

Removing the Obstacles that Confront: The Impact of a Nontraditional School Reform  
Model on the Graduation Rate in an Urban School District

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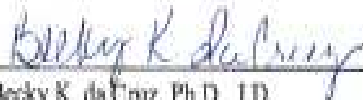
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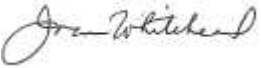
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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the late Marcus Charles Whitehead, Sr. Without his encouragement and support, this journey would never have begun. He was the ultimate cheerleader and without him, I nor my three children—Caesar Jamaal Harvey, Jordan Ferguson Harvey, and Marcella Joy Whitehead—would have achieved the level of accomplishment we have. It is also dedicated to my parents, Willie James “Jack” Ferguson and Evelyn Tanner Ferguson, who saw my potential early on and gave me the space to reach for the highest heights. Though my mother lamented that she only had a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade education, she was one of the smartest women I knew. She loved learning and spent time reading and increasing her knowledge every day she could. Had she had the opportunity, there’s no telling who she would have become.

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## ABSTRACT

Although access to education in the United States has improved for students across race, class, ethnicity, and gender, not all demographic groups' progress has kept pace with access (Mujic, 2015). Over the past two decades, more high school dropouts have been enrolled in public schools serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status (Mujic, 2015). This portraiture study involved interviewing and observing six participants in an established nontraditional educational setting. The study aimed to examine educators' perceptions regarding using a nontraditional school reform model to improve graduation rates in an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status. National, state, and local education may benefit from these findings to improve graduation rates nationwide. School districts and individual schools may also benefit from these findings and adopt the strategies employed to increase the graduation rates for the students they serve.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Overview*

American students have made significant gains since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (United States NCEE, 1983). Referencing the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), McFarland et al. (2017) noted that American students take more high-level math and science courses, and advanced placement examinations and fewer students are dropping out between Grades 10 and 12. However, despite their gains, students of color continue to underperform White students. Fernando (2012) concluded that American schools do not benefit students of color. Racial disparities or educational differences that exist between White students and students of color are noted in: (a) preschool attendance, (b) achievement at the elementary and secondary levels, (c) progress in school, (d) learning environment, (e) curriculum, (f) educational aspirations, (g) college enrollment and completion, (h) labor market outcomes, and (i) adult literacy (McFarland et al., 2017).

Whiteness is the foundation of the American school systems (Delpit, 1995; hooks, 1993; Wells, 2018). McIntosh (1988) defined the principle of whiteness as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (p. 1) afforded to White students only. For the predominantly White teaching force in American public schools, principles of whiteness translate into power and advantage that extend into classrooms and perpetuate systemic racism because students of color look, act, and learn differently (Stivers, 2015; United State Department of Education, 2016).

The traditional school model tends to operate as if one size fits all. Zero-tolerance policies in traditional settings often promote a systemic racist ideology that blames students for their inability to conform to the unfamiliar norms of schools' dominant culture. This ideology shows little to no regard for the trauma students of color living in poverty bring with them to American schools today (Wells, 2018). Nontraditional reform models can provide strong educational support by offering smaller class sizes with culturally responsive, personalized learning as an alternative to the traditional high school model. An additional provision of nontraditional reform models is that of student-focused support with flexible schedules in the late afternoon or early evening for students requiring such a schedule (Nassau BOCES, 2021).

This study examined perceptions of educators regarding the use of a nontraditional educational model to improve the graduation rate of students enrolled in an urban school district, with a focus on students of color. The research was conducted through the lens of the Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1987; Delpit, 1988; Dixson et al., 2006; Kozol, 1991; Tate, Ladson-Billings & Grant, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and the lens of relational-cultural theory (Birrell & Freyd, 2006; Comstock et al., 2008; Coy & Kovacs-Long, 2005; Ivey et al., 2007; Jackson, 2017; Jordan, 2000; Miller, 1976; Robb, 2006). The school-to-prison pipeline was also researched.

All American children deserve to have the promise of *A Nation at Risk* (United States NCEE, 1983), without compromise, with the assurance that they will receive the best free and appropriate public education. If America is to remain the land of opportunity, the commitment, as outlined in the *Nation at Risk* report must be fulfilled:

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests, but also, the progress of society itself. (United States NCEE, 1983, p. 16)

If America is to maintain its position globally, all citizens must be provided an opportunity to participate fully in the global economy. Individuals who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training necessary to do so will be disenfranchised (United States NCEE, 1983).

An overview of the study is presented in this chapter. A general background of the study is included, along with the statement of the problem, the purpose, research questions and the significance of the study. The conceptual framework, methodology, delimitations, limitations, summary, and definitions of selected terms are also included.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Although access to education in the United States has improved for students across race, class, ethnicity, and gender, not all demographic groups' progress has kept pace with access (Mujic, 2015). Over the past two decades, more high school dropouts have been enrolled in public schools serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status (Mujic, 2015). Misunderstandings of culturally specific behaviors and the impact of the turmoil Black and Brown students



living in poverty experience and exhibit at school contribute to the increased high school dropout rate.

The public-school teaching force in America's K-12 classrooms is comprised of 82% White, middle class teachers with little to no concept of the world from which these students of color come (USDOE, 2016). These misunderstandings include culturally specific behaviors. Other issues, according to Tatum (2005), include: (a) lack of awareness of the impact of poverty on school attendance, (b) the impact of witnessing acts of violence firsthand, or (c) having friends or relatives who have experienced such acts. Tatum (2005) noted that the African American student wears a "mask" in response to misunderstandings as a defense mechanism that is interpreted as lack of concern and results in the teachers' lack of concern, evidenced by low expectations and the minimal effort to teach. These misunderstandings perpetuate the continued underperformance of the African American student—particularly males.

