairs led to a second-floor loft visible because of a high ceiling. With adjoining white walls for the perimeter and rooms separated by columns, the main room had a fireplace with a surrounding shiny rock mantle. At the top of the fireplace, a two-person handsaw was mounted with bright modern art painted on the blade. An artist friend painted it. The remainder of the room and furniture was all white, with the exception of a few photos displayed on the walls and side table.

For our initial meeting and each subsequent interview, Abjiel was wearing a track suit type outfit, which I interpreted as a demonstration of his love of sports. In the sparsely furnished trendy family room, we sat on opposite ends of the White sofa and conversed easily from the start. Periodically, he stood or got a drink of water, but it was a relaxed atmosphere with lots of dialogue about his life. When speaking of his family, there was a hint of a smile. Throughout his stories, Abjiel never said a

negative word about his family, even when describing hardships. Regretting his childhood troubles, Abjiel respected the sacrifices of his parents who worked odd hours but expected their boys to make appropriate choices in school and in the neighborhood. He especially admired his older brother who turned down an Ivy League college education in order to help take care of his younger brothers. Even though Abjiel was led to succeed because he did not want to disappoint his family, he was adamant that football actually saved his life.

When asked to describe the reason he believed he was academically successful, he replied with the following in first person lifted exactly from the interview transcript summarizing his success:

People need each other. Why do so many not make it out of the community [*pause*] graduate and go to college? A lot of people didn't make it because they didn't have a mentor, someone they could relate to [*pause*] to push them. There are some really talented people out here, but they just fall through the cracks. Maybe it's those male figures they didn't have. Maybe it's a lack of something to do. Get involved in something [*pause*] football saved me. Choose some good people to be around. My circle of friends, [*pause*] everybody wanted to pull their weight. Nobody wants to be the weak link. We push each other to be better. You don't want to be the one to say, "I didn't make it." My guys [*pause*] that's why we are successful. Sometimes, it just has to be you. If you're handling your business as you're supposed to, I mean the grades going to speak for themselves. My parents worked all the time. We had to eat. We had to do what we needed to do in school. I didn't have a

parent who said, "Lemme see your report card, boy. How your grades?" Black culture was very much embraced in our school by the people who had an impact, but if you wanted to find the negative, you could. It was there. I chose to keep positive.

At the beginning and end of each interview, Abjiel smoked hookah because it helped him relax, and he was the only one home. His girlfriend and daughter were elsewhere because he did not want to be interrupted, and he would not ignore his daughter if she wanted something. As I was leaving after the last interview, I noticed a picture of his daughter on the rock mantle from when she was a newborn. It was actually a picture of a Facebook post. Above the picture he had written, "I'm going to buy you all the things I never had, but most importantly I'm going to teach you all the things I never knew." In this promise to his daughter, he seemed to reflect upon his own life.

In the counter-narrative, Abjiel is the unofficial leader of a group of friends. His experiences in mostly middle school and high school show how he faced many of the stereotypical behaviors associated with Black males: condescending language, extreme consequences, assumed bad behavior, low expectations, no flexibility, little knowledge or understanding of Black culture on the part of teachers, and lack of educational value by educators. Additionally, I believe expectations were even lower because he was a 1st generation Black American with immigrant parents having accents from a foreign country. Unlike the outcomes publicized and believed about most Black males, Abjiel was successful because he found support through sports, learned from life's difficulties, set his mind on success, and surrounded himself with

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friends, teachers, and mentors who believed in him. Knowing that many Black males are expected to fail, misbehave, and experience home difficulties, I believe Abjiel's success would not be expected in the eyes of most teachers.

Ant

Ant was 27 years old at the time we met for our interviews. With very light caramel skin and large brown eyes, he was what most females would call good looking. At least, that was what he claimed. Born in the country's capital city, Ant and his mother moved to Georgia after he was expelled from an *at-risk* kindergarten program in the downtown area of Washington, D.C. Ant verbalized his confusion on being labeled at risk, "What was I at-risk of? Gettin' in trouble? Gettin' suspended or expelled? 'Cause I got that!" Even though Ant always smiled, he actually laughed out loud as he talked about being expelled from kindergarten, "Who gets kicked outta kindergarten? Bruh, Black kids don't even get kicked outta kindergarten, but I did!" The following is the story reconstructed of Ant getting expelled:

"He cannot come back here," the White principal told Ant's mom as she and Ant sat in his small office at a public school in downtown Washington, D.C. It had some big program for *at-risk* kids. All the kids were Black. Ant's feet swung as they hung from the wooden chair much taller than the ones in his kindergarten classroom. His arms laid on the armrests as he looked at his mom. Her eyes watered becoming shinier as she took his small hand, stood up, and walked out of the office door. She turned around one last time and said, "God bless you, Mr. Watson." Ant guessed he was no longer at-risk. They left the basement floor of the three-story school without saying anything to each other.

It was just Ant and his mom against the world. It had been the last 2 years.

Walking in the front and only door of our second-floor apartment, Ant's mom

led him to the kitchen where she poured him some milk and cereal. That was

usually his breakfast and his snack. Sometimes his dinner. She finally spoke.

"Where did you get these?" She asked from across the table with the small

white bottle in her hand. "Beside the sink. I wanted candy, so I climbed up on

the counter. I finally reached them. Red Skittles are my favorite. I was going

to eat some for snack, but Sean wanted some too. I didn't want to, but they tell

me to share with Sean. I didn't want to get in trouble for not sharing." It was

Tylenol. Sean ate one before the teacher saw him.

Ant was kicked out of school, expelled, for sharing—giving another student

Tylenol that he thought was Skittles.

Seriously? Ant was proud of himself for sharing. The family of two—Ant and

his mom—needed a new start. His mom put the last box in the trunk of the old

blue Nissan Maxima. Everything they owned fit in the trunk. They didn't even

need the back seat.

When Ant was really young, his father owned an Italian restaurant in

Washington, D.C.'s Union Station; however, his father died when he was three. Other

than eating crab cakes at his father's restaurant, Ant has few memories of his dad.

Both sets of grandparents passed before Ant was born as his parents' only child. After

his father passed, he and his mother were the entire family. The reconstructed story

continues:

There was no one to say goodbye to as they got in the car and pulled away from the curb of their old apartment building. No one. They had never returned to the Italian restaurant his dad ran at Union Station after he was killed in a robbery. Saying goodbye to Washington, D.C., the murder capital of the world, Ant and his mother headed south to Georgia—just him and his mom.

Enrolling in an elementary school on the outskirts of a large metropolitan city, Ant always felt he was not like everyone else. Struggling financially, they moved residences when rent was due, but remained in the same geographic area. Even though he moved a lot, he never let it get to him. He never said anything to his mom because it bothered her so much that they moved constantly. "That's what we got to do. Let's rock. If we got to move, let's move. We're going to have to get through it together," Ant spoke positively with his mom. Nonstop moving—no place for longer than a year. Every time things were going well, something happened. Ant believed she didn't have the mentality for financial stability and building wealth because of the era she grew up in. She never believed in credit. Her main concern was finding a job, getting a paycheck at the end of the week, paying bills, and doing it all again. Ant said several times, "She did the best she could."

Ant felt different, even in elementary school. Financially, he did not have what everyone else had. He didn't have the clothes other kids had or the clothes that he wanted. In middle school he began to understand it is okay to be different because he was a special person and having a lot of things was not important. He realized that "people liked me [*pause*], Ant [*pause*], they didn't like me for having stuff. I just went with who I was [*pause*] someone who was funny and athletic."

Ant talked to everyone in school. At the end of the year, the whole eighth grade voted on superlatives similar to senior superlatives in high school. Ant won two awards: friendliest and most likely to succeed. Thinking he got on their nerves, Ant was shocked that his teachers thought he deserved those awards. "They told me so," Ant said with surprise.

Ant's biggest fear was disappointing his mom. He did not want her to hear "Mom, I'm in jail" or "I'm in a gang." Being a single parent, she had enough stress. Considering situations that may get him in trouble, Ant made sure he placed himself "around the right people." Middle school was when he became lifelong friends with three young men who all loved and played sports. He found friends who were staying out of trouble, who were playing sports, and who were also funny. Saying to himself, "Well shoot, that's kind of how I operate. I like to be funny and make jokes, and I like to stay out of trouble," he decided, "I'm playing sports to stay out of trouble." At school, he met influential friends that loved sports.

School gave him the opportunity to play sports with his buddies and build relationships with adult male role models. Because it was just Ant and his mom, "she really didn't know how to make a man of me," Ant said. Sports provided positive male role models and structure. Coaches became his mentors, asking him how he was doing in school. In turn, Ant mentored peers he believed were headed for trouble, having an opportunity to push some of the traits and values he had on someone who "was a little distraught and kind of going in the wrong direction and needed a little guidance." Then, high school came.

"High school was middle school on steroids" allowing Ant to meet more people and continue playing sports. Basketball was his love. That was his sport of choice. However, solely because his buddies wanted him to join the team, Ant learned to play football in high school after trying out for the team his freshman year. The year before, he attempted to try out for the junior high team, but he quit after being tackled. Ant possessed real talent and became a star player. After receiving a full football scholarship, Ant attended college at an HBCU in Virginia and played the safety position. Joking that all athletes major in communications, he indeed graduated with a degree in communications.

Ant was confident that he was smart and quick to understand concepts in school. With his frequent witty comments and big grin, he was quite funny and almost geekish from my interactions with him. After graduating college, he moved home, back to the area in which he was raised. Currently, Ant works for a nationwide car rental company.

In addition to football, Ant was a high school basketball player, and he is still skilled. Tall and lanky, he made my basketball game look extremely amateurish at our introductory meeting. He smiled frequently and was quick to offer a "Good job" whenever I made a basket. During the game, he would just yell out at times when he tricked me to get a score. He won two of the three games we played. It was evident from our interactions that he enjoyed talking to people and loved to have fun.

Living in the same geographic area and being in the age range required of participants, I was familiar with Ant even though he became a participant through his previous teacher. For all of his interviews, we met at his house on a Sunday afternoon

where he wore the same Adidas track suit, his Sunday attire, that seemed to completely wrap around his long skinny legs when he walked. I could not tell there were legs in his pants. As I drove into his neighborhood, there were several Black children outside playing and Black teenagers walking on the street. Two houses had White adults outside with children's toys laying around; therefore, the neighborhood appeared racially diverse from my observation while driving down his street. Ant's house was an older brick ranch style house in the same geographic area he spent his childhood. The concrete driveway was cracked with weeds growing through, but the house was not run-down like a couple of other houses on the street. During the first interview, there were still boxes and bare walls inside of the house because he had recently rented the house with his girlfriend and newborn son. He mentioned that he may buy the house and flip it, but he was definitely going to renovate. Neither his girlfriend nor son were at the house during any of the three interviews because they go to the laundromat each Sunday afternoon. During each subsequent interview, the house appeared a little more furnished, but the walls remained bare. At the time of the last interview, kitchen renovations started, so cabinets were torn out and plastic was draped everywhere.

During the first interview, we sat in blue and green canvas camping chairs, but a large gray sofa was available for later interviews. Ant seemed comfortable talking about any subject, although he frequently moved around by standing and then sitting several times. Constant movement appeared normal for him, and he confirmed he was active in school. Ant was extremely approachable and forthcoming. In fact, he even told me about his son getting bed bugs at the nursery and bringing them home. While

I would have been furious, he just shook his head saying, "Bruh, it was a hood daycare. Don't try to save money with ya kids." His son no longer goes there. Ant was an enjoyable person to interview because he was constantly joking and laughing.

In the counter-narrative, Ant's character is a member of a group of seven friends who support each other. Protective of his mother, he recognizes that he needs his male teachers and coaches as mentors to teach him "how to be a man." Therefore, he is involved in sports not only because he loves sports but also for the mentorship of the coaches. Recognizing when his peers make bad life choices, Ant tries to influence them to "hang out" with his group of friends in order to stay out of trouble. Ant has goals to play sports and graduate college and tries to influence others. He is another Black male success!

Sting

As a 29-year-old college graduate born and raised in a nuclear family with a younger sister, Sting was temporarily living in the basement of his parent's house with his pregnant girlfriend and dog, Blue, at the time of his interviews. The house he was having built was not yet finished, but his apartment lease ended. Therefore, he was staying in his parent's basement for a few weeks until his house was completed. Both parents were professionals. Sting's father was a veteran police officer with over 20 years of experience, and his mother was an elementary teacher who currently oversaw a child enrichment center at a major university. His mother's influence and his own work at the enrichment center during the summer months influenced Sting to pursue education.

According to Sting, he was the quietest member of his group of friends and the wealthiest. Wealthy as in having a "functional family," nice things, and everything he needed. He grew up in a large stucco house with a two-car garage surrounded by a meticulously landscaped yard with both parents. He had an "invisible leash" on him since he was born, but "it made him better." Being a Black police officer with a Black son, his dad taught him how to survive as a Black male not only at school but also with police officers, "If you get pulled over, keep your hands on the steering wheel. Just be humble and polite. Ask before you make sudden movements so that he knows what you're planning on doing. Then, he won't be surprised or act like he's surprised." Sting understood what to do well before he got his driver's license.

Because his mother was a teacher, she kept him structured and made sure he did well in school. He was close to his mom and never wanted to disappoint her. Once in middle school, Sting got a couple of bad grades, and his mom got upset that he was not taking school seriously. After he saw her upset and cry that one time, he "did not want to upset her again—never again." He could not see his mom cry!

Short and extremely skinny, Sting had a medium brown skin color with close cropped hair combed into waves. He was trying to grow a goatee but could not. In fact, he could easily pass for a middle-school student. As a quiet child, Sting stayed to himself—a self-described loner by choice. Actually, Sting referred to himself as a "nomad," believing he would be "just fine moving to another country like the Dominican and living solo. Just me and my dog."

Playing baseball since elementary school, he was a skilled player. However, a White high school coach, who Sting felt was racist because he would not play Black

students, made him "lose his passion for baseball," but he did not quit playing in high school. Even though he loved it, his baseball career was "disappointing because the coach obviously did not like Black people." Sting often wonders what would have happened if he had a better experience in high school, but he doesn't "dwell on it."

At his high school graduation, Sting expected to receive recognition for perfect attendance, but that was disappointing, too, as described in this reconstructed story:

"Sting," he heard his name called but waited at the top of the steps for the graduation announcer to talk about his 12 years of perfect attendance and give him a little trophy. "Go ahead," the person directing at the steps told him with a nudge on his arm. There was "no announcement and no little trophy." Sting was always at school. He had perfect attendance for 12 years. His mom made him go. She was a teacher. When Sting was in fifth grade, he attended his cousin's graduation and saw a graduate recognized for her 12 years of perfect attendance. "I'm gonna get a trophy at graduation," he told his friends for years, "for perfect attendance." He wanted to be recognized with that little trophy when he graduated, but for some reason that didn't happen. "Bruh, where's your trophy?" Ant, a longtime friend, asked Sting. "Man, I don't know. I'm Black. Pro'lly thought there was no way a Black kid had perfect attendance." He was disappointed but never asked about it.

After attending college with several close friends from high school, Sting and his college girlfriend moved back to the community in which he was raised. Both were teachers. At the time of Sting's interviews, they were expecting a baby boy.

In addition to teaching kindergarten for 5 years, Sting has several different business ventures trying to get rich. He develops educational apps, prints bulk order t-shirts, and has a delivery business. Shortly after his interviews, he wrote a children's book that was published and is available for purchase online. When an opportunity arises where Sting can make money, he gets involved. Being a millionaire with "stacks" is his ultimate goal.

Sting's name was given to me by Ant. Choosing to begin his first interview immediately, Sting opted not to play the introductory basketball game. After the first interview at Waffle House where we met for coffee, interviews were held in the basement of his parents' house. As I neared his childhood home in a middle-class area with two-story stucco houses set among well-manicured lawns, I realized those types of neighborhoods are rare in that specific community. I parked on the street in front of his house because the short driveway was full of cars, though I never saw anyone else. As it was beginning to get dark, Sting met me in the front yard and walked me around to the basement. There was a table outside the basement door with a flowerpot containing cigarillo butts. Blue, his huge Blue Mastiff, met us at the glass door with slobber hanging out of his mouth. He was the only one in the basement.

In each interview, Sting was hard to get talking. He mostly gave very short answers with little elaboration. I constantly asked him to explain or elaborate. Sometimes, I felt as if he was intentionally giving me clipped responses. At one point, he described how his father instilled in him to be "wary of people and look out for yourself." He progressively became more open during the second and third interviews. Because Sting was a private person and sometimes hesitant to divulge personal

information, I concluded he may have trust issues with all people because he came from a more affluent Black family. In fact, a Black peer once told him, "You got that White money." He mimicked his peer. However, he did not explicitly say he had trust issues.