Akbar (1992) contended that the students of color, and especially African American males, experience stress that results from mistrust of their school environment and confusion about their place in the world. This stress, according to Akbar, yields three kinds of responses: (a) denial or rejection of their cultural values while attempting to assimilate into the dominant White culture, (b) acts of self-destruction resulting from the frustration due to barriers to growth and racially oppressive conditions, or (c) over-identification with the anti-black hostility in the dominant White American culture. This dominant culture in traditional school settings is viewed as lacking compassion and understanding of culture-specific behaviors exhibited by African American males and

creates the basis for the conflict (Akbar, 1992). Consequentially, at least two types of gaps exist: (a) an achievement gap and (b) an opportunity gap.

The Black-White achievement gap reflects the differences in learning among specific groups of students. White and Asian students perform better than poor minority students perform (Murphy, 2009, p.3). Socioeconomic status and education quality contribute to the achievement differences. The opportunity gap continues, driven by the fact that poor students have no other option than to attend schools lacking a robust academic culture or schools staffed by less experienced teachers attempting to teach students needing the most support to learn and grow.

According to the Saguaro Seminar (2016), the phrase, *our kids*, tends to refer only to the dominant culture's children and excludes increasing numbers of economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged students. The failure to invest in today's poor children in Pre-K through Grade 12 will result in costs for criminal justice that exceed \$5 trillion in their lifetime for healthcare expenses and the opportunity costs of wasting the talents of poor gifted children (Saguaro Seminar). Putnam (2015) asserted that a well-established cause of the opportunity gap is the extreme isolation of poor students of color in poor schools, depriving too many of experiencing the American Dream.

Why was it illegal for the descendants of slaves to be educated in this country? Why were segregated schools slated to receive the used or out of date resources rather than the same state of the art materials and practical instructional resources available to the privileged majority? Despite the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), this disadvantage continues to prevail in urban school settings serving mostly Black and Brown students. This disadvantage is reflected in the academic performance reported for

minority populations today. The findings of this study on the perceptions of educators regarding the use of a nontraditional school reform model may aid in closing both gaps—achievement and opportunity—and improve the graduation rate.

### *Purpose*

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of educators regarding the use of a nontraditional school reform model to improve graduation rates in an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status. The State Department of Education has approved nontraditional reform models and aligned them to the Georgia Performance Standards (GaDOE, 2020). Enrolled students are administered the Georgia Milestones End of Course assessments for required courses. Graduation is the goal, and students have the option to work on an adaptable schedule and still graduate in four years or at another time, depending on their graduation plan and schedule.

### *Research Questions*

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ 1. What are the life and career experiences of educators who implemented a nontraditional high school reform model to improve graduation rates at an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students from low-income families?

RQ 2. What strategies did educators use to implement a nontraditional high school reform model to improve graduation rates at an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students from low-income families?

RQ 3. What were the barriers, if any, when educators implemented a nontraditional high school reform model to improve graduation rates at an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students from low-income families?

### *Significance of Study*

Although access to education in the United States has improved for students across race and gender, all demographic groups' progress has not kept pace. Segregated schools are re-emerging despite *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). White schools are getting Whiter and Black schools in poor urban communities continue to report substantial achievement gaps, with as much as a 20-point gap in graduation rates (Rothstein, 2014). Over the past two decades, many factors have contributed to high dropout rates among students attending high schools serving students from predominantly low-income African American and Hispanic families. Some of the factors include: (a) systemic racism, (b) below average performance, (c) low self-esteem, and (d) physical, emotional, and mental stress (Felmlee et al., 2018)

Ferris-Berg and Schroeder (2003) found that nontraditional high school reform models address the needs of students who have not been successful in traditional school settings. Provisions include a different atmosphere for students of color with culturally competent and responsive individualized support. Students receive attention and support focused on standards and skills necessary for success in a global economy (Ferris-Berg & Schroeder, 2003). Additionally, students are provided the necessary tools to complete high school requirements and are prepared for post-secondary options (Nassau BOCES, 2021).

Nontraditional school reform models are often the last chance for over-aged students who have not earned an adequate number of credits to receive high quality instruction in a nurturing yet demanding environment (Trenton Public Schools, 2018). Teachers in nontraditional settings consistently challenge students to reach academic goals and achieve full potential. The classroom environment requires focused and diligent effort, open dialogue and communication with administration, staff, and community partners committed to students' success (Trenton Public Schools, 2018).

While providing a different atmosphere with individualized attention, nontraditional school reform models focus on skills that facilitate student success in the world at large and adapt to meet the needs of modern-day students, especially students of color (Hurst, 1994). Thus, a nontraditional school reform model can be the final option for students who have had severe issues in the traditional environment, including: (a) truancy, (b) chronic suspension, and/or (c) multiple repeated grades. Students returning from outside placement (i.e., juvenile detention or some other alternative placement.) are often good candidates for a nontraditional school reform model.

Schools and programs must be established to educate America's students of color, especially males, and reverse the current underperformance. Many African American males find traditional school settings hostile and unpredictable environments and see themselves as "victims of race and poverty" (Tatum, 2005, p. 33). Do culturally competent and responsive administrators and teachers know that they must act when inequity exists? Do they understand that as social justice advocates, they are positioned to reverse the racist ideology that denies the humanity of students of color? Do administrators and teachers in nontraditional settings understand their role in changing an

ideology that blames the students of color for their failure while working to dismantle the oppressive systems that traumatize students of color in American schools? Do these educators accept responsibility of advocacy that allows students of color opportunities to assume productive roles in the urban communities they call home?

One school reform model employed by an identified urban school district in Georgia has increased graduation rates. I used portraits of administrators and teachers employed in this school district who serve under this nontraditional school reform model to illustrate cultural competence in their mission to educate and support students of color. Thus, this exploration involved examining the impact of a nontraditional school reform model on graduation rates of marginalized students of color. The exploration also involved examining the impact classroom environment and relationships administrators and teachers have on marginalized students of color.

Because of the existing achievement gap, opportunity gap, and the school-to-prison pipeline which leads to increased dropout rates, the need for this research study is critical. This study can add to existing research regarding the impact of nontraditional school reform models on the graduation rate for students of color who do not experience success or reach their potential in traditional high school settings. Educational policymakers at the national, state, and local levels may benefit from these findings to improve graduation rates nationwide. School districts and individual schools may also benefit from these findings and adopt the strategies employed to increase the graduation rates for the students they serve.

## *Conceptual Framework*

The premise for conducting this research began with my interest in the impact of a nontraditional educational reform model on the African American male graduation rate, reading achievement levels, and the prison pipeline. I framed the study around existing theories relating to low-income students' underperformance related to the Black-White achievement gap (American Psychological Association, n.d.b; Walker, 1963) and the opportunity gap (Saguaro Seminar, 2016; Dewey, 1907). I used *Critical Race Theory* (CRT) to understand the intersection of race and educational inequity and I used the *Relational-Cultural Theory* (RCT) which affects the healing that can occur in mutually empathic growth-fostering relationships (Bell, n.d.b; Crenshaw, et al., 1995; Dixson et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 1999; Miller, 1976, 1986; Quimby et al., 2018).

### *Critical Race Theory*

The CRT is an intellectual movement rooted in American jurisprudence scholarship that details the intersection of race and persistent educational inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Scholars examined the relevance of race and racism in education at the 1995 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) more intently regarding how outwardly race-neutral policies and practices have reinforced education inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1994). These scholars proclaimed race is a significant factor in general United States society, especially in education (American Education Research Association (1995). The CRT compels scholars to employ their insight and knowledge to work on the ground to resist racism. CRT scholars use *counter stories* to challenge the stories of White supremacy and discrimination that remain pervasive in the American landscape. Characterizing much of CRT's educational

scholarship, counter stories challenge the dominant discourse (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson 2005). CRT scholars choose to exercise humility and reject internalized White supremacy ideology. Researchers work within a context where people simultaneously experience racialized inequity in the same system or structure that they must rely on to maintain their livelihood (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2005). The work of Crenshaw (1988), Ladson-Billings & Tate (1994, 1995), and Bell (n.d.a) detailed the intersection of race and persistent educational inequity.

### *Relational-Cultural Theory*

The RCT emerged from the clinical practice of Miller (1976) wherein she noted the importance of relationships in her clients' lives, contrasted with the traditional theories of counseling and human development that emphasize independence, departure, and self-sufficiency as indicators of emotional development and mental well-being (Comstock et al., 2008). Mental health professionals use RCT to examine the influence of gender socialization, power, dominance, marginalization, and subordination on people's mental health and relational development. Miller proposed that mental health professionals [and educators] *pathologize* women, people of color, and marginalized men when they fail to understand and devalue how meaningful relational experiences are and how these factors contribute to the psychological well-being of people in general (Robb, 2006).

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

The school-to-prison pipeline (Balfanz, 2007; Elias, 2013) addresses the disproportionate number of students of color who are suspended and expelled compared to their White peers. Nontraditional educational reform models have created a place for



students who have not had success in the traditional settings and have provided hope for many displaced students (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2007; Hurst, 1994). The school-to-prison pipeline refers to discipline policies used in school districts across the country that push students into the criminal justice system when students are suspended or expelled at alarming rates. Incarceration over education is favored under this system and disproportionality forces minority students and students with disabilities out of schools and into jails or prisons (Elias, 2013). In a nation-wide study, the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2014) found that African American students are 3.5 times more likely than their White classmates or peers to be suspended or expelled. African American children account for 18% of students in public schools. However, they constitute 46% of students suspended more than one time. Students with disabilities account for 8.6% of public-school children, yet they represent 32% of youth in juvenile detention centers (USDOE OCR, 2014).

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (n.d.) noted the school-to-prison policies encourage police presence in schools, physical restraints, and both in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Also known as zero tolerance, these policies criminalize minor infractions and contribute to schools where minority children with learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect are isolated, punished, and pushed into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

### *Review of Literature*

The review of literature tackles the issues within the historical perspectives of traditional schooling and education in America since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). It explores Critical Race Theory and the quest for people of color to achieve full

humanity. The literature examines the role systemic racism has played in the failure to address the root causes for the alarming low-performance and achievement levels of students of color that include opportunity, poverty, disproportionate suspensions, and the overall implications of marginalization on one's mental health and well-being.

### *Historical Perspective*

Historically, schools have been places where racial, cultural, and social identities of groups in the United States are socially structured to create a line of dominance between non-White and Eurocentric identities (Roediger, 2005; Wells, 2018). Students of color are often marginalized, blamed, and ignored. Thus, when they cannot immediately conform and engage in a system designed not to benefit them in the first place, racial traumas are created (McGee & Stovall, 2015; Wells, 2018, Williams, 2016).

Traditional school settings have historically placed the African American males in special education classes at disproportionate numbers rather than provide the culturally relevant and appropriate instructional practices needed to support their education (Howard, 2008). Too often, traditional schools for students in poverty are defined by underprepared teachers, inadequate facilities, low teacher expectations, and ineffective administrators. Additionally, despite being only 18 percent of the public-school population, the African American males account for more than 40% of the suspensions that occur. According to Tatum (2005) this perception, real or imagined, has an impact on reading and overall academic achievement for students of color.

To remedy African American students' underachievement in traditional school settings, schools and programs were specifically established to educate African American males and reverse the underperformance (Tatum, 2005). Traditional schools have exposed

the African American male and other students of color to teachers who do or say things on a day-to-day basis that provoke anger in their students. According to Pierce (1970), these micro-aggressions have allowed teachers to project their stereotypical images on the African American males. Nobles (1987) described a psychometric warfare in the traditional school setting when test scores are used to support the belief that the African American student's capacity to learn is different from their White peers.