The last interview concluded with Sting describing why he believed he was successful. He believed the peers he grew up with were "more impactful than school." Meeting in middle school through sports or in the classroom, they were "like brothers" and "still hang out having fun." Sports were important and brought them closer. From an early age, he knew he was "expected to go to college;" therefore, after working at a school with his mother one summer, he set the goal of graduating college and becoming a teacher. He accomplished that goal and followed with a master's degree in instructional technology.

Like Ant, Sting was a member of Abjiel's group of friends in the counter-narrative. Knowing from an early age that he would go to college and graduate, he reminded his friends of that frequently and helped friends that needed it. Therefore, friends and sports played a major role in his life and in the counter-narrative. Contrary to the stereotype that Black families do not value education, Sting's family instilled in him the importance of education from an early age. Like himself, his character in the counter-narrative was a man of few words, but he knew what he wanted and remained a loyal friend.

Davis

Davis was 26 years old and, like Sting, was also a "teacher's kid." His mother taught elementary school, and his father was a truck driver. Until high school, his

father was gone much of the time working. Realizing he wanted to be involved in his son's extracurricular activities, Davis' father quit his job to interact more with the family. Davis appreciated his dad sacrificing for him and grew closer to his father because "a son needs his dad there growing up." A love for all things sports was evident because his apartment had a bicycle parked in the corner, a basketball on the floor at the end of the sofa, and a shelf full of sports video games.

Sports was the main topic in all of Davis' interviews. Throughout his childhood, he "played them all: basketball, football, baseball, all of 'em." However, due to his "height challenge," he never thought he was successful. Even though baseball was the sport in which he excelled, he loved "basketball the most." In our initial one-on-one game of basketball, I beat him easily. He played hard, but his height indeed proved to be a challenge. After one game with Davis, it felt as if I had known him for years. Like with Abjiel, I suspected this would not be our last game of "hoops."

Interviews were held at his fourth-floor apartment, which he had only lived in for a week before the initial interview. For the first interview, we actually pulled in the parking garage of his downtown apartment building at the same time because he was returning from the store with bottled water and toilet paper because "people was coming over, so I had to get some stuff." It was an older apartment complex but modernized with stores on the bottom floor. Located immediately off a major interstate, there were many businesses in the high traffic area. Wearing long baggy basketball shorts, white t-shirt, and sneakers, he had a scruffy short beard and close-cropped hair (almost bald). Walking up flights of stairs to reach his apartment, I was

surrounded by concrete walls and dark blue apartment doors. The door for each apartment was very tall (tallest doors I have ever seen on a residence) and adorned with two locks. Once inside the apartment, the ceiling was high, and the walls were close. Recently moving into the apartment, it was sparsely furnished. In the process of buying furniture, he had one sofa and a television with gaming equipment. Throughout all of the interviews, Davis played a basketball video game while we conversed. He had a group of people he competed with online who kept sending him messages to play, so he did. Multitasking came easily for him. Sometimes he paused the game to talk, but the distraction was quite annoying.

Davis remembered very little about his elementary years. After a rough experience in middle school that included suspension for gang activity, he had a "great high school experience socially." Sports were a major part of his high school career. In high school he had a group of four close friends (one was Abjiel) who did everything together: "sports, trick or treat, hang out, yell at girls, go to the mall," talk about their future, and "be boys." They were like family, and they were all accepted to college. Throughout school, Davis loved social studies and science and scored high in those subjects; however, he struggled in math and reading.

Throughout high school, he continued to struggle academically in math. During his senior year, he did not get accepted into the same school as most of his friends, so he chose to attend an HBCU out of state. Because the college was small, he credits his college professors with helping him understand concepts he should have learned earlier. After an extra year of college due to remedial classes and "too much partying," Davis graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Sports Management. Loving

sports and having a goal, he never gave up. Separating from what he called "his boys" after high school was difficult because they were "an important support group" who held him "accountable throughout school." He learned how important good friends were the hard way—through experiences with "people who had me headed the wrong direction in life." He spent one night in jail for driving under the influence while underage. Realizing the people he was hanging out with "were not true friends," he increased communication with his original loyal group of friends and traveled to "hang out with them" at least once a month.

Davis now has a young daughter with his longtime girlfriend he met at college. Living out of state with her parents, his girlfriend and daughter were joining him in the apartment the week following our last interview, so they were not present during any interview. Dreaming of working in something related to sports, being a sports agent is his ultimate goal. Davis currently works for a bus company that transports professional and college sports teams. Loving the "perks" of the job, he frequently receives box tickets for all types of professional sporting events.

Adamantly, Davis credits sports, relationships with school staff, and his group of friends as the greatest influence or impact on his school success in this excerpt taken directly from his interview transcript:

Sports made everything come together—character, discipline, grades, everything. [*long pause*] We weren't on the best side of town. We're middle class to poor area. Population majority Black. Surround yourself with good [*pause*]. The administration did a really good job. They did a hell of a job I would say. They hired great teachers who were versatile enough and

comfortable enough to step into a challenging Black environment. Of course, there were outliers, though. I think it helped mold me to be who I am. I truly believe that, and I stick to this. Not everything was handed to you on a plate. We don't have the same resources as a lot of other schools. In that regard, [*pause*] yeah, there is still racism. So, what does that mean? [*pause*] You gotta figure it out another way, right? Teachers had to use their imaginations, [*pause*] use what they had, to teach these students. You start behind the eight ball, but you still have the opportunity as a person. It molds you to become stronger, to become more adapted to adversity, and to know how to handle adversity [*pause*]. Everybody knew [the Crew]. We ran the high school and got all the girls. School made us closer. We had some classes together, and we always met up at lunch. Durin' all these times we were together, conversations usually included what we wanted to do in life. [*pause*] Of course, we all dreamed of bein' rich. We motivated each other to go college. A college education is needed to make the dough. Everybody's always pushin' each other to be better and do better. [*pause*] You don't want to be the one to say, "I didn't make it." Life was like a competition. Everybody wanted to pull their weight. Nobody wanted to be the weak link. To this day, we're friends and communicate every day—gotta love social media. Our relationships never changed. I don't think any of us would probably be where we are without each other. Everybody has a family now. [*pause*] We're all 27, 28, 29, or getting ready to turn 29 and nothin's changed. We got smarter, wiser, and became better people. And [*pause*] we all have a college degree.

In the counter-narrative, Davis is a member of Abjiel's group of friends. When Black males in schools are often separated to decrease perceived behavior issues, Davis found his friends' support key to his success. Throughout the counter-narrative, the support of friends that Davis gives and receives is intertwined with sports. The impact of having influential people in the lives of Black males, like the true story of Davis' parents who took a talented friend to football practice and games, is illustrated through Davis' early experiences taking Abjiel in little league. Finally, Davis remembered his educational experiences more positively when his culture was included causing him to realize the absence of Black culture in much of his school career; however, he stayed positive and built relationships with school staff because he believed they were working hard and doing their best.

Narrator

I, the author of this dissertation, am the narrator of the counter-narrative. Being a Black male who met the criteria set for the study, I have experiences and background knowledge to enhance the counter-narrative as realistic fiction. Next to the youngest of 8 children, my parents divorced in middle school. My younger brother and I moved from house to house with our dad after the breakup, and my sisters stayed with Mom. Moving frequently to questionable houses, I awoke to roaches scampering when the light was flipped on. I had a parent in jail. Every stereotype associated with a Black male, I believe, played a role my life experiences; however, with the completion of this dissertation, I will graduate with a Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction in the summer of 2021.

Currently, I am completing 8 years of teaching elementary school in the community where this study was conducted. I am now 30 years old and, like the participants, have a group of friends who have remained close since middle school. All of us Black males were raised and schooled in the geographic area in which the study was conducted. We were inseparable—*The Crew*! When walking into the homecoming dance together (with our ladies) after winning the football game, someone yelled, "It's The Crew!" That name stuck because The Crew was always together. Participants in this study are not real members of my group of friends actually called The Crew; however, I named the group of friends in the counter-narrative The Crew. Narrating the counter-narrative, this is the one and only story of mine that I incorporated into the counter-narrative. The rest of the stories solely belong to the participants. Because of my background and experiences as a Black male, I understand how Black males like these participants would think and react to situations and events, and Abjiel remarked at one interview, "You're one of us!" Because I am one of them, I believe enhancements made from my background knowledge maintained the integrity of the participant's experiences. For example, I know and visit the gas station Abjiel bought his Gatorade from the day he received a threatening phone call, and I lifted weights in the weight room where Coach Cook had the conversation with Abjiel. I enhanced their stories because of my experiences. Finally, to increase validity with the enhancements, respondent validation described in Chapter 3 was used. That is how my background knowledge enhanced the counter-narrative, included story elements of realistic fiction, and remained valid.

The counter-narrative was written in third person from my perspective as a member of a group of friends that included Abjiel, Ant, Sting, and Davis. Sheen and Bama, friends in the group patterned after actual friends described by the participants, are mentioned in the counter-narrative as well, but they are not major characters. Though each participant had their own group of friends in real-life, the counter-narrative combined them all into one group. Narrating the counter-narrative by combining knowledge gained from my experiences, perspectives, and background with the participants' stories, events in the counter-narrative were reconstructed from the data (stories) collected from participants with some of my background knowledge interwoven to create a realistic fiction counter-narrative. Therefore, it is our story.

Conclusion

Overall, participants were easy to talk to and eager to share their stories. Even though I chose participants with a great deal in common and found other similarities, each one was unique and had his own set of contextualized circumstances with which to deal. The biographical sketches provided the reader with background information about each participant and introduced their character before reading the counter-narrative. Their experiences were varied and valued. The counter-narrative is provided in Chapter 5, The Crew: A Counter-narrative.

Chapter V

THE CREW: A COUNTER-NARRATIVE

Counter-narrative, as used by CRT (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002/2016), was

chosen as the method to present data gathered from participant interviews. The events

in the counter-narrative were all experiences gathered from participant interviews;

however, some enhancements were made as described in Chapters 3 and 4. Written in

third person from my perspective as a member of a group of friends called The Crew,

the counter-narrative begins with a prologue and is divided into sections with a

heading for each section. After providing the community setting and introducing the

counter-narrative in the prologue, I organized the counter-narrative to spotlight

influential events in sequential order while maintaining accuracy of the characters'

experiences. Each participant was a main character throughout the counter-narrative.

The literary element of flashback was used to engage the reader while introducing

Abjiel, the first character and unofficial leader of The Crew. Ant, Sting, and Davis are

introduced as the counter-narrative unfolds. Throughout the counter-narrative

experiences of the participants, who are also successful Black males, were

reconstructed. The participants were extraordinary young men having unheard voices;

therefore, their stories needed to be told in an extraordinary manner. This is not a

story of overcoming; it is a story of being Black, being male, and being successful.

Prologue

Raised and living in the metro area of a large urban city built along the railroad, our community is one of the older settlements bordering the city limits of a major southern city. Many of the older houses, those not inhabited by the original residents who are now elderly White people, are beginning to crumble: gutters hanging down, bricks falling off, broken windows, and abandoned cars littering small weed-overgrown yards. Being the cheapest area in the county where many impoverished families reside, most dwellings are rental properties inhabited by *rent jumpers,* people who move when the rent is due. Some parts of the community are tagged with rival gang graffiti. Shoes hang over the powerlines at the entrance to select neighborhoods to show where drugs are available. While it is a diverse community with White, Black, and Hispanic residences, the population is predominantly Black.

After meeting in early childhood at school or through junior sports, Abjiel, Ant, Sting, and Davis became close friends in high school, nonblood brothers really. There were more guys who joined The Crew, but these were the original four friends. Though they all had different family dynamics and experiences in life, they were all living in the same area, they were all Black males, and they all exceeded expectations.

The Crew

"You have the right to remain silent," Abjiel stood there and watched as Banke, his baby brother, was led away from the principal's office in handcuffs.

Abjiel stared at Banke's back as officers led him through the glass enclosed main office at the front of the high school. Banke became smaller and smaller until the large dark blue and orange metal doors cut out of the beige cinderblock walls

slammed shut behind him—A sound that would become all too familiar for Banke in a place not so visually different than the school. He was gone!

Abjiel stood seemingly emotionless as Doc, the high school principal, put his hand on Abjiel's shoulder. Turning away, Abjiel had tears running down his dark brown, almost black, face.

"Black men don't cry," Abjiel thought to himself as he fell into the soft leather office chair, and simply whispered, "It's my fault."

Another Black man was having his education transferred to the Georgia Department of Corrections.

Six Years Earlier

All three bothers stood at the glass front door waving as their mom backed down the driveway of the two-story brick house that had been their home—their families' home—for the past several years. She would now be about 20 minutes away in her own house. The divorce was final, and she couldn't make enough money cleaning houses to take care of herself and three boys, so there was just one solution: Abjiel's mom and dad switched places. His dad moved back into the house with his three young sons, but he was at work—always at work.

"Come on guys," Phillipe, the oldest of the three brothers, said gently nudging Abjiel and Banke by the hand that was already on their shoulder, "time for dinner."

Phillipe was 5 years older than Abjiel and 6 years older than Banke, the youngest of the three boys.

"Pizza again," Banke whined as they sat down on the faux leather couch that had a couple pieces of duct tape covering holes created by the boys. It was nearly

Banke's bedtime because he was still in elementary school—fifth grade. Dad left money for dinner, so pizza was delivered as usual. Phillipe could drive. He was 16, but he didn't have a car.

"Bruh, just eat so you can get ready for bed. You got school tomorrow," Phillipe told Banke as he sat a Coke can down on the scratched up wood stained coffee table in front of each of them. They ate quietly as a Disney movie played on the television screen. Disney movie. 7:00. *Every* night.

Abjiel's Mistakes

Phillipe was a junior in high school. He was real smart. Now, he was practically a dad, too. He took care of his brothers—at least he tried. Abjiel had just started his first year in middle school and hated it. Banke was a quiet kid who never said much about anything, but he watched and listened, especially to Abjiel. Banke saw all the trouble Abjiel got in at school. Out of both brothers, Abjiel, the trouble brother, was the one he adored.

"Abjiel, got another call from school today. You in ISS, [*pause*] disrupting class," his dad said in broken English with a touch of exasperation in his quiet voice. Abjiel jumped as he woke up to his dad standing over him at 4:00 in the morning—just after returning from his limo driving job that kept him at the airport most of the night. In fact, early morning was the only time Abjiel saw his dad to talk to him because middle school dismissed so late.

"I . . ." Abjiel stammered half asleep as he rolled over on the bottom bunk bed and tried to explain but was interrupted.

"No, Abjiel, no excuses. This better be the last call I get about you not behaving. You gonna be a doctor one day, son. Doctors don't do this." In a rare show of any emotion, Abjiel's dad placed his hand on Abjiel's shoulder and squeezed lightly, seeming to communicate both love and concern to Abjiel in his own way. Sharing a room, Banke was silent on the top bunk, but he heard it all. He heard that Abjiel was going to ISS—ISS, again.

"Yessir," Abjiel mumbled quickly falling back asleep as his dad left his room.

Abjiel did not want to be a doctor, but all parents from the motherland wanted their children to be doctors. He didn't want to disappoint his parents, but he was only in middle school.

"Maybe I'll change my mind," he thought every time being a doctor was mentioned.

Calls from the school continued, and Abjiel frequented ISS—disrespect, skipping class, foul language, disrupting class, not following directions, hands on others, and so many more. It wasn't for anything that major but mostly annoying behaviors. His dad had to work, so there wasn't much he could do. At the time, Abjiel thought he was having fun in life. Little did he realize the impact his actions had on Banke.

On a usual Friday afternoon coming home from school, Abjiel busted in the glass door of the house just a couple of weeks after Christmas. He loaded up his bookbag and told Phillipe he was going to Davis' house.

Abjiel called to tell his dad and got the usual response, "Okay."

Davis was a friend from elementary school who lived over in the Warren Hills neighborhood. Most weekends, Abjiel rode his bike to Davis' house and stayed Friday night and Saturday night. He took his new BB gun he got for Christmas because they played with it in the woods behind Davis' house on Saturdays. A lot of kids lived in that neighborhood. Abjiel, Davis, Sting, and Ant were always together—every weekend. They all went to the same elementary school, but Abjiel was a year ahead of them in middle school. Sting's dad picked him up if it was dark; however, on Sunday night, Abjiel rode his bike back home well after dark. Dropping his bookbag by the door, he went straight to bed.

"Waaaa, waaaaa, waaaa," Abjiel's alarm clock blared the next morning—Monday morning!

He jumped out of bed and quickly got ready for school. When he got to the door, he saw the bus was already stopped in the cul-de-sac. Abjiel grabbed his book bag that he left at the door the night before as he locked the door to the house and ran to the bus stop before she pulled away. He didn't even get his breakfast Phillipe left out for him. Of course, he had to sit near the bus driver because of his bad behavior and probably because of being Black.