### *The Critical Race Theory*

The philosophy or premise of CRT originated during the enslavement of African Americans in the United States, according to Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2005). Spiritual songwriters challenged the superiority of White slaveholders offering an alternate perspective on heaven and who might make it there (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2005). Bell (n.d.a) pondered the similarities between CRT and African American spirituals and found that the spirituals communicated an "understanding and reassurance to needy souls trapped in a hostile world" through "the use of unorthodox structure, language, and form to make sense of the senseless" (p. 910). Bell (n.d.a) argued that "the persistence of racism and the institutionalized threats to persons of color continue to reinforce the hostility of an unfriendly world" (p. 2).

Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2005) challenged the dominant messages by affirming the humanity of persons of color with the spiritual, "All God's Children Got a Song." De Vogue (2015) noted that unjust policies and practices against people of color incite people of color to demand changes. Dixson and Rousseau Anderson concurred, noting "cultures of criminality and lawlessness" as unjust policies and practices that incite people of color to demand changes (p. 2). In another affirmation regarding the

humanity of persons of color, Dixson and Rousseau Anderson noted that in another verse of the spiritual, the songwriter implied that only in heaven will things be equal. However, Dixson and Rousseau Anderson indicated that this thought was utterly antithetical to the White Christian slaveholders' blatant hypocrisy's attitudes and mindset. According to Dixson and Rousseau Anderson, it created a counter story. Cone (1972) and Jones (1993) highlighted the double meaning of the songs written by the enslaved. Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2005) argued that just as the multiple meanings of the spirituals can be lost unless they are studied historically, CRT requires contemporary events to be scrutinized historically.

Cone (1972) noted that the despair so evident in the spirituals was typically linked to assurance and elation that "trouble don't last always" (p. 57), another title of an inspired spiritual. Likewise, the CRT and the spirituals reflect the despair and suffering of slavery in sharing the contrasting combination of struggle and hope, the counter story. The work and hope of CRT scholars "acknowledge the permanence of racism while, at the same time, argue that this recognition should not lead to despair and surrender, but to greater resolve in the struggle" to overcome (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2005, p. 3). Although racism is a permanent and pervasive part of the American landscape, this knowledge does not demand defeat. The trouble of this world must be united with a vision of hope that people of color are not required to accept oppression and racial inequity as a permanent state of being. According to Jones (1993), the spirituals distinguished a balance between inner faith and social action; and CRT determines a balance between scholarship and social action steps toward liberation and the end of oppression. Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2005) asserted that CRT "requires that

scholars utilize their insight and knowledge to work on the ground to resist and disrupt racism and inequity” (p.4). CRT scholars also apply humility and discourage internalized White supremacist ideology. CRT researchers rely on a system to maintain their lives within this same system they experience racialized inequity. Students of color are often marginalized, blamed, and ignored. Thus, when they cannot immediately conform and engage in a system designed not to benefit them in the first place, racial traumas are created (McGee & Stovall, 2015; Wells, 2018).

I began the first grade in 1963 in a segregated school building for grades one through 12. There were old and used “Dick and Jane” books that I could read already because I had been doing homework with my brother who was two grades ahead of me for as long as I could remember. I could also write my name and was beginning to learn cursive. Learning came naturally to me, and books were my first friends. I loved school. The library was my favorite place, and I could not wait to get back there each day. It was my third-grade teacher who told me that I was going to be a teacher. Separate was not equal, but it was the order of the day. However, I had teachers who recognized my potential and encouraged me to live up to my fullest potential. Sadly, not every American child of African descent receive such support today.

### *Systemic Racism*

Fernando (2012) and Wells (2018) contended systemic racism works within schools to oppress students of color. This system of racism is the result of failure to identify and address gaps in African American children’s learning and mental health issues, and these issues result from the trauma of poverty they bring to school (Williams et al, 2016). Putnam (2015) contended that extreme isolation of students living in poverty

enrolled in low-performing schools contributes to the opportunity gap's well-established cause.

Systemic racism contributes to an alarming inequity that renders schools theoretically ineffective at helping students of color reach their full potential, and it plays a significant role in the erosion of their mental health (Wells, 2018). Systemic racism adversely impacts students of color and their ability to achieve educational goals, and it ultimately impacts their economic goals. The implicit bias of administrators and teachers often results in low expectations and oppressive stereotypes, especially in responding to student behavior and performance (Hill et al, 2014; Wells, 2018).

#### *The Achievement and Opportunity Gaps*

Walker (1963) introduced the *achievement gap* in an article published in *The Nation*, reporting on the two-year educational gap between low-income African American students at Lincoln Elementary School in Englewood, New Jersey and higher-income White students residing in other school districts within the state. The Black-White Achievement Gap is used to describe differences in learning among specific groups of students, especially academic achievement between socioeconomically advantaged White and Asian students and their minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged peers (Murphy, 2009, p.3). Walker (1963) suggested the racial concentration, socioeconomic status, and quality of education contribute to the achievement gap. Noguera and Akom (2000) maintained that disparities in achievement have “the effect of reinforcing well established assumptions regarding the relationship between race, academic ability, and intelligence” (p. 1).

High stakes testing and the associated penalties that focus on racial achievement gaps have forced districts to analyze how they educate children of color. When these scores are used to rank students and the schools, poor students and the schools that serve them are typically found at the bottom of the achievement ladder (Noguera & Akom, 2000). Another concern with high stakes testing is that the content of what students learn at school is limited and narrow when preparing students for the test becomes the focus, neglecting critical thinking, creativity, and intellectual curiosity.

Putnam (2015) chronicled how the American Dream was rapidly evaporating for more than 25 million children born to less educated parents in the last three decades. How well children turn out in life should not depend on their parents' socioeconomic status but should depend on their talents and hard work. When there is a shared destiny and a collective responsibility for all students, *our kids* will mean our communities' and our nation's children.

#### *The Effect of Poverty on Academic Success*

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (n.d.a) found that approximately 18% or 13 million of all children residing in the United States live in poverty. Child poverty is determined by a threshold established by the federal government based on the combined income of adults with children living in the home. The threshold is determined by the size and structure of the family. A family consisting of two adults and two children with a combined income of below \$25,465 was considered living in poverty in 2018 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.a).

The impact of poverty is great as it adversely affects the overall well-being of the child, specifically their behavior, social and emotional health. According to data collected by

the Annie E. Casey Foundation (n.d.b), in 2019, 31% of Black children were living in poverty. Twenty-three percent of Hispanics and Latino children were living in poverty (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.b). Thus, public schools are charged more than ever to meet the needs of children of color, children whose first language may not be English, and children who are poor (Phillips & Putnam, 2016).

Mental health issues resulting from the trauma of poverty are a significant barrier to academic success. According to Guzman et al. (2011), mental health problems identified in the first grade are among the strongest predictors of lower achievement test scores in fourth grade. Subsequently, the odds continue to increase for: (a) dropping out of school, (b) delinquency, (c) gang membership, (d) substance abuse, (e) committing violent acts, and (f) incarceration (Reid et al, 2002; Wagner et al., 2006; Wells, 2018).

#### *Mass Incarceration and Students of Color*

Practices of mass incarceration and excessive punishment begin in the public schools where students of color are suspended and expelled at rates that greatly exceed the penalty White children receive for identical behaviors (USDOE OCR, 2014). In courtrooms, African American defendants are 22 times more likely to receive the death penalty when their victims are White, and children as young as 13, almost all of whom are African American, are sentenced to life imprisonment for non-homicidal offenses (USDOE OCR). The United States of America represents only four percent of the world's population, and 22% of the nation's population is imprisoned (Stevenson, 2019). Since the 1970s, the prison population has grown from less than 300,000 people to more than 2.2 million with at least 4.5 million more on probation or parole (Stevenson, 2019). Thanks to "three strikes" and mandatory sentencing laws, too many people have been



sentenced to life without parole for stealing a bicycle or for simple possession of marijuana charges (Stevenson, 2019).

Approximately 70% of incarcerated youth suffer from mental illness (Goncalves et al., 2016). This information creates a sense of urgency for conversations on improving student mental health and increasing positive outcomes. Thus, schools need to address cultural competence, or how teachers view and understand racial, cultural, and social identity needs of the students they serve (Wells, 2018).

While Civil Rights and inequality protests were brewing toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a new politics of fear and anger emerged (Stevenson, 2019; Vedantam, 2016). Beginning with Nixon's war on drugs, a disproportionate number of Black and Brown people have been targeted, stopped, suspected, incarcerated, and shot by the police. Mandatory minimum sentences, three-strikes laws, children tried as adults, along with the addition of *broken window* policing, and *stop and frisk* policies have become the norm (Stevenson, 2019; Vedantam, 2016).

### *Methodology*

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of educators regarding the use of a nontraditional school reform model to improve graduation rates in an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status. This research may help to enhance educational policy and practice should districts and schools choose to adopt strategies that eliminate barriers that impede high school completion. Using the lens of the CRT, the intersectionality of racism in schools and the resulting gap in graduation rates for Black and Brown students, I challenged the role of systemic racism in creating current

devastating educational outcomes. In addition to CRT, I used the RCT to provide a framework for describing the cultural competence and responsiveness demonstrated by professional educators in nontraditional settings. Though researchers mainly use RCT in therapeutic settings, culturally competent and responsive educators employ many of the same strategies and techniques in their interactions with students to build connectedness and to focus on preparing students for post-secondary outcomes.

Using portraiture, the voices of culturally competent and responsive educators revealed their unique life and career experiences and strategies they use to improve the graduation rates for the Black and Brown, formerly underperforming students. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) defined portraiture as a blending of science and art to provide through observation empirically based descriptions while at the same time paying attention to subtle human emotions and details. Portraiture also allows the researcher to participate in the meaning-making and generation of *life-drawings* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997). Life-drawings are typically the drawing of a traditionally nude human form while being observed by an artist or sculptor, but the portraitist draws her portraits through the dialogue and interactions she has with her subjects that evolves into a narrative. Portraiture enabled the participants to enlighten and inform how they make meaning and understand the phenomenon questioned (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). I used purposeful sampling, a qualitative strategy used to maximize learning through a comprehensive investigation in selecting the participants for this portraiture study (Merriam, 2002). To illustrate how the participants' lived and career experiences informed the use of strategies to improve graduation rates of students of color, I used six portraits.

I used interviews to collect data. Data analysis included coding, categorizing, and reflective writing. I took necessary precautions to assure validity of the findings and the identification of researcher bias and reactivity; and increasing generalizability of the results.

### *Delimitations, Limitations, And Definitions*

Delimitations and limitations often impact methodology and data analysis in the course of conducting research. Delimitations, which established the boundaries for this portraiture study, and limitations, those influences which were beyond my control, are addressed below.

The terms used throughout this study have a special meaning in connection to the topic of nontraditional education and its impact on the graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students who are at-risk of dropping out of school. These definitions serve to provide a clear understanding and to establish a common language in the context of this current study.

#### Delimitations

The Academy was selected because it was the site of the alternative program for the district and because the director was a transformational leader who was selected to implement nontraditional practices that would positively impact the district's graduation rate and dropout rate when students were not finding success in their traditional school environment. The educators invited to participate in this portraiture study were required to have served a minimum of 3 years in the nontraditional setting with Proficient or Exemplary annual evaluation ratings. Data were collected in the spring, summer, and fall of 2021.

I primarily sought to study educators devoted to implementing a nontraditional high school reform program to improve the graduation rate and post-secondary or career outcomes for students of color living in poverty in an identified Georgia urban school district. Thus, I purposefully selected educators employed in this nontraditional setting as they can provide relevant and in-depth detailed information to answer the research questions about the phenomenon under investigation (Maxwell, 2013). This criterion aided in addressing how factors that exacerbate dropping out of school, i.e., the achievement gap, opportunity gap; and the school-to-prison pipeline, impact graduation rates and post-secondary options for students of color living in poverty (Aguilar, 2019, Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; Phillips & Putnam, 2016; United States Government Accountability Office, 2018).