"A Black kid breaks one rule, and he is marked for life," Abjiel thought often repeating what Sting's dad, the cop, said many times.

For some reason that day, the bus driver slammed on her brakes, and Abjiel's bookbag flew off the edge of the seat with that BB gun sliding all the way up the aisle. The bus driver leaned over and grabbed the BB gun from the bus floor.

"Oh, shit," Abjiel thought, his eyes widening.

She knew it was his because he overreacted trying to explain. He told her it was just a BB gun from this weekend, but it did not matter because there were policies about guns on campus.

The bus driver picked up the radio and called the school. Abjiel tried to hear what she was saying, but the kids on the bus were too loud. As the bus pulled in the lined off bus lot, there stood the principal and two school police officers by the first column under the walkway canopy. He knew they were there for him.

"Stay seated, Abjiel," the bus driver said as the others rushed off. Abjiel did not know why they were in such a hurry to get off the bus and into the school. He certainly never was!

After the last kid exited, the principal entered the bus and motioned for Abjiel to come while one police officer stood at the bus door and the other went to the back emergency exit. Carrying the gun and Abjiel's bookbag, the principal looked down at Abjiel shaking his head, "I'm not surprised it's you, Abjiel, again!"

They led Abjiel into the office with the principal and police following very closely beside him and behind him. The middle school and elementary school were next to each other and used the same bus port. Davis saw it all from one bus over. Intentionally hanging around outside in the bus port, Davis watched his friend. Three grown ass men came to get one little sixth grader.

"Psst. Ab-," Davis whispered trying to hide behind a column but get Abjiel's attention. Davis gave him a thumbs up, trying to ask if he was okay. He just nodded.

"Go to class, young man," the principal growled as they quickly passed. We didn't see Abjiel at school again until the end of the school year, but he told us everything the next weekend at Davis' house.

Abjiel sat down across from the principal's desk, the tip of his toes just touched the floor. The cops were standing behind Abjiel. When he looked up, he saw three little blond-headed kids grinning at him—pictures of the principal's kids on the desk. They looked so happy. He'd be surprised if they did something bad.

"I'm sorry. I left it in my bookbag. At Davis' crib this weekend. My friend's house. Just a BB gun. I forgot it was there. Got home late and went straight to bed. The bus was already there, and I didn't want to miss it. I grabbed my bookbag and ran to the bus. Forgot it was there until it flew out. I promise you I wasn't doing anything with it," Abjiel finally was able to catch his breathe. He couldn't seem to stop explaining or stumbling over his words, but nobody believed him anyway. White people never listen to Black people—much less believe them.

"It's always something with you. You know there are no guns at school. This isn't your '*hood*." Stressing the word *hood*, the principal's face scrunched in disgust, and his thinning brown hair flopped as he snapped his neck from side to side imitating an upset Black female.

"I forgot it was in my bag," Abjiel reminded him.

"Well, you need to start thinking. How can you forget a gun? Nobody with good sense forgets a gun! We have no tolerance for weapons here. It doesn't matter what kind it is. We have tried to call your dad. Has he changed phone numbers again?" the principal asked. He was tired of dealing with Abjiel.

Under a zero-tolerance policy for weapons, Abjiel was suspended 40 days for having a gun at school. The irony was he rushed to get to a place just to be sent home for several months. For 40 days he chilled at home. When he was allowed to return to school, he had to go to an alternative school that was far away for another 40 days, but his family had to provide transportation. His dad drove him there for a week, but his father had to rest because he worked all night to buy food and pay the bills. Even though he tried, there was no way his father could get him to the alternative school, so Abjiel was home 35 more days to do whatever he wanted to do—not get his education!

There were 2 weeks of school left when Abjiel returned to middle school. He missed pretty much a whole semester, and he could not catch up. He did not understand anything—way too far behind. A few days after school was out, Abjiel's report card arrived in the mail. He knew it would not be very good, but at the top, it said, "Retained in 6th grade."

"What the hell?" Abjiel said as he opened the envelop with no one around to hear him.

His parents never said anything about him being retained. If only he hadn't tried so hard to get to school that day he would not have been suspended and held back, but it just made their friendship stronger because they were all together now in the same grade.

Abjiel was bad throughout middle school—in trouble all the time. Oh, it looked fun and was fun, but his younger brother was absorbing all of this. Nobody expected anything out of Abjiel, but he wanted them to.

Beginning of a Friendship

Davis, Abjiel, and Sting knew each other from little league, the neighborhood, and elementary school; however, Davis and Sting met Ant their fifth-grade year when Abjiel was already in middle school, so Abjiel did not know Ant until he began going to Davis' house on the weekends. Because of school, their group of friends grew.

Jokes were Ant's specialty, but constant playing annoyed Ms. Fletcher, his teacher. Tall and lanky even in fifth grade, Ant smiled all the time and was a quick learner, but he didn't give the other kids time to learn before he started playing. He got bored!

"Ant, turn yourself around," Ms. Fletcher said so many times with a little bass in her voice.

"Yes, ma'am," Ant smiled at her and turned around.

Ant always had some comment or lame remark he needed to share. He loved to see people laugh, and he loved to laugh himself.

"Hmmm. What to do?" Ant thought as he finished his page of division problems.

"No one else is finished," he thought as he looked around the classroom. Ms. Fletcher walked over to his desk.

"How do you always finish so fast? Check your work. I'm sure you will find something to correct." Ant stayed on task and finished his work before anyone else, especially in math. It was easy, but Ms. Fletcher told him to check his work. He did, and it was always right. Then, he helped other people, or he tried to help other people.

Ms. Fletcher was busy, so he helped them. They needed to understand. The only problem was that Ant was out of his desk and talking—not following classroom rules!

People constantly called his name wanting him to help them. He could not sit there and be quiet. Ant didn't understand why Ms. Fletcher didn't want him to help others.

"Yo, Ant, sling me that pencil," whispered a kid on his right. The desks were in rows—old school ways from an old teacher.

"Ant, how you do this problem?" asked a kid on his left.

"Hey Ant, can you help me?" inquired Davis two rows over. Davis always had trouble in math. Being Davis' friend, Ant walked over to his desk to help him.

"Ant, son, sit your tail down. How many times do I have to tell you that?" Ms. Fletcher redirected Ant again saying each word slowly with smoke about to come out of her nose. She was mad!

Ms. Fletcher was this old White Mountain Dew lady with long curly brown hair pushed back with a headband. A lot on the hefty side, she was as mean as she was plump, especially if she didn't have her Mountain Dew. Ant's classmates loved him, and he thought deep down Ms. Fletcher loved him too.

"I just got on her nerves sometimes," he told his buddies pretty much every day at recess. The truth was she could not stand him, but Davis never convinced Ant of that. Also, Ms. Fletcher really hated recess, probably more than she disliked Ant.

"Over here, Ant," was the constant chatter as the boys from various classes were outside playing basketball at recess. That was when Sting and Davis first met Ant. All of them were not in the same class, but the grade level had recess at the same

time. The old beat up goal on the outside basketball court was ragtag, but it still had a hole for the ball to go through until the boys returned one Monday near the end of the school year to find the net completely ripped off and the rim bent.

"Come on, guys, let's play football." Ant was the outspoken leader of all recess sports. The rest of the boys followed him from the court to the grassy field beside the basketball court. Ant grabbed the football out of the recess container.

As long as they were playing something, it really didn't matter what game it was. Soon, the sidelines were loud but not from cheerleaders. It was the loud ass teachers always thinking we were fighting or playing too rough.

"No tackling," Ms. Fletcher yelled first. She was the loudest teacher, so she did the yelling.

"Don't touch anyone else," the tone of her voice got a little meaner.

"Guys, stop piling up on each other," Ms. Fletcher bellowed as she walked closer to the boys laying on top of each other on the ground. She was so uptight.

"Nobody was fighting. That's just how we roll," Anthony thought, "We're hands-on kind of people, but the teachers didn't like it." Soon, the football was taken away, but we still had the basketball. It became our football. As soon as we started playing with the basketball, it was taken away too. We could not use a ball to play football or basketball. It made no sense. We didn't have a problem. The teachers did. They were afraid of what MAY happen.

"Damn, ain't that what football is? A BALL game. What's the deal?" Sting mumbled where only we could hear. He knew cussing would get him in trouble.

What else was there to do on a big field at recess? Ant picked up a pinecone and walked over to the guys. Game on! The football game started back with a pinecone. The side of that field was full of pinecones, so football was on! It drove the teachers, especially Ms. Fletcher, crazy, but we had fun.

Middle School Sports

Middle school had junior high school sports and no recess. Ant and Davis wanted to play for their school teams, especially basketball. In sixth grade Ant and Davis were athletic; however, Davis was little, and Ant was uncoordinated. Davis and Ant tried out for the junior high school basketball team but got cut. Word on the street was Coach Johnson only kept people he knew. Seventh grade they got cut again. He wouldn't rock with them at all, so they played rec ball. Rec ball was fun, and they had a great coach in rec ball who played semi pro in Europe. Abjiel played with them sometimes because he was with Davis' family most weekends.

In the summer before eighth grade year, Ant hit a growth spurt and became coordinated. Davis, Ant, Sting, and Abjiel were in the middle school gym playing around before tryouts and for some reason there was this slightly bent goal close to the door leading into the cafeteria. Ant ran across the gym to dunk that junk, and he did. He dunked the basketball his eighth-grade year!

During the yelling and shoulder bumping, they heard a familiar voice. Coach Johnson stepped out from behind the glass of the coaches' office on the other end of the gym with his whistle around his neck carrying a clipboard to start basketball tryouts.

"Whoa, great moves," everyone stopped and watched as he walked toward Ant clapping.

"Son, you here to tryout?" Coach Johnson asked, stopping in front of Ant. He rocked with Ant now. He had no choice but to put Ant on the team, but short Davis still played rec ball.

Football was the sport of choice for Abjiel and Sting, but they all played football for the junior high school team except Ant. Other than pinecone football at recess, he had never played. Real men played football. Sting, Davis, and Abjiel jawed at him until he relented and joined the tryouts in eighth grade.

Ant's [mom was big on] him [playing sports], so he [had all of his gear] and paid his $85 [sign-up fee]. Walking out to the middle school field, he looked like a [real football player], but he [had no idea] what he was doing.

"You lookin' clean, Ant," Sting said, "Maybe you do got some balls."

"Football swagggggggg," Abjiel agreed, dragging out the word.

Ant pranced around like the showoff he was. Them long, skinny legs strutted across the field, but the compliments didn't last long. On the first tackle drill, he ran out there and lined up. Looking around to see what the others did, he was slow to start]. Somebody's helmet hit his neck right between his head and shoulder knocking him to the ground. Getting his first stinger, he flipped over, jumped up, and sprinted off the field and up the hill like a skinny-legged ostrich toward the office where he signed up and paid.

"Where you going, man?" someone hidden under a blue helmet yelled.

"Waaa, waaa, waaa. Call the waaambulance. Get your scrawny ass back out here," someone else chided. Most everyone just stood there silently watching. Ant never looked back! Everyone stood there watching as he entered the small office, stunned!

"I want my money back. I ain't playin' football no more," Ant told the lady sitting at the desk before he made it all the way through the office door. Ant retired after less than an hour on the team. He got the $85, went to Hibbett Sports, bought the red and white Jordan's, and was made fun of for a year. However, that tryout was NOT the end of his football career.

People Who Cared

Abjiel was the star quarterback for the junior high team, but his bad reputation followed him through middle school; therefore, he stayed in trouble. An eighth-grade teacher, Mr. Smith, loved football and related to Black boys—or at least tried to relate. He was the first teacher Abjiel, Sting, Ant, and Davis could communicate with and build a relationship with. Mr. Smith actually told them they were smart—more than once, and he meant it. Other teachers sent Abjiel to Mr. Smith's classroom when they got tired of him, but Mr. Smith and Abjiel initially connected over football. Mr. Smith had this Atlanta Falcons banner hanging above his desk.

Abjiel would walk in the classroom and say, "Rise up!"

"Abjielllllllll, rise up!" Mr. Smith repeated, after a prolonged emphasis on the *l* in *Abjiel,* and dapped Abjiel up—even when he was in trouble Mr. Smith did not beat him down.

Mr. Smith was a White dude with a bald head and round red cheeks wearing khaki pants and a golf shirt every single day. Even though the boys thought he was old, he probably was only in his forties. Everybody loved him, and he was funny—always happy and friendly. All the boys stopped by Mr. Smith's room every morning, but he talked to Abjiel the most because other teachers and administrators sent Abjiel to ISS in Mr. Smith's room all the time. They did not want to deal with Abjiel, but Mr. Smith liked him. Davis, Ant, and Sting had Mr. Smith's social studies class last period, but Abjiel was in there many days anyway because of his behavior—reputation, really.

One day late in Abjiel's eighth-grade year, Mr. Smith straddled a chair backwards beside Abjiel's timeout study carrel that was smashed in the back corner by the window. Abjiel was sent over from the language arts class next door, as usual for disrupting—talking out and laughing. Davis, Sting, and Ant were all near him and could hear.

"You're a good kid, Abjiel. Talented kid. Smart kid," he paused.

"Man, you continue on this path, you going to be in jail. Jail, Abjiel. Man, you going to end up in jail acting like this, or you not going to be nobody. There are too many Black men out here who end up like that because they don't have the opportunity in front of them like you. They end up blowing it because they don't take what they have and run with it. I know some teachers around here don't treat you right and look for every little reason to send you out. Don't give them a reason. Show them your greatness. What do you wanna do 10 years from now? Think about it, and what you are doing to get there," Mr. Smith told it like it was, and he was right.

Abjiel didn't say anything. He looked down, but he was very still.

"Hold your head up high and proud—even if you make a mistake or a bad choice, own it, learn from it, and move on," Mr. Smith encouraged him.

Honestly, I think it was the only time someone had ever said to him, "You're a good kid, Abjiel."

Abjiel made it through eighth grade—middle school—and discovered his passion! He played football, and he was talented! He loved it! He had never played before middle school, but he became the star quarterback. Sting and Davis played little league football for years, but Ant and Abjiel never did. Because his dad had to work, Abjiel would not have been able to play in middle school if Davis' family had not taken him to practice and to games, and football wasn't really his father's thing anyway.

Abjiel was with Davis' family most weekends, but now it was even during the week sometimes for practice. They were like a second family and somewhat made up for his mom and dad not being there.

"Hey. It's late, Abjiel. My kid gotta go to bed. It's time to go home. It's dark. You gonna ride your bike?" Abjiel knew it was time to leave when he heard this from Davis' mom. She was straight up, "You got to go!".

"Yes, ma'am," Abjiel answered as he got his stuff to leave. Even though Abjiel was with them a lot, he still went home at night. There was no beating around the bush. It was time for him to go back to his house. They took him back and forth to practices and games, but he had to leave when it was time for bed.

Abjiel rode his bike the mile to his home and entered a quiet, dark house by himself. His brothers were there, but they were asleep. Abjiel saw how other families interacted with each other and wished his family was like that. His family loved him, but without Davis' family, he would not have been introduced to football. Unknowingly, he began to realize what he wanted. Football became Abjiel's goal. He continued to play football in ninth grade and was really good—talented. The starting spot as the high school's quarterback was his—all because people cared enough about him to take him to games and practices.

High School Sports

"I can get upset with you and discipline you. But you know, as far as just teaching you things about being a man, unfortunately, I just, I really don't know. You have to play sports, son," Ant's mother was overwhelmed raising him all alone. She wanted Ant to have a good male role model to teach him how to be a man, and she knew that would be a coach.

Ant joined the rest of his brothas—The Crew, as they became known—in sports—basketball, football, track, and soccer. Before high school really got started, all Abjiel, Davis, and Sting talked about was football. Ant had to get back on the field. Even though he didn't play, he knew a little more about football now.

One summer weekend at Davis' house, The Crew was outside playing basketball.

"Hey Annie, you tryin' out?" Abjiel asked Ant out of the blue if he was going to freshman football tryouts.

"I ain't playing no football, man," Ant responded with a shaking head every time one of us brought it up, "I like living."

"Come on bro. We be playin' in PE, bro. You'd be mossin'. You gotta show everyone you gotta set—that you not a little girl—especially after running scared last year," Sting knew talking trash usually worked to convince Ant to do something.

In reality, Ant was scared shitless to play football, but his boys wanted him to play. He couldn't disappoint his brothers by being the only one not playing, so he tried out. This time, he was prepared to be hit.

Entering ninth grade, Ant was taller and stronger—still skinny with funny looking legs. He walked onto the high school practice field right in front of the school in his football swag ready for tryouts. The first day was just physical fitness skills: running, flexibility, strength, and agility. The Crew passed that easily!