To participate in this study, the participants were required to: (a) be certified professional educators who have obtained at least a bachelor's degree, (b) be currently employed in a nontraditional school reform model at the high school level, (c) have worked under the current principal for three to five years or more, and (d) have attained proficient to exemplary performance on the TKES or LKES, whichever is applicable.

### Limitations

The nontraditional high school reform model identified for this portraiture was initially implemented during the 2014-2015 school year. The purpose of implementing the reform model was to provide a much-needed personalized navigational learning environment for students who had been written off by the traditional educational system and often by themselves. Many were overaged, had chronic discipline issues within the traditional setting, and had little hope for achieving a high school diploma.

Upon the selection of the six participants, I was initially concerned and disappointed that there were no diverse candidates at the Academy who had served for three years or more. I was pleased, however, that each of the six participants could very well have chosen to serve in any traditional environment. Instead, they chose to commit and remain in this space to make a difference and increase the postsecondary options for students who choose to complete their education in the nontraditional setting.

Creswell (2014) noted that impending defects outside the control of the researcher are considered limitations to the study. At least two limitations were applicable to this research study. One limitation was that only perceptions or life and career experiences of educators employed in one nontraditional high school reform model designed to improve graduation rates were examined. Life and career experiences of educators employed in more than one nontraditional high school reform model designed for the same purpose would have provided a broader perspective. Another limitation is that the study was conducted in only one urban school district serving predominantly African American students and students of low socioeconomic status. Conducting the study in more than one urban school district would have provided a broader perspective.

Another possible limitation of the study was the reluctance of participants to speak freely during interviews. Participants' personal perspectives of observations or their reservations about being observed limited data collection. Additionally, potential limitations in qualitative research included distorted responses, incomplete or inaccurate documents, and researcher bias (Patton, 2002).

## Definitions

*Accountability.* Accountability refers to the obligation of the school or school system to accept responsibility for its actions.

*Achievement Gap.* This College and Career Ready Performance Indicator (CCRPI) indicator compares scale score achievement data between the school's lowest achieving students and the state's mean score for each subject. This indicator also measures the difference in gap size between the current and previous year for the school's lowest achieving students (GaDOE, 2015).

*Alternative Educational Schools/Programs.* Alternative educational schools and programs offer nontraditional options for students who may struggle in the traditional school setting. These students may need more innovatively designed approaches and settings for learning (Georgia Department of Education, 2015).

*At-Risk Students.* Students who are at-risk are those who are not on track to complete high school in four years due to failing grades, attendance and/or behavior issues, alcohol or drug issues, family issues, or other social issues (Bowers & Sprott, 2012).

*Black-White Achievement Gap.* This indicator is used to describe differences in learning among specific groups of students, especially academic achievement between socioeconomically advantaged White and Asian students and their minority socioeconomically disadvantaged peers (Murphy, 2009).

*College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI).* GaDOE uses CCRPI to measure school improvement, accountability, and as a communication tool to promote college and career readiness for all students.

*Credit Recovery.* Credit recovery is a type of alternative program designed to allow students an opportunity to retake courses in which they did not earn the necessary credits needed for graduation (Georgia Department of Education, 2015).

*Critical Race Theory.* A theoretical framework in the social sciences that uses critical theory to examine society and culture as they relate to categorizations of race, law, and power.

*Cultural Competence.* A set of behaviors, attitudes and policies that allow a teacher to successfully teach students of different cultures (Diller & Moule, 2005).

*Economic Segregation.* The degree to which high- and low-income families live in separate communities (Sharkey et al., 2016).

*Effective Alternative Schools.* Alternative schools designed to meet the needs of students and increase student academic success (Porowski et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2011).

*Flexible Schedules.* Schedules that allow flexibility in students' class schedules versus the traditional school's predetermined schedule.

*Georgia Milestones Assessment System.* The End of Grade (EOG) and End of Course (EOC) Georgia Milestones are included in the assessment program measuring performance outlined in the Georgia Standards of Excellence (GSE), including the areas of English Language Arts (ELA), mathematics, science, and social studies. Students in Grades 3 through 8 take the EOG exams, and students in grades 9 through 12 take the EOC exams. Scale scores from these exams are used as an accountability component in teacher and leader evaluations and impact a school's or district's CCRPI (GADOE, 2015).

*Graduation Rate.* The graduation rate represents the percentage of a school's students who complete high school within four years (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014).

*Growth Mindset.* The belief that one can learn more or become smarter if he or she works hard and perseveres, learns more or learns more quickly, and views challenges and failures as opportunities to improve learning and skills (Dweck, 2006).

*High School Dropout.* A high school dropout is a student who drops out of school before earning a high school diploma (Ekstrom et al., 1986).

*Hopeful Adolescent.* A hopeful adolescent is a youth who has an effective support system such as family, church, community organizations, specific youth-focused organizations, sports, or school (McLaughlin et al., 1994).

*Innovative Alternatives.* Innovative alternatives, including smaller learning environments, flexible schedules, multiple ways to earn credits, differentiated instruction, and personalized learning, are strategies and inventive approaches to meet the needs of students (Edwards, 2013).

*National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).* This national assessment measures student achievement in grades 4, 8, and 12 in the areas of mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, United States history, technology, and engineering. The most common assessments provided are in mathematics and reading, and the data is used to compare student achievement for different demographic groups across the Nation (Gorman, 2010).

*Nontraditional Education.* Nontraditional schools or programs are designed to meet the needs of at-risk students by providing classroom settings and curricula unlike that offered in traditional schools.



*Opportunity Gap.* The opportunity gap refers to the gap that exists in opportunity, support, and resources between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students, including school quality and the opportunity for all students to be welcomed into the school environment and valued by the teachers who serve them (Coleman et al., 1966; Putnam, 2015; Phillips & Putnam, 2016; Saguaro Seminar, 2016).

*Racial trauma.* Racial oppression, discrimination and/or harassment resulting in physiological, psychological, and emotional damage (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011).

*Relational-Cultural Theory.* An alternative theoretical framework used by mental health professionals to examine how sex role socialization, power, dominance, marginalization, and subordination affect mental health and relational development (Jordan, 2017).

*School connectedness.* Described as feeling positively about education, having a sense of belonging within the school environment, and establishing positive relationships with school staff and other students. School connectedness addresses engagement, bonding, belonging, attachment, and commitment related to school (Jimerson et al., 2003; Libbey, 2004).

*Student Success.* Student success refers to reaching educational goals through academic achievement leading to graduation and options for a stable life of work fulfilling the American Dream (Caroleo, 2014; Payne & Slocumb, 2011; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Sullivan & Downey, 2015).

*Traditional Education.* Traditional education is a structured system in which a public-school teacher plans lessons and utilizes a variety of educational instruments in

presenting it to the students. The students attend classes at a specified time at a specified location (McNulty, 2021).

*Whiteness.* Refers to a quality pertaining to Euro-American or White people or traditions only (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013).

### *Chapter Summary*

Although the graduation rate appears to be on the rise, the graduation rate for students of color continues to decline. The need for a nontraditional high school reform model is especially critical for the underperforming students of low socioeconomic status. The Black-White achievement gap, especially in reading, the opportunity gap, the school-to-prison pipeline, the CRT, and the RCT offered answers to questions and provided solutions to reduce underachievement and increase graduation rates. This research study provided a clear understanding of the characteristics of a beneficial nontraditional high school reform model and the strategies used by the teachers and leaders that impact the lives of students of color, especially males. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the perceptions of educators regarding the use of a nontraditional high school reform model to improve graduation rates of predominantly low-income African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status.

The findings of this study will aid in understanding the patterns and themes in educators lived and career experiences that prompted them to serve and implement a nontraditional high school reform model. Other school leaders and policy makers may use the findings to provide a similar nontraditional alternative for students who have been historically unsuccessful in a traditional school setting.

This study comprises six chapters. I have provided an overview of the study in Chapter 1, generally discussing how racism and the principles of Whiteness influence the graduation rate for students of color. In Chapter 2, I provide a comprehensive literature review that identifies and explains how the social stratification prevalent in American public schools leads to racial and cultural trauma for students of color. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology of portraiture as the research design. In Chapter 4, I introduce portraits that demonstrate how educators build relationships with their students and strengthen school connectedness, resulting in discovery of a path for the students to reach full potential. In Chapter 5 integrates the six portraits into one collective portraiture and introduces the themes that emerged. Finally, I discuss the research findings, implications of these findings, and future study possibilities in Chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Literature Review*

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of educators regarding the use of a nontraditional school reform model to improve graduation rates in an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status. The focus of the study was on one high school program within an urban school system serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status in a nontraditional setting. Existing data reveal more than 65 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, American schools are nearly as segregated as they were in 1954 (Rebora, 2019). While approximately 75% of African American students attend schools with majority minority populations, 38% attend schools with not more than a 10% enrollment of White students (Rebora, 2019). Other data reveal the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for African American students is below the United States average. The national ACGR was 85% in the 2017-2018 school year. The ACGR for African American students was 79% (USDOE, 2020b). The national ACGR increased to 86% in the 2018-2019 school year. The ACGR for White students was 89%. The ACGR for Hispanic students was 82%, and the ACGR for African American students was 80%. (USDOE, 2020b). An in-depth understanding of strategies used and barriers encountered by teachers and school administrators in a nontraditional school setting could help to improve nationwide graduation rates of African American and Hispanic students living in poverty.

In this review of literature, I include a synthesis of other scholars findings to examine nontraditional education and how it helps African American and Hispanic students who live in poverty be successful in high school. Initially, I also provide a brief historical perspective of traditional schooling in America before and since *Brown v. BOE*. I then discuss the Critical Race Theory (CRT) and how systemic racism adversely affects the academic performance of students of color, especially those who live in poverty. Next, I explain the Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) and include general perceptions and myths regarding the targeted subgroup. Additionally, I discuss the achievement and opportunity gaps, poverty, multi-cultural education, graduation and dropout data for African American and Hispanic students, strategies and interventions, the school-to-prison pipeline, the nontraditional education reform model, challenges, and barriers. I also include a summary.

### *Historical Perspective*

American Slavery, defined by a racial caste system, denied Black people's humanity (Stevenson, 2019). Enslaved people were characteristically considered things not persons and were considered persons only when accused of criminalization. The most outstanding achievement during the period of Reconstruction was the establishment of public schools. Black people were banned from learning to read and write during slavery and were desperate for an education. The newly elected Black legislators pushed for a universal, state-funded school system—not just for their children, but for poor White children, too (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Until this time, the White elite sent their children to private schools and poor White children went without an education while Black children

did not have access to education altogether. The Black legislators were also instrumental in passing the first compulsory education laws requiring Southern children, Black and White, to attend school like their northern counterparts (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

After the *Brown v. BOE* ruling, schooling in America began its transformation and inequities were revealed. The Coleman Report of 1966, Equality of Educational Opportunity Study (Coleman et al., 1966), was mandated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to disclose the unequal educational opportunities for children of different races, colors, and national origins. The phrase, “achievement gap” was used in the report. This national survey report made regional comparisons of the differences in student achievement, teacher quality, student characteristics, socioeconomic levels, and their effect on achievement. The Equality of Educational Opportunity Study (EEOS) concluded that disadvantaged African American students learn better in well-integrated classrooms and prompted busing of students to other schools to achieve racial balance (Coleman et al., 1966).