Soon, we suited up to play a scrimmage game to show how we play. There were seniors out there at scrimmage, and they were big. The seniors played varsity, and they were there to act as the opposing team in tryouts and probably [to intimidate us].

"I'm comin' for their ass," Abjiel mumbled to anyone around him as the seniors walked on the field. He was competitive.

"I'm just worried 'bout my ass," Ant responded terrified at the thought of being tackled] by one of them. Ant knew he was going to get smashed, but he had to stick with his guys. He told himself he had to get to them before they got to him.

"Man, I don't know 'bout this," Ant mumbled as he stood on the sideline.

We were on the main football field this time with empty stands on both sides. Varsity was doing kick return, and freshman and JV were doing kickoff. All of us newbies stood there waiting. Ant was fidgeting—shuffling his feet nervously having never truly played football before. He remembered what happened in last year's tryouts.

"One more down here on kick return. Anybody, let's go!" Coach Cook needed one more person on the other end at kick return with the seniors. Ant knew that if he was [playing with the seniors they would not tackle him.

"Oh yeah," Ant mumbled where just Abjiel, Davis, and Sting could hear. Then, he ran onto the field, took off the blue jersey, put on the orange jersey, and went to kick return. Later, he told us his reason, "Man, if I'm with the seniors, they couldn't smash me."

He ran in that kickoff—on the left. The ball was kicked on the left side. Ant started running down toward the ball. Instead of going straight through the mix, he ran around and came back up at an angle. It happened. He met somebody near the sideline and clinked him. Ant completely knocked that dude off his feet. He hit the guy so hard the dude flew up in the air. All of this was right in front of the coaches.

It was a loud, "Thump," as the guy hit the ground. Ant landed beside him. The dude wasn't hurt, but he wasn't happy either. Coach Cook ran over to Ant.

"Who are you, boy? You're blade." Blade. Coach Cook gave everyone a nickname.

"The way you sliced through everybody to go hit him. You're Blade!" That's what he called Ant all four years of high school football. He saw talent in Ant that needed some refinement—the hit wasn't legal.

"Next time, go after the guy carrying the ball," Coach Cook said as he walked back to the middle of the field.

Coach Cook was an old, old White guy who always wore a sun visor, school t-shirt, and those small polyester coaching shorts with his sack out. Those shorts were so small his sack had nowhere else to go but out. Even though Ant told him, that thing stayed out. He was laser focused on football.

The Crew all made the football team. Actually, everyone who tried out made it. Abjiel became the starting varsity quarterback. He wasn't the tallest guy, but the dude was strong and accurate when passing. Ant, being a quick learner and scared for his life, caught on to the game quickly.

Near the beginning of freshman year Coach Cook asked Ant, "Wanna play JV?"

Ant clinked about five dudes in the first two freshmen games, and he could cover some field on those long legs. He was impressive—talented!

It got even better. In the middle of freshman year Coach Cook asked Ant, "Wanna do Varsity kickoff?"

"Play varsity as a freshman?" Ant thought in his head then repeated it aloud to make sure he heard correctly. Coach Cook nodded.

"Hell, yeah!" Ant didn't hesitate. He wanted to suit up on Fridays. Girls loved that.

Abjiel and Ant were both on the varsity squad. Ant—the guy who ran scared in last year's tryouts was now a star player. Honestly, Sting and Davis were a little jealous, but they supported a brotha. Poor Ant still didn't know what he was doing.

The principal was at practice one afternoon walking around talking to players. He asked Ant, "What position do you play?"

"Wide receiver," he replied with confidence.

"No, you don't play offense. You can probably catch, but you play defense," Coach Cook corrected as he slapped Ant on the shoulder. Coach Cook taught him everything about football, even the name of the position he played.

"You ever played safety?" He asked Ant one day right in the middle of practice when we were sophomores.

"I'm ALWAYS safe in every extracurricular activity I do," Ant replied with a grin. He always had jokes.

"No, you big dummy. I'm talking about the safety position on the football field. Calm down, Romeo," Coach Cook explained his meaning and shook his head in disbelief.

"Naw. What's that?" Ant asked.

He stood Ant in the backfield, "Don't let nothing go past you, Blade."

"Alright," Ant shrugged.

Sting played safety. Ant watched Sting and learned immediately what to do. Ant [killed it] at that position also. He was a natural.

At a practice near the end of our second season, Ant got his chance to shine, and it was just too easy. Ant was playing defense. Abjiel dropped back and threw the

ball deep, Ant was down field and picked it. He picked that joint. It was off to the races. He didn't make it all the way to the end zone because he stepped out of bounds, but he was fast. We were lit. Ant was killin' it out there. By the end of high school, he had at least five interceptions in each of his last 3 years of football. Occasionally, Ant was put in a game at wide receiver. The amazing stat for Ant was the low percentage of times he was tackled—rarely was he tackled. He always remembered his first football tryouts, saying he "didn't want to get killed!" Along with Abjiel, Ant became a high school football star.

Coaching Mentors

Throughout high school, coaches were always asking about our grades. If we did bad, they wouldn't let us play. Davis, Ant, and Sting never had problems with grades, but they kept asking how we were doing. CONSTANTLY asking how we were doing. TOO OFTEN asking how we were doing!

Every progress report and report card distribution, the coach of the sport at that time would say, "Lemme see your report card. Pass to play. Pass to play."

At the end of his first semester of high school, Ant walked into the basketball office and handed his report card to Coach Gordon who was busy at his desk.

"Great job, Ant. You been going to tutoring?" the basketball coach asked without ever looking up.

Ant just laughed, "Yes sir, Coach. I'm the tutor." Ant was smart—always doing well with little effort for years.

Coach Gordon looked up with his brows scrunched and nodded before looking back down at the papers on his desk and giving a faint giggle. Even though he was a

great guy and great coach, there was still some doubt, and he did not really believe Ant was smart with schoolwork. He wasn't the only one. The Crew were all smart Black males, and it was true—Ant really was a tutor!

Ant giggled as he walked back out of the office and said over his shoulder, "Hard to believe, ain't it coach?" Ant kept walking not waiting for a reply.

After the first semester of ninth grade, Abjiel was failing. That's when reality hit. He had a come to light moment with an English Literature teacher named Ms. Honey. Don't let the name fool you! The whole Crew experienced her at some point. Ms. Honey was old and White with long, stringy gray hair and those half glasses part way down her nose where she peeked over the top. She had no wrinkles because she never smiled to make cracks in her skin. She always wore these dark skirts exactly halfway between her knees and ankles with a banded blouse and a blazer. It was probably her 50th year teaching. I don't think she liked any kids, but she certainly [didn't like any of The Crew, especially Abjiel].

"Turn around, Abjiel," Ms. Honey told him one day near the end of the first semester of our freshman year.

"Yes, ma'am," Abjiel said politely as he turned around to face her.

"I need to see you after class, Abjiel," Ms. Honey told him right before the bell sounded.

"What's up, Ms. Honey?" Abjiel approached her desk.

"What's up is you have a 68. You're failing," she announced with an I-knew-you-would look on her face.

"No way. Can you please round it to a 70?" Abjiel knew he wasn't doing great, but he didn't expect to fail.

"Nope, you earned it," she quickly responded.

"Can I redo some work or complete some extra credit to raise my grade? If I fail, I can't play football," Abjiel was serious for once.

"Nope," she said again looking like she wanted to smile.

"Please, Ms. Honey. Football is my ticket. I'm good at it. I want a scholarship," Abjiel said all he knew to say.

She just shook her head, "You should have thought about that before you disrupted every class. You earned that 68. You've had all semester to bring up your grade. I don't expect you to get an A, but you can certainly pass just by following the rules. Maybe you should concentrate more on your grades than football."

Then, with a raise of her eyebrows and an almost grin, she added, "Or maybe you won't have a choice now!"

Abjiel just walked away. The Crew was waiting in the hallway and heard it all. If he couldn't play football, he probably would have dropped out of school because he had nothing to work toward. He wanted to quit then, but he didn't.

It was true. Abjiel was bad in class—always talking, making jokes, and trying to make people laugh. He was not mean but disruptive. Trying to be the class clown, Ms. Honey got the last laugh when grades came out. She indeed failed him. Abjiel made her teaching difficult, so she did not want to help him out. He asked to do makeup work or extra work, but she didn't let him because he was bad. Abjiel was

close to being ineligible to play football—all because of Ms. Honey, and himself, he soon realized. He would not fail another class.

Coach Cook, the head football coach, called Abjiel into his office in the fieldhouse behind the football field after school but before practice. Coach Cook was a stocky White dude with a serious face that exuded intelligence. Never once did he treat any of his players with anything but fairness and respect. Abjiel sat down on the weightlifting bench near the coach's desk knowing what it was about, but he tried to act normal. Davis, Ant, and Sting began weightlifting while Coach talked to Abjiel. We could hear most of the conversation. It was after school, so we were all in the weight room.

Abjiel sat with a big smile like everything was good, "What up, Coach?"

"How the hell can you come to school every day and fail? If you continue to make these kinds of grades, you will never see the field [*pause*] ever," Coach wasn't smiling, and Abjiel's smile probably irked him.

Abjiel's head dropped. What would he do without football?

"Abjiel, raise that head up. Be a proud man. What is it [*pause*] what do you want? Where do you see yourself in 5 years [*pause*] 10 years?" Coach asked as he waited for a response. This talk sounded familiar.

"Man, I wanna play ball. I wanna go to college, and I wanna make my family proud," Abjiel stood up looking at Coach with determination.

"Wonderful! That's what you want, but what's YOUR plan? What are YOU doing now to help YOU get there?" Coach asked, and then it was silent. Abjiel's eyes widened], and he stared at his coach, realizing [his answer was not helping him.

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"Nothing," Abjiel whispered after what seemed like an hour.

Coach handed him a spiral notebook and pen.

"Write down your goal, and at least three things YOU are going to do to reach that goal," Coach Cook instructed.

When he finished, Abjiel took the notebook to Coach who shook his head, "That's YOUR goal and YOUR plan. I know you can do whatever goal you set. Fold that up and put it in your wallet. When it gets tough, take it out and read it."

That was a reality moment for Abjiel. He had a lot of talent, and he knew it. Football gave him something to look forward to. Abjiel was still an average student, but he tried harder, knew what he wanted, paid attention, and did okay in class. Helping each other, The Crew made sure he passed the rest of his classes.

Football was a motivator that taught him to communicate with his teachers, do what he needed to do, and think about his choices. It actually helped all of The Crew. They had to make good grades to continue playing. They had to go to school. They had to be on time to class. They listened. They didn't open a book and study, but They paid attention. They attempted to do work and turned in something, recognizing they could get credit for effort. It was mostly Black kids, so they had to get credit from somewhere. Football and sports kept us wanting to be at school.

When you haven't trained your mind to be a bright kid from a young age, it's hard to flick a switch and say, "I'm going to do good in school now." Coach Cook mentored his guys by believing in them.

The Crews high school basketball coach, Coach Gordon, was also a great coach and mentor. A tall distinguished White man with not one piece of his graying hair out

of place, he not only coached but also taught World Geography. Coach Gordon gave

Ant his first job as a sophomore in high school. Ant worked printing papers making

$25 a week. Every Saturday, Coach Gordon woke Ant up at 6:00 am, scooped him up

at 6:30 am, and stopped by Krispy Kreme if the hot sign was on. Coach Gordon, Ant,

and another player worked at a closed office building that published packets for

conferences being held in the area.

"Get to work, boys!" Coach Gordon said as they entered the empty building,

and he lowered himself into the large executive chair propping his feet up on the

table—less distinguished looking on Saturdays.

"We could get outta here quicker if you got your ass over here and helped,"

replied the other dude. The second worker person changed frequently. Ant never

knew who his coworker was each week, but it was always a basketball player.

"Not happen'. That's why I got y'all—to work!" Coach responded with a

yawn. After Coach Gordon slept for a couple of hours each week, they discussed

basketball games or just life in general. He was always coaching.

They spent all day Saturday making copies and sorting packets for whatever

conference was in town the next week. Ant did that job for two years. Coach Gordon

taught him what it was to have a job. Knowing Ant needed a little male guidance,

Coach Gordon was a mentor and confidante on and off the court.

Not long after basketball season started during sophomore year, Ant and his

mom moved into another duplex. He never got upset with his mom, but one day at

practice, he took a few extra hits on a man that was already down—Abjiel, his friend.

"Stop, Ant. You've got to be a team player. Don't beat him up because you're down. Control. Control the ball. Control yourself. Be a team player. Play hard, but play fair," Coach Gordon knew they were not only teammates but also friends. The court was a great place to leave frustrations, but Ant overdid the foul on Abjiel. The practice was intense because a big game was coming up that Friday night. Everyone was playing hard. Ant got wrapped up in the moment.

"My bad, bro," Ant dapped and hugged Abjiel.

"We good, man. We good," Abjiel was soft spoken and patient. A real friend had a brotha's back. He knew Ant didn't purposefully try to hurt him. It was just the heat of the moment.

Coaches taught you on the court and in life. Friends supported you through good and bad. Ant sealed his place in The Crew and adopted the motto: play hard, play fair.

A Bad Experience from Which to Learn

Sting was a quiet member of The Crew, but he was an athlete. Baseball was his favorite sport to play. He tried out and made the high school baseball team as a freshman. There was only one team, and he made the team all four years.

"Catch of the season, Hoss," the opposing coach yelled as Sting snagged one at short stop during his junior year. Sting didn't know what a Hoss was, but he hoped his coach heard that! He had spent the better part of the last two seasons on the bench.

The 20 or so total people in the stands for both teams were screaming, clapping, and yelling. They recognized a talented player when they saw one.

"Sting, swap with Debo," Coach barked after Sting threw the ball back to the pitcher.

"What the fuck? For real?" Sting never talked back to a teacher, but it just came out.

Coach didn't respond. He stayed propped on the dugout steps.

Sting couldn't believe it. He thought this was his chance to show what he could do, but back to the bench he went. That's where he stayed until some big White bruiser knocked one to the outfield but only got to first base. Sting was fast, so he spent his baseball years replacing bruisers on the base path. He was bored and wanted to do something, so he joined another sport with the rest of the Crew—track!

Sting was terrible at proper running, but track was fun because his boys ran track. He ran the 200, the 100, and the 4 by 1. Because he was having fun with the brothas, he eventually only went to the baseball games when there was no track meet. In between track events, he kicked back with the bros—laughing, trash talking, chilling, talking to girls, talking about the future. They bonded!

They traveled to track meets together. One away track meet was during a storm, and even though no one ran in the rain, it was still wet and cold when the rain ended. There was no way they were getting off that bus. The announcer called their name for the individual events over the loudspeaker twice before proceeding without a runner. Even the track coach didn't know where they were until the end of the meet.

"You lil' assholes," Coach was mad when he got on the bus and saw them sitting there laughing and having a good time. Heads dodged his clipboard that flew to the back of the bus.

The laughing stopped, and they kept their mouths shut. Coach cussed them out for a good 10 minutes before driving back to school in silence. Then, he didn't talk to them for a week. That track meet was never mentioned again by the coach. Realizing they were not very good teammates, they worked extra hard from then on.

Trash talk was a part of sports. Usually, it was directed to opponents to mess with their heads, but The Crew supported each other with trash talking. Outside people probably thought it was horrible, but it was what they did best. Trash talk makes you better by working harder and being determined, but no one in The Crew took it personal.

"Bruh, you sorry as fuck," yelled Abjiel during football practice when Sting dropped a wide-open pass. The other guys joined in.

"Scrub, you're dookie—sorry as hell," Ant added.

That's what they did and still do—nothing personal. Of course, no one liked it, but the next time they played better because they didn't want to hear the trash talk.

At another practice, Davis tried to tackle Ant, but Ant was rarely tackled and was much bigger than Davis. Ant put his arm out stiff, holding Davis back by the top of his helmet. Davis' arms were flinging. Everyone was laughing, even Coach Cook. All of a sudden, Ant moved his hand, and Davis fell to the ground.

Still laughing, "Turtle," Sting murmured quietly as he walked past Davis still on the ground.

"Cockroach," Abjiel yelled as he came running over copying the way Davis' arms were slinging.

Davis was pissed, but it would be worse if he made excuses. He heard trash talk for what seemed like a week, but that was the only time Davis made that mistake. He played harder and better. While it might not be motivating for most people, The Crew thrived on trash talk. Oddly, mistakes usually produced the best learning experiences that made them better.

A Brother's Mistake

The Crew was all interested in the same things—girls, sports, graduating, clothes. Most of the Crew didn't have a whole lot, so they switched clothes all the time. Shoes. Jackets. Pants. Shirts. It added to their wardrobe, and they had more swag by making it appear they had more apparel than what we really had. Because they were the same size in high school, except for Ant's pants, it worked. People judge how you walk, how you talk, how you dress. The Crew didn't judge each other; they helped each other.

By senior year, they could get away with anything. Teachers at the school freshman year were no longer there. The Crew was popular because of sports, and they were fun. The teachers loved them. The girls loved them. Abjiel was the starting quarterback. An all-county player, he developed a reputation of a good student. He was cool with the principal, the administrators, and the teachers who meant something. Being football stars, Abjiel and Ant were the face of the team. They were the face of the school. Abjiel figured it out. However, The Crew had no idea what was going on with Abjiel's family.

When Abjiel was a senior, his younger brother, Banke, was a Junior. Banke did not play any sports, and he never really found his niche or place at school.

Waiting on Abjiel to drive them home after football practice, Banke stayed after school a couple hours most days during football season. He and some friends usually hung out in the stands while Abjiel practiced. Sometimes they would take Abjiel's car and go to the store.

There was a disagreement between some people Banke used to hang with. Peebo was Banke's friend and a suspected gang member, and The Crew unsuccessfully tried to warn Banke to stay away from him. Peebo was with Banke in the stands that day, and then they were gone.

About halfway through practice, Abjiel noticed Banke's friend and their neighbor he drove home from school each day was the only one still in the stands. He refused to interact with Peebo. Banke drove Peebo in Abjiel's car to a neighborhood called Bankland. It was home to the Bankland Gang. Banke only went to watch a fight—nothing like a good fight! However, Peebo had a gun hidden under his shirt. In the midst of the fighting, Peebo pulled the gun out and shot the other kid. Killed him! Banke had no idea that Peebo had the gun. Parked at the top of a small hill directly in front of the small dilapidated dirty yellow house, Peebo ran back up the hill and jumped into the car yelling for Banke to drive. People ran out of the house and off the porch screaming as the car sped away. They recognized Abjiel's car. Everyone knew the little old burgundy Honda with a dented passenger's side, faded and rusted hood, and loud muffler. The Bankland gang knew who the murderer was—or so they thought.

"You killed my brother, Mutha Fucka. Now I'm gonna kill you!" Abjiel heard through his phone's speaker.

Ten minutes after he got out of football practice, Abjiel got the phone call. After every practice, Abjiel and Banke went to RaceTrac to get a drink. Abjiel was walking out of RaceTrac with his orange Gatorade and stopped right there on the curb as he answered the phone. His chest hurt. He had no idea who was on the other end of that call—or why!

"Man, What the hell?" Abjiel responded.

Then, he heard and saw a helicopter to his right not too far away. Bankland was not far from RaceTrac. Abjiel wondered if Banke knew something because he was acting weird and fidgety. He didn't want anything to drink that day. Looking around, Abjiel headed back to the car and dropped off their neighbor.

"What the fuck is going on?" Abjiel asked sliding back into the driver's seat after letting the friend out of the back. Abjiel told Banke about the phone call. Banke spilled everything.

"Bruh, I drove to Bankland with Peebo. He was fightin' James, but then he shot him! Man, I don't know if he died or not. I didn't even know Peebo had a gun. I didn't know what to do, so I took Peebo to his crib," Banke explained, scared to death. James died. Rival gangs had a disagreement over weed money and selling territory.

The police came to Abjiel's house that night questioning him and Banke because his car was seen near the shooting and because their names appeared in revenge threats during witness interviews. Abjiel explained he was at practice, and Banke explained what he knew. Banke was told not to leave the state.

"We've got threats that they may be coming to retaliate on you and your family," the police said.

Everybody knew where Abjiel lived. People were there all the time. Abjiel and Banke left their house and stayed with their mom for a week because the gang didn't know where her house was located. They were both out of school. For a week, Abjiel's whole future flashed before him in ruins, and his mind raced with thoughts. College recruiters had been coming to the games. There was talk about a full ride. He had to play football. He couldn't let the team down. They were his guys! He had to go to college. He couldn't let himself, The Crew, and his parent down. They were his family!

Laying in the bed at his mom's house the first night there, Abjiel couldn't sleep. Half scared, he stared at that worn folded piece of paper from his wallet. Nowhere on there was written a plan for the possibility he was accused of being involved in a murder.

He stared at his last statement, "Stay on the right track."

"What does that mean now?" Abjiel thought, "How can I stay on the right track now?"

"Honesty," kept appearing in his mind, but he knew honesty did not matter for many Black males in the court system.

Abjiel had goals. He made mistakes early and learned from them. He had come too far to give up.

The next day, the high school principal called Abjiel, "Man, we heard that you were involved in some kind of incident."

The principal was cool. He and Abjiel respected each other. Abjiel told Dr. Rivers, Doc, what happened—everything! As much as he hated it, he was honest

about Banke's involvement. Doc kept it on the hush while everything was going on.

The Crew did not even know what happened. After a couple days, the police arrested

Peebo for murder. With that arrest, James' gang no longer sought retaliation on Abjiel

and Banke, so they returned to school; however, it wasn't over.

"Ms. Dudley, can I have Abjiel in the office, please?" somebody's voice

interrupted Abjiel's U. S. History class from overhead.

Banke and Abjiel met in the hallway right outside of the door to the main

office. Doc was waiting at the front desk and walked them down the short hallway to

his office. Two police officers stood up as they walked in and sat in the two chairs

facing Doc's desk. They were White guys with a band around their arm saying Gang

Task Force. "I'm Black," Abjiel thought. It wouldn't matter what he had to say—like

usual.

"Gentlemen," Doc spoke to the policemen while motioning to Abjiel and Banke

sitting in front of him. Doc leaned forward resting his chin on his hand. Listening.

"We believe you were an accessory to murder. Abjiel, your car was seen by

many bystanders speeding off with the gunman inside, and Banke, you were seen," the

police informed them.

They planned to charge Abjiel as accessory to murder. Abjiel and Banke

explained what they knew.

"But it wasn't me," Abjiel defended himself. The police had no idea Abjiel

was not there. They assumed he drove because it was his car, and they were going to

charge him.

Doc stood up pointing at Abjiel, "Nah, no way. This kid, Abjiel, was at practice."

Doc vouched for Abjiel—literally stood up for Abjiel. As Abjiel started to speak, Banke interrupted and finished telling the whole story.

"Are you sure he was at practice that day? Can you verify that?" the police asked Doc.

"Absolutely," Doc said confidently as he picked up his phone and called Coach Cook to the office.

Coach [stopped] abruptly on his way through the door when he saw the police. They asked him about Abjiel being at practice the day of the murder.

Coach Cook looked them straight in the eye and pointed at Abjiel saying, "This is our starting quarterback. He was at practice the whole time. He has not missed one practice in his high school career."

And as soon as Coach finished, the police looked at each other and then Banke.

"You have the right to remain silent . . .," I stood there and watched as Banke was led away in handcuffs. Banke didn't know Peebo was going to shoot James that day, but it didn't matter. He hung around bad people.

Abjiel stared at Banke's back as he passed through the glass enclosed office and became smaller and smaller until the large metal doors slammed shut behind him-- not for the last time. He was gone!

Doc put his hand on Abjiel's shoulder. He turned away with tears running down his face and simply whispered, "It's my fault. He saw everything I was growing up."

"Son, you hold that head up high. You made mistakes just like everyone else has in their life. What kind of role model have you been the last three years? You are a magnificent example of setting a goal and working toward that goal. You threw yourself into sports rather than gangs]. You surrounded yourself with people you knew could help you. We all have choices. You led by example. Now, Banke has to learn from his mistakes." Abjiel was close to Doc, but it was still impossible for Doc to understand Black males.

Banke's accessory to murder charge was dropped, but he was still charged for felony criminal street gang activity, which was a year in jail and the end of his education. Abjiel had another reason to succeed—to take care of Banke when he got out of prison.

The Crew had no idea any of this happened. Being gang related, the shooting was kept quiet. Years later, The Crew learned about Abjiel's brother and that Abjiel blamed himself for Banke's troubles. Unlike Abjiel, Banke never learned from his mistakes.

Plan for Success

With good grades needed to play sports, they had to make sure they all did well. Most teachers were White, and they were helpful for the most part. Abjiel learned to build a relationship with teachers by finding out something personal about each one of them and asking them about it as a conversation starter. He learned to get on their good side early. Sometimes, it was quite funny to hear.

"Good morning, Ms. Wilkie. You're looking mighty pretty this morning. How was lil' Cindy's piano recital? I bet you were one proud mama," Abjiel was extra with this teacher because he knew she thrived with the attention.

"Ass kisser," Ant mumbled, pursed his lips, and made a kissing sound as he walked by.

Teachers loved it. Abjiel now became a favorite student. Because teachers loved him, they loved the rest of The Crew. After all, The Crew was always together. Asking teachers about things they liked and that were important to them created talking points. After building relationships and gaining respect for each other, it was easy to talk to teachers. In return, teachers helped by giving them a lot of second chances in class. Becoming a master at forming relationships with teachers, Abjiel soon realized building those types of relationships with other students was also beneficial. School wasn't that hard. He figured out how to make the good grades and still have some fun.

At the beginning of each semester, they enacted their unofficial plan for success. First, they scoped out classmates the first day of the semester to identify the smart students in each class. Then, they sat by the smartest person in class, who became their safety net. Next, they talked to that smart student and became friends just in case help was needed. Finally, they were prepared in case they did not understand the material. Come to find out, most smart kids were really cool. That's how Abjiel met Ambi junior year. She was hot and smart! He crushed on her for a while, but they never had classes together until second semester junior year.

Abjiel walked into the single-wide trailer on the first day of school looking around to find a place to sit. Needing to find the smartest person in the class, he spotted her in the first desk on the far side of the trailer. He knew who she was but had never had a class with her—until now!

"Hey, pretty lady! Here's your last Christmas present!" he played it real smooth sliding in the desk behind her. She was short and thin with light brown skin, bright light brown eyes, and a sexy smile with one corner of her mouth drooping down just a little.

"I'm sorry? What?" she was always polite.

"Me," Abjiel answered, and she laughed.

The small talk continued, and a friendship began—the best safety net Abjiel ever had. They had conversations every day. Having the same lunch period, they sat together at lunch occasionally—the days she didn't spend her lunch in the media center. Abjiel devised a plan.

"Yo, Ambi, wanna meet this weekend to study for that test on Monday?" It was Abjiel's chance to learn from a smart girl and hang with a hot girl.

She smiled and nodded, "Sure."

Sunday afternoon they met at an Italian place, Little Maddio's, near the local mall where they sat for hours, but very little study occurred. They talked about everything—childhood, church, family, goals, etc. Abjiel had met his future.

After a few hours, Abjiel had an idea, "You know this stuff, so we'll do fine! Let's ditch this joint and see a movie." Following that night, they were inseparable.

Ambi became Abjiel's girl and supported him through high school and college, even though he did not need much help after learning to pay attention himself.

The Crew Grows

Everyone in The Crew was funny, but Ant was definitely the funniest and friendliest. He gravitated toward people like himself. Ant actually met Jeremy in elementary school before he knew any of The Crew, but everyone knew Jeremy. Jeremy was the complete opposite of Ant—a Black guy with nice clothes, a beautiful house, both parents, brothers, sisters, and anything and everything he needed. Unlike Jeremy, Ant needed everything but didn't get much of anything. Jeremy had it all but couldn't seem to hang around the right people as we got older.

In seventh grade, Jeremy was getting mad at one of the teachers because he got a bad grade for not finishing his assignment. He was arguing and getting loud—disrespectful! Ant didn't like that.

"Come on, bro. Calm down. Just finish next time," Ant led him to the hallway with one arm around his shoulder.

They were close in middle school. Ant made sure they stayed busy and out of trouble], but Jeremy's attitude and behavior continued to get worse and worse and worse and worse. Ant and Jeremy began to grow apart in high school, but Ant still [tried to interact with him] at times. Ant hit him up one day junior year.

"Hey bro, I'm bout to meet up with The Crew to play basketball. Come on over to Davis' crib," Ant tried to get him to hang out with The Crew.

"Bet, 'bout to go to Ray-Ray's crib. Meet up wit'cha later," Jeremy gave his usual response, but "later" never came this day or any day.

"Man, you ought not be doing that stuff. That's not good company, bro," Ant never gave up on Jeremy.

Four hours later when The Crew finished playing basketball, Ant headed to his car, and he noticed a missed call from Jeremy's dad. Ant didn't hear the phone. He didn't think about anything when he was playing basketball—play hard, play fair.

Ant called Jeremy's dad back.

"Have you seen Jeremy? Have you heard from Jeremy?" the voice of Jeremy's dad coming through the phone was panicked.

"Oh, damn, no, said he was goin' to Ray-Ray's house, but that was hours ago," Ant knew something was wrong. Ray-Ray and his group were known for drugs and minor theft.

Later that night, Jeremy's dad called and told Ant that Jeremy was locked up for burglary. That was the first of many arrests. Ant didn't know what Jeremy was searching for—maybe it was for someone's approval—because he had everything money could buy. Within the next year, Jeremy was in a gang. Ant tried to stop him.

"No, man, you got it all. Your family got you squared away," Ant did not want to see his longtime friend choose that life. He was shocked and upset when Jeremy indeed joined a gang. Everybody was disappointed. Jeremy's dad was disappointed. His mom was disappointed. In fact, she was devastated.

Jeremy's mom called Ant after one of his later arrests, "How come he just didn't stay with you?"

Ant didn't have an answer for them, but he could never get Jeremy off of his mind.

"At some point you just have to want it yourself, like Abjiel did," Ant told The Crew one day. Ant knew then that he needed to help the brothers.

Different people were always coming with Ant to hang out with The Crew. Most didn't stay around, but every once in a while, one did. In tenth grade, Sheen moved to the area from South Carolina. He was a super country kid. Tall. Thin. Light skin. Fidgety. Loved weed. He didn't really say much at first, but he played football. That made him cool. After a couple of weeks, that kid was like an open book. He could [talk and talk a lot], but you couldn't understand him. Never could.

"What?" They would all ask him. Eventually, they took turns.

"Your turn, Sting," Ant said as Sheen entered the weight room talking one day.

"What the hell you sayin'?" Sting asked Sheen. Everyone laughed.

Pretty soon, they learned his twang and learned to understand him—most of the time.

Once Sheen did start talking, he never stopped. There were certain things that he was doing—people he was talking to—that probably would've gotten him into trouble if he would've kept doing it. He seemed a little distraught and going in the wrong direction. Ant recognized it and brought him to The Crew where he fit in great.

"Let's hang out," Ant told Sheen. Even though we all played football together, Ant was the one who brought Sheen to hang out with us.

"Basketball—this Saturday," Ant told him. The Crew played basketball every Saturday at Davis' house. Sheen joined the game that Saturday and every Saturday from then on.

Sheen was in 10th grade driving an Excursion—huge car, and he had his own apartment—in 10th grade! That Excursion fit the whole Crew inside, and the apartment was a great hangout. The Crew wondered why Sheen had his own apartment when his mom lived in the same town and he was only 16 years old, but family discussions were off limits. The Crew respected that because it was really none of our business. Because they all played sports, they pushed Sheen to play more sports, and he played everything they did. The Crew was glad Ant befriended Sheen.

One night when The Crew was hanging at his apartment, Sheen shocked them all by saying, "Guys, I think y'all saved my life. 'Preciate you. Y'all my real family!" Sheen graduated college and opened his own photography business where he became a highly sought photographer.

A few weeks after Sheen, a ninth grader joined the football team. He was called Bama. The Crew normally didn't hang with the youngers, but he needed them. Bama was the second and final brother Ant was responsible for bringing to The Crew.

"Man, you just look ugly. You weird. You just, you retarded, but you smart. You can play football. Come on, got to make you my friend, too," was how Ant described his first encounter with Bama to The Crew when he took Bama to hang out.

Bama was odd. His head was wavy instead of round on the top, and he was constantly confused; however, he became a brother and the last member to join The Crew.

Success is an Attitude

Abjiel had one semester of high school left and had to retake ninth grade English Literature—only senior in a class with freshmen. It was required to graduate.

"You babysittin' today, Abjiel?" someone from The Crew always asked on the days he had that class.

"Bring your paci? Ambi changed your diaper yet?" someone else would say. The Crew was brutal to each other, but trash talk was a part of life and made us stronger.

Ms. Robin was the teacher this time—a tall Black lady in her middle 20s. She was really cool and became one of Abjiel's favorite teachers. Knowing the freshmen were a little shocked at seeing the star quarterback in their class, Ms. Robin asked Abjiel to start the semester off with a motivational talk and part of his story.

"You guys can do anything. I failed English Literature 3 years ago and look at me now. Don't waste the opportunities you have been given. Ask yourself: What do you want? What are you going to do to get there? And do it!" Abjiel repeated what he heard years ago and showed his folded piece of paper before finishing with a description of the impact of that little beat up paper.

That was the best class ever. Ms. Robin was his teacher, but she also became his friend. Abjiel was still the talker, but he also knew what he had to do. Ms. Robin knew him, respected him, and helped him.

"How's it going, Abjiel?" she was always checking on him, and her room became a hangout for The Crew before and after school.

"Who you taking to the prom, Abjiel? Ambi?" Ms. Robin asked one day as Abjiel was leaving class. She was a senior advisor.

"Ahh, man, I don't have the bread for all that. I'm gonna skip it," Abjiel replied. She stared at him for a minute, but the conversation ended there. He left the classroom.

"Good morning, Abjiel," said Ms. Robin with the normal handshake she gave everyone as they walked into the room the next morning. Abjiel felt something thick against his palm. As he walked to his seat, he glanced down and saw a wad of money all rolled up. Looking up, he nodded at Ms. Robin. He could tell by the smile on her face she knew he appreciated it. That prom was lit—thanks to his teacher.

Abjiel remained friends with Ms. Robin. He lived in the dorm his freshman year of college, and Ms. Robin furnished everything—the sheets, the curtains, EVERYTHING. She took him on a shopping spree. She was his teacher, and she was a Godsend!

Friends Forever

No one in The Crew wanted to be the one to say, "I didn't make it." They didn't want any of their brothers to say that either. One of the crew, Bama, was a year younger; so, he graduated high school a year after all the others. Bama wanted to go to college where most of The Crew went because they studied together at the library (usually through the night) and kept each other out of trouble. He knew he had support with them, but he wasn't the sharpest and did not get accepted into our college. However, he was accepted into a community college near them, but there were no dorms. Bama had nowhere to live.

"Come on, bruh. You can stay on our couch," Sting and Davis both agreed. They were college roommates and had to look after a brother.

Bama spent his freshman year of college living with them and sleeping on their apartment couch. He studied with them during their all-nighters at the end of each semester. He just took classes at another college. They were friends, but they were brothers. They took care of each other. That's The Crew, and that's why they became successful.

The Crew wasn't perfect, but they stayed out of major trouble and looked after each other. The Crew was lit, and they all graduated college. They made sure each other did—always did and always will look after each other.

Ten Years Later

Every member of The Crew graduated college, obtained a full-time job, and started a family of their own. Every birthday, every special event every day on social media—The Crew is together. It's bigger now with girlfriends, wives, and kids, but they are one big happy family. That's success!

Conclusion

There are so many more stories that could be included in this counter-narrative, but I think I met my goal of writing a narrative opposite of majoritarian stories mostly heard about Black males. They looked after each other, had fun, got in some trouble, set goals, made hard decisions, and persevered. Themes determined from and across data and represented in the counter-narrative are described in the next chapter, Chapter 6, entitled *Themes and Implications from the Data*.

Chapter VI

THEMES AND IMPLICATIONS FROM THE DATA

Themes were crafted from the data analysis and used to write the third-person realistic fiction counter-narrative from the narrator's perspective. All themes constructed were present in the experiences of all participants, even though some themes were more noticeable in the experiences of individual participants. Because all participants viewed friends as a major influence on their success, *succeeding through friendships* was a major theme with the entire counter-narrative written around the characters' friendships. The other themes were *succeeding through sports*, *building relationships with school personnel*, *learning from mistakes or difficulties*, *setting goals and attitudes for success*, *choosing good people*, and *influencing others to succeed*. In this chapter, each theme is briefly discussed and supporting examples from participant's interview data are provided. Then, the theme is examined from the context of the counter-narrative, and suggestions provided to increase the success of Black males are italicized.

Succeeding through Sports

Sports had a major influence on all participants. Through data analysis, I determined sports were played for enjoyment, to keep the kids busy and out of trouble, to provide male role models, and to escape issues going on in life. Every participant verbalized participation in sports as having a positive impact on their success. In addition to meeting each other through sports, academic success was influenced by

sports because they had to pass classes to play. Finally, I concluded participation in a sport built character and provided a way to obtain a college education. *One strategy a teacher could use is to encourage participation in an extracurricular activity of interest to Black male students*.

Sports provided a fun escape from everyday life. Abjiel's passion for football influenced his evolution from a student frequently being in trouble in middle school to someone who made up his mind to succeed. Ant and Abjiel both experienced challenging issues at home, but playing football provided them an escape where they could solely think about the game. It worked because they both received full scholarships to play football in college; hence, with practice, talent, and perseverance, sports can provide a free college education. This is ironic because students are often discouraged from any academic work involving sports (research papers, etc.) because very few actually make it in sports. Success in sports does not always mean playing them. Davis was so passionate about sports that he earned a sports management degree and intends to spend his life involved in sports. Even though he was not very good at playing sports, he found a way to still earn a living with his passion. Davis, Abjiel, and Ant demonstrated that some Black males do make it, and it is not for the teacher to discourage kids from their dreams. *Teachers need to allow students to pursue their interests even if that interest appears to be unachievable to the teacher*.

Abjiel believed that participation in sports built character and demanded discipline to meet the expectations of the team. Abjiel was the face of the team and had to live up to those expectations. Players learn teamwork as well as other character traits like patience and responsibility. They must discipline themselves to be at

practice and games on time and ready to play. Not playing football in the past, Ant learned to be disciplined and ready to play when he volunteered to join the seniors on his first day of practice. He did not know what he was doing, but he took the initiative to try. He also learned a new position, safety, which earned him a spot on the varsity team as a freshman and eventually a football scholarship. Finally, his mother had him play sports so he could learn to be a man from coaching mentors. In addition to football paying Ant's way through college, his basketball coach taught him to be a man by providing his first job. Therefore, sports helped build character and discipline needed through life. *In the classroom, teachers could incorporate character building into lessons—however, Black culture should first be understood.*

A requirement to participate in high school sports is to pass academic classes. Abjiel met with this issue as a freshman when he failed his English Literature class. From that point on, he became disciplined in his classes in order to remain on the football team. My participants demonstrated as did McDougal's (2009) study that Black males increased success when they had a reason that was important and relevant to them. Often, extra help is provided for athletes who may need assistance with their academics. When showing his grades to his coach, Ant was asked if he went to tutoring. He responded that he had, but in a twist, it was because he was a tutor helping to provide extra help to those who needed it. Ant had high expectations for himself even though some of his teachers did not. Because players are required to keep their grades up, achievement increased. *To help students, teachers could monitor student academic progress and provide opportunities like redoing low grades or correcting assignments to increase learning and decrease the likelihood of grades*

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keeping students from playing. Glocke (2016) provided other strategies using the Afrocentric worldview.

Finally, playing sports kept these players on track by building relationships. Ant pushed his friends who were headed in the wrong direction to play sports because he knew sports could keep them out of trouble. Coaches constantly communicate with teachers about players' grades and behavior. If they are not performing where expected, the coach becomes the biggest cheerleader for players to stay on the right track to play ball. Relationships were also built with teammates. All participants suggested sports provided a way for them to build relationships and hang out together. Having a strong desire to be involved, Sting participated in more than one sport in the same season. Even though his high school baseball coach made him lose his passion for playing by only using him as a baserunner, he found another sport in which to participant with his friends. To motivate Abjiel, Coach Cook had him write his goals and his plan to achieve them. Football kept Abjiel wanting to go to school, and that was certainly not the case in middle school. Contrary to the beliefs of many teachers, he did care and wanted to do well in school. Therefore, as noted by Hotchkins and Dancy (2015) playing sports has the potential to keep players on the right track. *Because relationships were important in sports, teachers could use them as a model to build relationships in the classroom that engage Black male students to want to be present and be involved.*

Sports was a major influence on the success of students in school because it provided an escape from life, helped build character, required passing grades, and kept players on the right track. Therefore, participation in sports and/or extracurricular

activities (music, drama, chess, astronomy, etc.) promoted success in these young men and should be considered as a potentially positive and beneficial strategy schools could employ to help young Black men similar to my participants. Also, sports provided fun and promoted the building of relationships. Therefore, *teachers suggesting and promoting involvement in sports or other extracurricular activities of interest or relevance to Black males may provide students something in which to become involved.*

Building Relationships with School Personnel

Another theme prevalent among all participants was the importance of building relationships, specifically with school personnel and peers. Because these two themes were common in all interviews yet different in details, I split them into two themes: succeeding through friendships and building relationships with school personnel. Participants' interactions with certain teachers were some of the most positive memories about school. Before any stories were told, the participant began by saying whether they liked the teacher or not. Not surprisingly, all participants described some staff who negatively impacted their education. However, *the best and most successful memories were in the presence of teachers the participants deemed fun, cool, and caring.* Abjiel, specifically his senior English teacher who helped him in multiple ways, had many beneficial interactions after figuring out what he wanted, Ant came to respect his fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Fletcher, and connected with his football coach; Sting's reaction to his baseball coach showed his restraint when a teacher did not do what he felt was right. Davis had a teacher he remembered from elementary school he thought was fun and cool.

Participants in this study were successful because they built relationships with different personnel at the school: coaches, teachers, and administrators. Building relationships included creating the impression you desire teachers to have of you and communicating with them. Abjiel described the importance of thinking about and providing the impression that you want others to have. He made sure he knew something about each one of his teachers as a way of letting them know he cared, and as a result, they gave him second chances and extra help with grades. By the time he was a senior, he built a reputation as a good student and was glad the teachers who knew him as a freshman were no longer there. Ant's peers and teachers voted him Most Likely to Succeed in middle school telling him it was because he was always positive, and he never acted upset. Therefore, the reputation desired can be created by the student; however, *teachers could increase positive relationships with Black males by refusing to allow past reputation or behaviors impact teacher interactions with students*.

Communicating with teachers and coaches was very important. Obviously, being the adult, a teacher or coach should be communicating with all students to make sure they are progressing. Realistically, that does not always happen. Therefore, students are left to sometimes take the initiative to build a relationship with a teacher. Having a positive relationship with the teacher is usually beneficial for students because the teacher is more willing to work with them and push them to do well when they have a good relationship. Abjiel had a teacher in middle school, Mr. Smith, with whom he could relate. He also built a close relationship with Coach Cook, his football coach. Coach Cook was the one who motivated him to do well and really made him

consider his future with the little beat-up piece of paper in his wallet. Another influential teacher was Ms. Robin who paid for his prom and furnished his dorm room. Additionally, Ant had a middle school basketball coach who gave him his first job to develop his work ethic and mentored him. Earning the nickname Blade, he developed a close relationship in high school with Coach Cook, who taught him everything about football. Building relationships with coaches and teachers was instrumental for success. Davis built a relationship with a college professor who helped him "catch up" in math. In Robertson and Chaney's (2017) research, relationships with Black male students and teachers were often strained. However, from my participant's experiences, teachers who were coaches seemed to have effective relationships with Black male students. Coaches were encouraging and passionate, and that transferred to the students. *Increasing passion and encouragement by teachers in the classroom could increase student engagement and academic achievement while building relationships*. Maybe the student/coach relationship should be further studied to provide teachers with tips to build relationships with Black male students.

Finally, relationships with administration are important. Abjiel had a close relationship with the school principal, and that relationship was pivotal in keeping him out of trouble and allowing him to finish high school without so much negative attention. Dr. Rivers and Coach Cook, vouched for him when he was accused of being an accessory to murder. The administration, principal primarily, has lots of power and can increase academic support (i. e., extra tutoring, resources to meet basic needs, etc.) and behavior support (i. e., keeping check on progress, encouraging and praising accomplishments, actively listening to students, etc.) provided at school.

Students spend lots of time in school. Therefore, it is not surprising that positive relationships with school staff promote student success at school—not just with sports. *Teachers should build relationships with students to learn their interests whether it's music, drama, gaming, etc.—or sports.* Likewise, *frequent and positive communication between students and school staff helps build those relationships that many times last long into the future.*

Succeeding through Friendships

While relationships with school personnel were beneficial, relationships with friends were viewed as more influential by participants. Those relationships were a major piece of the counter-narrative. Peer friendships provided the encouragement and motivation necessary to be successful. The key was choosing the right friends to create a brotherhood, make each other better, encourage one another, and refrain from disappointing your brothers. Individuals have a choice regarding the people around whom they hang. Successful people interact with others who have the same goals and create a brotherhood of support. Ant only tried out for high school football because his friends played. Abjiel and Sting explicitly stated they were "friends but more like brothers." That brotherhood remained after high school and is still going strong today. Abjiel remains the unofficial patriarch of The Crew.

Abjiel, Ant, Davis, and Sting all suggested their circle of friends made each other better. Sting was good at trash talk. Although most people would get angry, all the participants felt that trash talk made each other better. Sting made a mistake on the football field, and all the others made fun of him. Therefore, he tried harder, pushed himself to do better, and he did. If this trash talk was heard by teachers or school

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personnel, students would be in trouble for inappropriate talk (even without the colorful language). Trash talk may not be what makes all circle of friends better, but it worked for the participants and for The Crew. *Training on Black culture to create a culturally responsive learning environment, as described by Whitaker (2019) in an interview discussing her experiences with cultural responsiveness and describing culturally responsive teaching as a consideration of the cultural background, experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and values of others, could help teachers better understand interactions among Black male friends and prevent some unnecessary consequences for Black males.*

Encouragement was another way they helped each other be successful. While all participants spoke of the importance of peer friendships, Sting was adamant his group of friends that he had since middle school made him better and provided inspiration for him to stay on the right track. Abjiel and Sting both stated that no one wanted to be the weakest link or be the one to say, "I didn't make it." Sting and Davis let Bama sleep on their couch the first year he was in college. This encouraged him to stay in college and allowed him to join his friends to study together in the library. With their close group of friends, each participant knew they had someone to encourage them when needed and to make sure they succeeded. Friendships became, as described by Sting, "brotherish" with all participants suggesting these friendships were more impactful than anything else at school. Disappointing a brother was not an option. Without their group of friends, none of the participants believe they would have their college degrees today. Early in school, *students need opportunities to work together cooperatively to develop strong friendships.*

Their experiences suggest that surrounding yourself with encouraging friends helps bring success because you do not want to disappoint others who are important to you. The key is ensuring you choose friends with similar goals who will influence you to achieve those goals. Throughout their school lives, The Crew made plenty of mistakes that were turned into learning lessons. Again, their friends were there supporting and helping along the way. The lesson learned is to choose good friends who steer you and keep you headed in the right direction. For teachers, *encouraging friendships and interactions rather than frequently separating friends could positively impact Black male students.*

Learning from Mistakes or Difficulties

Mistakes are inevitable. The way mistakes are handled is what is important. After any situation or event, reflection is needed for improvement. The first step to learning from mistakes is admitting the mistake and taking responsibility. After realizing mistakes or reflecting on situations, the decision is made on what is wanted and what needs to happen. Then, hard work must follow to identify a solution and achieve what is wanted. *Rather than beating students down for their mistakes, teachers can encourage and guide students to learn from mistakes and difficulties through life.* This provides a learning experience rather than the normal negative consequences.

Many examples of this theme are found throughout the transcripts and counter-narrative: Abjiel learned he needed to start studying after failing an English class and facing the possibility of not playing football; Ant learned Tylenol was not Skittles; Davis learned to ask for help when needed; and Sting learned to play harder after

hearing trash talk for his football mistakes. However, Abjiel's story provided most of the experiences reconstructed in the counter-narrative. Abjiel realized his behavior and academics in middle school were not acceptable. As he recognized his passion and talent for football, his priorities shifted. Football impacted his future. He admitted his mistakes and decided what he needed to do; however, intertwining the themes, his relationship with his coach was pivotal in truly thinking about what he wanted. From ninth grade forward, he worked to get what he wanted, and he got it. He passed his classes, turned his behavior around, and became a football star. As he graduated, he was relieved his teachers from ninth grade were no longer there because his reputation was much different. His thinking is evidence that supports the idea that a bad reputation stays with you and is held against you, even after you have improved.

Additionally, other people's mistakes provide learning opportunities. Ant learned from other people's mistakes. His friend Jeremy went down the wrong path and ended up in jail and in a gang. From Jeremy's mistakes, Ant learned he wanted to influence other people to stay on the right track by bringing them into his group of friends. Ant also learned from his mom's mistake of not having financial stability. He realized she was doing the best she could and did not get upset, but he made sure he continued his education with a college degree. *Teachers could discuss any situation with Black male students, or any student, from which to reflect upon and learn.*

The participants were adamant that they would not quit amid difficulties. They knew what they wanted and did whatever was necessary to get it, finding there was always a solution. Davis loved sports, but his size was a difficulty in his quest to play basketball. However, through a degree in sports management he found a way to still

be involved with sports. This attitude made him successful. Sting wanted to play sports, but when he was not given the opportunity to play baseball, he solved the problem by joining the track team. By reflecting on events or situations, students can learn how to do things differently or better. For either, *reflection should be encouraged.*

Mistakes were crucial turning points in their lives and an important part of what made them successful. I also found this important because, I believe, many students do not admit their mistakes to learn from them. These participants all reflected on their mistakes, whether on their own or with the help of another person. Therefore, reflecting on mistakes and situations to learn from them and improve increases success in school. *Learning from mistakes should be modeled and reinforced throughout school to explicitly teach students how to reflect and think about events that happen.* After learning from mistakes, goals can be set.

Setting Goals and Attitudes for Success

Goals provide something for people to work toward—a desired end result. In order to achieve the desired result, a plan is needed. Setting goals and making a plan are necessary to reach personal goals. Therefore, individuals need to take responsibility for their own goals and lead the way to achieve them. For the achievement of any goal, a positive attitude is beneficial.

The setting of goals and having a positive attitude were evident in all the transcripts and reflected in the counter-narrative. Sting had a goal to be a teacher. He knew what he needed to do to and reached his goal. Davis had a goal of working in sports. Needing a little academic help along the way, he achieved his goal Abjiel

explicitly described setting goals and Ant explicitly described having a positive attitude. When Abjiel realized he was good at and wanted to play football, he set his goal to play football and graduate from college. Not being accustomed to doing well in school or behaving, his coach literally had him write what he wanted, or his goals, and make a list of what he needed to do to achieve that goal—a plan. Then, he kept that plan in his wallet as a reminder. Abjiel was responsible for himself and followed his plan. He ended high school with a full scholarship to play football in college. *Writing goals and designing a plan may be a beneficial activity to provide all students.*

Ant's attitude was positive throughout childhood and with his mother. With limited finances, he and his mom moved frequently. He never let his mother know it bothered him and stayed positive for her. Also, even though he was scared to play football, he tried out as a freshman with his friends. He was willing to try anything, even something that scared him. After volunteering to participate in a drill, he made an outstanding play. Not even knowing or understanding his position, he learned it and began playing varsity as a freshman. Even though oblivious to any football rules or plays, he was positive and had fun. In the end, he received a full football scholarship. Staying positive earned him an education. *While all actions we complete are not positive, encouraging positivity and a can-do attitude would promote increased success and perseverance.*

Ant was also a great example of setting a goal and being persistent to achieve it. When students were playing football in elementary school, the teachers took the ball because they were too rough. Therefore, they began using a basketball to play football. When that was taken, the guys still wanted to play football, so Ant got a

pinecone. There were thousands of pinecones on the playground, so he was able to achieve his goal of playing football at recess by being a leader and having a plan to achieve his goal of playing football at recess. Nothing stopped him from playing football. He was a problem solver. *Providing real-world problem-solving opportunities in the classroom increases the likelihood problem solving would be used in real-life toward accomplishing goals.*

At some point during their schooling, each participant realized what they wanted to achieve. They did not all write them down like Abjiel, but they all knew what they wanted. That was to graduate. Having a positive attitude and setting goals provided great opportunities. Sometimes, explicitly writing goals and plans on paper helps to internalize and give vision. *The setting and writing of goals are strategies teachers could use to encourage students to deeply think about their future desires and then later reflect on their progress.* Others may be able to keep their goals and plans in their minds. What matters is the setting of goals and the work needed to achieve them. That is how success is achieved. With Ant as an example, having a positive attitude and taking the lead in any situation, rather than following someone else, to achieve goals increases success. Therefore, set a goal and make it happen!

Choosing Good People

Interacting with people who expect great things from you influences you positively. Hanging out with crooks makes you look like a crook. Growing up, I was often told by my grandfather, "You play in shit, you smell like shit." Meaning that the people you hang out with tells a lot about you, this allegory leads to the next theme. Choosing good friends and relatable mentors can have a positive influence that

promotes success. *While character and decision-making skills can and should be taught and encouraged, students are really the ones responsible for choosing good people.*

Like everyone, each participant faced difficulties in school. However, they each realized the importance of surrounding themselves with good people who encouraged each other to do well, confronted each other when headed down the wrong track, helped each other when needed, and expected the best of one another. Abjiel learned to build relationships with people who impacted his life, and, as a result, his principal and coach vouched for him when he was possibly being charged with accessory to murder. Additionally, he created a friendship with a teacher who helped him pass a class he previously failed and furnished his dorm room for college. The people he chose to be around looked after him and helped him be successful. He knew he wanted to play football and go to college, so he made sure he surrounded himself with people to encourage the achievement of his goals.

Ant was solely living and being raised by his mother. According to him, she did not know how to make a man out of him, so he played sports. Therefore, he was surrounded by coaches to influence him. They checked on his grades and behavior. In middle school, one coach gave him his first job and taught him work ethic. Being friendly with a positive attitude, he became close to his coaches who positively impacted his success. Therefore, he chose good, relatable people with which to surround himself.

Finally, Sting and Davis chose good friends. Sting told about trash talking among his friends when someone made a mistake, maybe on the football field. They

knew it was nothing personal. It was just what they did. However, Sting and Davis agreed trash talking made each other better because it made them work harder to not make the same dumb mistake again. Additionally, good friends helped each other. While I am sure it was an inconvenience, Sting and Davis allowed one of their friends to crash on their couch so that he could go to college near them. Surrounding themselves with good friends benefitted all involved. Good people help each other be successful.

I have often heard that bad company corrupts good people. Therefore, the opposite must be good company helps bad people succeed. Even though they all had experiences with "bad" people influencing them to make bad choices, all participants chose to be surrounded by peers and adults who would encourage their success. Being surrounded by good friends and good teachers encourages an attitude of success. Stories in the counter-narrative provide support for choosing good people with which to interact. Watching and learning about others to identify people with a positive influence helps lead one to success in any area of life. Young students could be encouraged to think about whether the people they are surrounding themselves with are good influences. Having positive influences was and is important for success in any area. *Teacher could model being a good influence*.

Influencing Others to Succeed

Sometimes there are unspoken expectations where you just know you must do what is right. That was part of the brotherhood because they were accountable to each other. Not everyone has that accountability piece as an influence to stay out of trouble. Sometimes, people need good influences to step up for them. The final theme

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constructed from the data was *influencing others to succeed*. With each participant being in a group of influential friends, they encouraged each other to succeed. Additionally, peers outside their group were brought in, especially by Ant. The peers they sought to join their friend group were often headed toward trouble. Ant, specifically, discussed finding Sheen and Bama who were headed down the wrong path and pulling them into his group of friends. Abjiel was asked to speak to the younger classmen in the English Literature class he had to retake, and Sting and Davis let Bama stay on their couch for a year to attend college. Therefore, they specifically sought to influence peers to stay on the right track. *While teachers cannot control how students influence each other, they can model influencing others through their own actions and treatment of people.*

One way to be a good influence is to identify and bring friends into the circle. Good influences promote increased success. Ant and Sting explicitly discussed influencing others. Ant intentionally tried to befriend others who were on the verge of making some bad choices after his friend Jeremy resorted to gangs. Ant realized he could pull some guys into his circle of friends. Sheen was headed in the wrong directions, so Ant befriended him and encouraged him to play sports. Ant did this with both Sheen and Bama. As a result, they both were able to attend and graduate college. His influence made a difference in their lives.

Likewise, Sting and Davis influenced others. As mentioned, they roommate allowed one of their buddies to stay on their couch the entire first year he was in college. Because of their help, he was able to go to college and graduate. That is an example of influencing others to succeed.

Sometimes, you do not know the exact outcome of your influence. Abjiel was in a freshman English Literature class his senior year because he failed it as a freshman and needed it to graduate. Since he was the face of the school known for football, his teacher had him speak the first day of class. He encouraged his classmates to figure out what they wanted and how they would get there, exactly what he had done. While I am sure he does not know what happened to those classmates, he was trying to positively influence others in the same manner he had been influenced.

In reality, no one really knows the impact of others or the impact you have on others. However, you can influence people who are around you. Being a positive influence on others impacts their success as well as your own.

Conclusion

I need to emphasize that the previous themes were determined from the experiences of my participants. Not all Black males are passionate about sports, but there is something that interests everyone whether it is music, games, drama, science, etc. Whatever the interest is of students, teachers can increase awareness of it and encourage success whether the teacher likes the activity or not (as long as it is not illegal or immoral).

All the themes were carefully crafted after repeated readings of the transcripts and coded data, and all seven themes are reflected in the raw data and counter-narrative. A theme may have been more developed through one character or more visible in certain participants' experiences; however, to be a theme, it was reflected across all participants. Not one of these themes is new or unheard of; however, I do not believe they are all being encouraged or embraced as ideas for teachers to help

Black males increase success in the classroom nor do I believe Black males realize the impact of these themes on their lives. *Teachers encouraging students in these areas could be beneficial if teachers understand their students to know areas in which they need support.* Therefore, they can serve as reminders for teachers to incorporate in the classroom and motivational strategies for Black male students. While these themes were common across all successful participants, racism remained and was identified throughout stories told by the participants. Despite the themes for success, the goal of a counter-narrative is not only to make good choices (or to make the case that succeeding academically is a result of good choices, which are often affected by environmental circumstances). The goal of a counter-narrative is to unmask racism as well as point to issues related to agency—or choices. Chapter 7 exposes racism in the school experiences of my Black male participants.

Chapter VII

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM EXPOSED

Even though Black male participants in my study were successful, they still faced many problems at school—racialized problems. A goal of my study was to expose any racism still present in school while also raising the voices of successful Black males for others to hear. While overt racism has decreased, implicit bias and systemic racism remain. Patterns of racism were identified, mostly in the form of microaggressions, in participants' school experiences. From data analysis, systemic racism was exposed through unfair practices present in schools, verbal aggressions, lower expectations, and inequalities combined with well-known stereotypes. Each of these are discussed after a brief description of the systemic racism embedded throughout participant experiences.

Systemic Racism

Traditionally operated according to the White norm on which schools were founded, there are policies and leadership decisions intentionally and unintentionally detrimental to Black male students. For example, zero tolerance policies targeting stereotypical beliefs about and behaviors of Black culture and, specifically, poor Black males provide no opportunity for flexibility. Zero tolerance policies appeared twice in stories collected. One was a zero-tolerance policy regarding gang related activities, and the other was a weapons zero-tolerance policy. The zero-tolerance weapons policy caused Abjiel to waste a whole year of school. He knew not to have a BB gun

at school, and a consequence for having it whether intentional or not was understandable; however, a 40-day suspension that became a 75-day suspension because of no transportation to the required alternative school was extreme. Because of missing so much school, Abjiel repeated the grade level. More than likely his reputation and previous behavior issues increased stereotypical beliefs toward him and played a role in his consequences. Inferred from Abjiel's perceptions of his interactions with his White principal, little understanding of Abjiel's circumstances was present or even wanted by the principal. While gun violence is a disturbing trend in schools, each situation is different. Abjiel was a child taking care of himself all weekend and getting himself to school because his dad had to work. Seventy-five days out of school did not fit the crime of forgetting a BB gun in his bookbag. It pushed him out of school. Seemingly accurate, Abjiel believed the school just wanted to get rid of him. Different from White middle-class norm, family dynamics like Abjiel's is rarely understood by White leadership, and, more than likely, stereotypes regarding the lack of care by Black families further impacted Abjiel's consequences. White leadership knows that many Black families struggle financially and are stereotypically less involved in school than White families (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015), yet it was required that Abjiel's family transport him every day to an alternative school. This consequence, I believe, reflects systemic racism because more than likely administrators knew Abjiel could not be taken to the alternative school; however, it was a way to keep him out of their school longer—with no regards to missed instruction. The school system in no way took care of one of their students and

exhibited systemic racism with policies written from the views and experiences of White culture.

Another example of institutional or systemic racism was Ant being kicked out of an "at-risk" kindergarten. Like many other students with the intersection of being poor, being Black, and being male, Ant was labeled at risk. The negative term "at-risk" suggests the student is more likely, or expected, to struggle in school, so it seems as though he needs lots of instruction and academic exposure. Yet, Ant was kicked out of kindergarten because he was sharing his "candy" with someone else. He was always told to share, so he did. First, I find myself wondering what he is at risk of in kindergarten. Being poor? Being Black? Being male? Beginning his school career at risk, he started school with a negative label of being lesser than others. He thought the Tylenol tablets, red pills, were Skittles. His misbehavior was sharing, something he had been taught to do at school and at home. The problem was what he was sharing. Rather than an expulsion, this was a teaching moment. However, Ant was added to the statistics of a Black male being kicked out of school for drugs—in kindergarten. After all, Black males are known for taking drugs and being incarcerated for drugs. The experiences of Abjiel and Ant provide two examples of racism present in the structure and policies of educational institutions.

The school curriculum was another area where systemic racism was problematic. Black culture is communal (Glocke, 2016), but Ant was made to sit and work quietly without helping his friends. Black culture uses call and response, but Abjiel was sent to another room for talking out. Davis frequently mentioned the lack

of all things Black in school: books, posters, music, behavior characteristics, and culture. All of these reflect the dominant White culture of educational institutions.

Reform is needed to provide a fair and equal education for all students. Examples provided appear to have embedded stereotypes that influence school policies. Even though the students have greatly changed, educational institutions follow the structure and operation of historical White leadership. Being predominantly White personnel, verbal aggressions were acts of racism found in the experiences of the participants.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions can reflect racism in what was verbalized. Many times, microaggressions are unintentional; however, they reflect implicit beliefs. Several instances of microaggressions were present in the experiences of Black males. When Abjiel's White principal met him on the bus during the BB gun incident, he greeted him, "I'm not surprised it's you, Abjiel. Again . . ." The White principal possessed the stereotype that Black males are violent and always in trouble. When Abjiel tried to explain why he had the BB gun, the principal responded, "It's always something with you. You know there are no guns at school. This isn't your *hood*." With this statement, the principal was signifying guns belonged where Abjiel lived—Black neighborhoods that are bad and violent—and suggested White neighborhoods were better, supporting the assumptions of universal Black American experience and White cultural superiority described by Henfield (2011). Though likely unintentional, the content of many comments reflects stereotypical beliefs crafted from White privileged experiences of most school personnel. Throughout the stories provided by all participants, verbal acts of

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racism by teachers and school personnel were committed. In addition, unequal treatment was found with verbal omission.

Microaggression occurred in what was not said to Abjiel. Rather than discussing retention with Abjiel or his family, he was notified that he failed sixth grade when he received his report card in the mailbox. No one should find out they were retained through the mail. Generally, schools notify parents and students about plans for retention. Lack of retention notification occurred due to the unspoken beliefs about Black family culture on the part of White administration. That would not happen with a White student. Because of previous interactions with Abjiel's family and stereotypical beliefs, I believe the school assumed the parents did not care and would not show up for a meeting anyway, so they took the easy way out. White privilege, as theorized by CRT (Bell, 1992; Taylor, 2016), was evident because school leadership likely would have notified a White family their child had failed much earlier through a meeting or phone call.

More microaggressions were found in the data collected; however, the examples provided are similar to the other microaggressions by reflecting stereotypical content of what was said or not said to Black male students. Microaggressions identified in the interviews were written into the counter-narrative to expose racism that remains present in schools claiming to provide an equal education. White privilege and the Whiteness of schools described in CRT (Bell, 1992; Taylor, 2016) were shown through the school leaders' actions and interactions with the students. These microaggressions reinforced common stereotypes held about Black males.

Low Expectations

Low expectations of poor academic performance as described by Alliman-Brissett and Turner (2010), or not believing Black students will do as well as others in school, are a stereotype that negatively impacts Black males from the time they begin school. Ant experienced a combination of microaggressions with low expectation from his fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Fletcher. When helping others after being the first one to finish his math, Ms. Fletcher told him to sit down and recheck his work. "I'm sure you will find something to correct," she remarked. This statement reflects the majoritarian stereotype that Black students are not expected to do well academically, particularly in math. Saying she knows he will find something to correct suggests she does not believe he understood the material to complete his work correctly. This belief by Ms. Fletcher was common because Ant said she always told him to check his work, and it was always right. Because she did not like him breaking classroom rules by being out of his seat and helping other students, I believe she did not trust that he understood the content to help his classmates correctly. The expectation that he would understand the content and do well was absent. Ms. Fletcher's microaggressions likely were not intentional and stemmed from long ago learned beliefs from her own experiences. However, these lower expectations are a part of the school culture with mostly White school personnel (Allen, 2014). Additionally, Ms. Fletcher lacked understanding of Black culture by not allowing Ant to cooperatively discuss and help other students. She embraced what Glocke (2016) called the Eurocentric Worldview that was briefly discussed in the literature review and predominantly seen in schools.

Even later in high school, Ant was not expected to score well academically because he was a Black male—a poor Black male. When describing how his coach would always ask to see his report cards to check his grades for eligibility to play sports, Ant remembered the coach asking him if he got tutoring because his grades were always high. Ant responded that he did go to the tutoring because he was the tutor, causing the coach to look up and chuckle. The coach's action suggested he was surprised that Ant was a tutor. If Ant had low grades, he could not play. If he had high grades, he was questioned. Ant had a good relationship with the coach, so that was likely not intentional but rather a reaction from long ago learned beliefs. However, low expectations were evident.

In ninth grade, Abjiel was in danger of being kicked off the football team because he was failing. His English Literature teacher pushed her cultural beliefs when telling him, "You should have thought about that before you got the 69. You've had all semester to bring up your grade. I don't expect you to get an A, but you can certainly pass just by following the rules. Maybe you should concentrate more on your grades than football." In these statements, she explicitly verbalized her low expectations saying, "I don't expect you to get an A." She did not expect him to do well academically in class because he was a Black male athlete making class hard for her with his disrupting behavior. She also suggested that his passion for football was unimportant. Ironically, after wanting him to lessen his focus on football, football was the main reason he made it through high school, and it paid his way through college—the one thing that changed his life. Understandably, she wanted him to care more about his grades, yet not understandably, she refused to give him the opportunity improve his grade. I think she

was confused about what was more important—him failing or him learning the material? In addition to low expectations academically, she was reflecting the stereotype that all Black males care about is sports.

Finally, having a mother for a teacher and seeing a cousin earn a trophy for perfect attendance, Sting had a goal throughout his school career to earn a little trophy for perfect attendance. He had 12 years of perfect attendance, but he received no recognition at graduation. Sting had perfect attendance through his school career. White school leadership likely missed his perfect attendance because a Black male with mediocre grades was not expected to have perfect attendance throughout all 12 years. As a result, he was not recognized for his achievement. Irving and Hudley (2008) discussed the problematic stereotype that Black students were expected to earn awards for nonacademic achievements, like sports, but not academic or attendance-based ones. Low expectations were a constant part of the school experiences for all participants and remain a problem for Black males in many educational institutions. Other inequalities were identified in many school stories gathered from Black males.

Inequalities

Inequalities, both implicit and explicit, have historically been and remain a part of many educational experiences as suggested by the permanence of racism in CRT (Bell, 1992; Taylor, 2016). Often the inequality was a result of lack of understanding of Black culture. A characteristic of Black culture is the constant touch and play that gives people on the outside of Black culture the perception of fighting. During Ant's daily football game at recess, play was seen as being too rough; therefore, the football and basketball were taken away from the students. Combining the frequent touching in their culture and

the mimicking of sports they saw on television, the students' actions were viewed as negative and aggressive by their White teachers because those experiences are not characteristic of White culture.   The Whiteness of schools suggested by critical race theorists Bell (1992) and Taylor (2016) CRT was evident in the staffs' lack of understanding of Black cultural characteristics. Lacking from all interactions among school personnel and Black male students were conversations to build understanding of what was happening. For example, the stereotype that Black males are violent collided with the *touchy feely* characteristic of Black culture when Black males greeted each other and played at recess; therefore, White teachers assumed students were fighting or would fight. Knowledge of Black culture and speaking with students about their actions could provide clarity allowing students to play their game without teachers assuming violence.

Another inequality in educational institutions re-iterated in the counter-narrative was the lack of resources in high poverty, high minority schools. Davis recognized the difference in resources saying, "We don't have the same resources as a lot of other schools. In that regard, [*pause*] yeah, there is still racism. So, what does that mean? [*pause*] You gotta figure it out another way, right?" In the same recess story discussed in the previous paragraph, Ant described the ragtag basketball goal that finally bent and became unusable. Because of this, the football game began. More than likely, the basketball goal would be fixed or replaced before becoming ragtag in predominantly White schools because of the differences in parent involvement and more funding for White schools. From my participants' stories, I believe Black parents generally supported their children's education by dealing with issues at home; however, just as two preservice teachers in Puchner and Markowitz's (2015) study reported the belief that

Black parents are not actively involved in school like White parents, I think this belief remains prevalent among educators. Again, White privilege was identified in school resources. Likewise, Abjiel and Davis mentioned the lack of resources in the specific community overall. Being positive, they believed that did not stop students from succeeding. They and the teachers just had to be a little more creative. Black males in this study appeared to have accepted the inequalities as normal, again supporting CRT's idea of racism being a normal or accepted part of society (Bell, 1992; Taylor, 2016). These inequalities reflect racism still present in educational institutions.

Even though acts of explicit racism in educational institutions have decreased, they still exists. Sting was a baseball player his whole life and believed he was talented making the varsity team all 4 years of high school. However, he did not consistently play. He was only "used to run the bases." After all, "Black men are fast." Though the coach never said anything racist, Sting verbalized his thoughts that the "coach was racist" and "did not like Black kids" from his coach's actions. Therefore, he only used them when it was beneficial—to steal bases and score runs for "slow bruisers." Lack of support for Black players caused Sting to lose his passion for baseball. Likewise, Ant had a similar experience in middle school when trying out for the junior basketball team. He realized that the coach would not "rock with [him] at all" for 2 years because he was not like the coach. However, when the coach saw him slam dunk a ball in eighth grade, Ant made the team. From these stories, it was clear that racism and inequalities remain a significant part of educational institutions.

Even though these acts of racism may seem small and unintentional, the different treatment was realized by these Black males. As suggested in CRT, racism was so

prevalent that it became normal (Bell, 1992; Taylor, 2016). At one point, Abjiel realized his teachers did not expect him to do well because he was poor and Black. He even remarked, "Nobody expected anything out of me, but I kind of wanted them to." Abjiel and Ant both finished school and even earned a full football scholarship. If they had the encouragement and experiences of White children, imagine how much they could have achieved. In all behavior incidences, students felt like they were not being heard, and they were not. Majoritarian stereotypes helped institutional racism maintain a real presence in educational institutions.

Conclusion

Even though laws call for an equal education for all, that is not happening in most schools. Though mostly unrecognized, systemic racism, microaggressions, low expectations, and inequalities remain real occurrences embedded in many schools. I believe a major cause for acts of racism is a lack of understanding of Black culture. CRT suggests that schools are a vehicle for social change—change could start with teachers learning about Black culture. The next chapter presents my final thoughts about the study and revisits the research questions with a brief summary.

Chapter VIII

CONCLUSION

Throughout the history of the United States, Black males have been a marginalized group denied their right to an appropriate education and equality in a society dominated by the expectations of the White norm (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1989; Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano et al., 2000; Taylor, 2016). Even though American society progressed a long way since the days of slavery and explicit racist hatred through words and actions, racism is still ever present in America's educational institutions. A Black child is physically allowed into a school and seemingly provided with a proper education, but a cloud of racism still hovers. This racism may not be visible (low expectations because of common stereotypes), heard (a silent step sideways as a certain child walks through the door), felt (not calling a child to reading group because they are too low for it to do any good), or even realized (making a child sit down to work, giving a consequence for calling out, or being kicked out of advanced classes for being too needy); however, racism still exists and is negatively impacting Black students as many microaggressions and instances of systemic racism are accepted as normal.

Research Questions Revisited

For this study, I first developed an overarching research question: How did the experiences of four young Black men impact attainment of an effective education and expose racism along the path to a college degree? From that question, I broke it down to

four more specific questions considering how educational, familial, societal, and cultural experiences influenced the ways successful Black males made sense of their academic success.

Educationally, I found successful Black males set goals and worked to achieve them. Written or filed in their mind, all participants met their goal of graduating with a college degree. Most of their success was attributed to the relationships they had with their individual groups of friends, who pushed each other to succeed and demanded the best from one another. Being communal, close friends were considered family.

The experiences of the Black males in my study contradicted the majoritarian stereotype that Black families do not value education. While Black families were involved in different ways than White families, Black parents still wanted their sons to graduate and do well in all areas of school. Likewise, their sons did not want to disappoint their families. Parents provided tutoring when needed, addressed behavior issues at home, and encouraged involvement in sports for the mentoring opportunities athletics provided. Summarily, Black families indeed valued education and were influential in their son's success in positive ways.

Societal influences that impacted Black males in the study were mainly around sports and mentoring. Sports was a prominent part of their lives very early—little league. That is where many friendships developed. They believed involvement in sports helped build the character they needed to achieve and graduate. Likewise, sports provided mentors who were their coaches. Males without a father were influenced by coaching role models. For example, Ant's coach provided his first job, instilled work ethic in him, and taught life lessons on the court. Finally, because of involvement in sports,

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participants had to earn good grades to play. Even though racism was present, being involved in societal activities like little league sports influenced the success of Black males in my study.

Finally, cultural influences, while not the most visible, were not usually positive influences in education. Many educational institutions have a large divide between students and teachers regarding culture. With White culture being dominant in schools, Black students sometimes have difficulty being themselves in classrooms where the behavior of White culture is expected—Eurocentric worldview (Glocke, 2016). These differences add to and create stereotypes that result in Black students getting reprimanded for behaviors that are acceptable and taught in Black culture but problematic in White culture: call and response, physical touch, talking, standing up, etc. Because White privilege in schools is the norm, many Black males have accepted it (Chapman, 2013); for example, participants thought many of their teachers were great with Davis saying schools "hired great teachers who were versatile enough and comfortable enough to step into a challenging Black environment." In my study, the overall finding was that culture influenced success by teaching participants how to handle different situations. However, they would like to see more of their culture integrated. Cultural interactions is one area identified for further study in the next section.

Further Study

This study sought to tell the stories of successful Black males. Through the counter-narrative, experiences of four successful Black males were shared, but that is not enough. More stories need to be shared to challenge the stereotypes and help eradicate racism in schools. Additionally, as I progressed through the study, several

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ideas emerged that need further study. Because the theme was so prominent in the data, further study focusing on the friendships of successful Black males could add valuable information on how relationships influence success. On a similar note, further study on the impact of sports and the discouragement of sports by teachers on the achievement of Black males may yield information regarding extracurricular activities available in schools and how they influence achievement. Then, offerings of extracurricular activities may be modified or improved to positively influence Black male achievement. Finally, a study comparing and contrasting the experiences of Black males in classrooms of teachers with and without professional learning to understand and integrate Black culture has the potential to be eye opening for teachers and students. It would be interesting to hear about Black males' experiences and perspectives after learning in the Afrocentric worldview as proposed by Glocke (2016). Overall, continued study and understanding of Black male experiences are needed to increase achievement and be a vehicle for change.

Limitations

I would like to say that I had the perfect study with no limitations; however, I know there are always areas for improvements. My study, even though six were initially confirmed, had four participants. While I gathered many valuable stories, more participants could have given me even more data and experiences to share. Next, even though intentional, the setting of my study was small. I specifically sought to understand experiences in a community in my district. However, I believe it would be valuable to widen the setting to include participants from other areas in the same district. Then, more schools and students could be impacted with the inclusion of

more geographic areas. Students in neighboring communities may have experiences valuable from which to learn. Finally, my experience as a researcher and writer was nonexistent. I fell in love with counter-narrative when I first heard about that design, and I long to write stories. However, these were the first interviews conducted, and this counter-narrative was the first realistic fiction narrative I have written. I know there is room for improvement, and I find revisions every time I reread it. Therefore, my lack of experience was a limitation. However, I met my goal of writing a counter-narrative for my dissertation, so I am a successful Black male.

Final Thoughts

Being a Black male, I always thought I could easily recognize, identify, and handle racism in my life. However, as I conducted this research, I discovered that several experiences I had throughout school were racially motivated, but I did not realize the racial motivation. As I reflected on these experiences, I believe I did not realize the racial motivation because the experiences and similar experiences were understood to be normal experiences. I think this realization surprised me most. The most astonishing thing I learned from this research is the continued presence of systemic racism in educational institutions. Not specifically asking participants about racist experiences, systemic racism was identified through the participants' stories. Reflecting, I would like to go back and have a conversation about participants' racist experiences and how those experiences impacted them. I do not understand how we have so much systemic racism still happening in society after many years of working for equality. My participants opened my eyes to instances of inequalities that I probably would never have noticed (Abjiel's zero tolerance suspension, Ant's tutoring

microaggression, Sting's high school baseball experience, etc.). As a result of this research, I now recognize instances of racism more readily in my own school that continues to operate according to White norms as discussed in the literature and revealed in my participants' stories. Increased recognition allows me to bring awareness to systemic racism whether that awareness is welcomed or not. As a father to a Black daughter and two Black sons, awareness of participant's experiences along with my own experiences provided me with knowledge and understanding of how some Black males were successful and how racism remains present in schools in order for me to prepare my children for the future by closing the opportunity gaps they may face at school and holding the high expectations at home that may be lacking at school.

With the demographics of schools changing, the operation of schools must follow. Currently, America's education system is failing a large group of the American population—my people! We are here; we are smart, and we are valuable. Opportunities need to be equalized. Our voices need to be heard. No one knows our educational needs better than we do. Through the use of storytelling (a vital part of true African culture), my study used the voices of academically successful Black males to provide current Black males with hope, current teachers with ideas, and the current American society with an alternate view of Black males. In a world filled with hate, these stories of four successful Black men engaged education as a weapon of change. They are waiting for their stories to be shared!

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APPENDIX A:

IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 03821-2019   **Responsible Researcher:**   Mustapha Cabbell

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Lorraine Schmertzing

Project Title: *From School Pushouts to Graduating College: A Counternarrative of Highly Educated Black males.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of this research study all data (data list, email correspondence, etc.) must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *At the start of the recorded interview session the researcher must read the research statement to the participant. The reading of the statement must be part of the recording and documented in the transcript.*
- *Exempt protocol guidelines prohibit the collection and/or storage of recordings. Recorded interviews must be deleted immediately upon creating the interview transcript.*

☒ *If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.*

Elizabeth Ann Olphie   07.08.2019   *Thank you for submitting an IRB application.*

Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator   *Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.*

Revised: 06.02.16

APPENDIX B:

Participant Questionnaire

Participant Questionnaire

Name_____ Age_____

Phone #_____ Email_____

Please Respond:

Did you attend schools in ██████████████ from K-12?   □ Yes   □ No

List all schools attended._____

_____

Were you in Advanced Placement or Honors classes?   □ Yes   □ No

Were you a member of ██████████ Performing Arts Magnet?   □ Yes   □ No

Did you graduate college?   □ Yes   □ No

Did you attend an HBCU?   □ Yes   □ No

College attended_____ GPA_____

Major _____ Degrees earned/year_____

GPA_____

Are you currently employed?   □ Yes   □ No

Place of Employment_____

        Position_____

Have you previously been suspended, expelled, or arrested?   □ Yes   □ No

If yes, please explain_____

_____

Please list any community involvement. _____

APPENDIX C:

First Interview Topics

Life History and School History

1. Tell me about yourself (use questionnaire if prompting is needed).

2. Think back to your earliest school experiences. Tell me about those. (We will have a conversation about their experiences. If any prompting is needed, the following may be used.)

    a. Favorites (subject, teacher)

    b. Positive experiences

    c. Family involvement

    d. Extracurricular activities (at school or in community)

    e. Friend or peers

3. Continue with middle and high school

4. Describe when you realized what you wanted to do in life.

    a. Family support

    b. Peer support

APPENDIX D:

Second Interview Topics

More Details & Focused Details

1. Ask for further information from first interview

    a. More details from stories (add feelings)

    b. Clarify any details

2. Describe how you felt in the schools.

    a. Fitting in

    b. Interactions with teachers

    c. Any specific programs

3. Describe your family's view on education.

    a. What did a typical day look like when you got home?

    b. Levels of involvement

    c. Educational level

4. Describe your friends

    a. Similarities

    b. Differences

    c. Where are they today

5. Describe the integration of the Black culture into the schools.

    a. Programs or people coming in

    b. Positive/challenges

6. Describe a successful day at school

APPENDIX E:

Third Interview Topics

Making Meaning – Perspectives

1. Ask for further information from first interview

    a. More details from stories (add feelings)

    b. Clarify any details

2. Describe your family's role in your academic success.

    a. Completion of school

    b. Career choice

    c. Anything you would change, or wish would have happened

3. Describe the school's role in your academic success.

    a. Completion of school

    b. Career choice

    c. Anything you would change, or wish would have happened

4. Describe peers/society's role in your academic success.

    a. Completion of school

    b. Career choice

    c. Anything you would change, or wish would have happened

5. Describe culture's role in your academic success.

    a. Completion of school

    b. Career choice

    c. Anything you would change, or wish would have happened

6. Describe the main reason you believe you were academically successful.

APPENDIX F:

Research Journal

Research Journal

Participant _____ Date/Time_____

Place_____ Interview #_____

Verbal Observations	Physical Observations
Future Questions	**Reflection**