The Minority Student Achievement Network viewed the presence of students of color in the late 60’s and early 70’s as a challenge as these students were perceived as deficient and disadvantaged when compared to their White peers (Noguera & Akom, 2000). Noguera and Akom (2000) argued that the achievement gap reflects disparities in experience and life opportunities for individuals from different racial groups in American society. In addition, Noguera and Akom (2000) contended that it would certainly be remarkable news “if the children of those who were most likely to be incarcerated, denied

housing and employment, passed over for promotions, or harassed by the police did just as well” (p. 3) despite these obstacles.

Coleman as cited in *Integration Yes; Busing No* (Goodman, 1975) concluded in an updated study that busing failed as it prompted “White flight” when Whites fled to the suburbs to avoid this opportunity to create racial balance in schools. A cross-district busing program was evaluated and demonstrated that classroom integration can significantly increase the test scores of poor students without any decrease in the scores of their economically advantaged classmates (Putnam, 2015). However, the school board that instituted this program was not re-elected and the integration policy was overturned immediately by the newly elected school board (Putnam, 2015). According to Noguera and Akom (2000) determining how to desegregate schools has become the priority more so than determining how to meet the educational needs of diverse student populations. Noguera and Akom affirmed that the small number of bright spots of success in schools where there are no achievement gaps and where students of color perform and achieve at high levels despite the odds against them are evidence of the possibilities “if we lived in a society that truly valued children and that was genuinely committed to equity and high-quality education for all” (p. 4).

Black Codes, defined as restrictive laws that limited the freedom of African Americans ensuring their availability as a cheap labor force, replaced laws governing slavery. Black Codes weaponized the criminal justice system as the strategy of choice whenever Black people “asserted their independence or achieved any measure of success” (Stevenson, 2019). Any challenge to the White racial hierarchy could be deemed

a crime and punished by law or lynching. This denial of humanity, along with the presumptive view of Black people as criminals, endorsed a tolerance to engage in any form of brutality in response to any significant or minor act a Black person committed. Some acts of brutality were presented as spectator sports, wherein “deviled eggs and lemonade” were served as onlookers enjoyed the acts of violence performed for public consumption (Stevenson, 2019, p. 81).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the language for non-crimes has replaced the Black Codes: driving while Black, sleeping while Black, sitting in a coffee shop while Black, birdwatching while Black, and even in many cases learning while Black. These non-crimes have resulted in the *Black Lives Matter* movement of today. However, the counter chant to discredit this movement is *All Lives Matter*.

### *Critical Race Theory*

Scholars in education began to use the CRT to explore the role of race and racism in the production of inequality decades ago (Bell, 1987; n.d.a; Lawrence, 1993; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994; Tate, 1997). Dixson et al. (2006) indicated that race remained a powerful symbol of difference, inequity, and oppression and noted that CRT could be used to understand persistent inequity, injustice, and oppression (Dixson et al., 2006, Gillborn, 2013). Matsuda et al. (1993) concluded that it was time, and it was necessary for scholars in education to *sing* a new and different song to challenge the notion of White supremacy. Matsuda et al noted that CRT focuses on six tenets:

1. CRT recognizes that racism is a pervasive and permanent part of American society.



2. CRT challenges dominant claims of objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness, and merit.
3. CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual or historical analysis of the law.
4. CRT insists on the recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and society.
5. CRT is interdisciplinary.
6. CRT works toward eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p.56)

The goal of CRT is social transformation. This social transformation in education demands an analysis be conducted and changes made to the structures that prevent all children from receiving the same opportunity to learn and be successful (Dixson et al., (2006). Tate (1997) indicated that law and educational research have been influenced by a paradigmatic view that characterizes people of color as inferior. Research related to people of color and their representation in American jurisprudence has been dominated by theories and belief systems attached to political, scientific, and religious theories that rely on stereotypes and characterizations that reinforce the inferiority paradigm and the resulting political action (Allport, 1954; Bullock, 1967; Cone, 1970; Marable, 1983; Takaki, 1993; Tate, 1997). The inferiority paradigm is fostered on the belief that people of color are biologically and genetically inferior to Whites (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Gould, 1981; Selden, 1994). Padilla and Lindholm (1995) argued that IQ studies that

were part of the inferiority paradigm continue to persist when educational research involving ethnic minorities is conducted. The inferiority paradigm assumes:

1. The White middle-class American (often male) serves as the standard against which other groups are compared.
2. The instruments used to measure differences are universally applied across all groups, with perhaps slight adjustments for culturally diverse populations.
3. Although we need to recognize sources of potential variance such as social class, gender, cultural orientation, and proficiency in English, these factors are viewed as extraneous and can later be ignored. (Padilla & Lindholm, 1995, p. 127)

These assumptions have been viewed as biased against African American, Latinos, and other ethnic minorities (Lightfoot, 1980; Pang, 1995; Rodriguez, 1995). Woodson (1933) and W.E.B. DuBois (1903) both used race as a theoretical lens for assessing social inequity. Woodson (1933) identified the school's role in structuring inequality and demotivating African American students in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (p. xix).

DuBois (1903) maintained that the African American “ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (DuBois, 1903,

Ch. 1, para. 3). He felt the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the color line and yet, today in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it remains.

Weinberg (1977) contended that educational research involving children of color should include: (a) pertinent historical and legal background; (b) the ideology of racism; (c) a continuing re-examination of prevailing views of the role of race and social class in learning; and (d) the influence of minority communities on schools (Tate, 1997, p. 199). According to Carter and Goodwin (1994), the belief in the intellectual inferiority of people and children of color has had a powerful impact on educational policy and curriculum development since before the 1800s as differences in achievement between White and non-White students were assumed to be genetically based. This “inferiority paradigm allowed slavery to be condoned, which resulted in racial/ethnic groups, particularly Blacks and Indian [Native Americans], being considered uneducable and barred from formal or adequate schooling. The inferiority paradigm continues to manifest itself in the quality of education offered non-White children (p. 296). Assumptions related to the inferiority paradigm have also impacted the legal discourse in the United States assuming the intellectual inferiority of African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and other people of color. Jensen (1969) illustrated the interrelationship between science and public policy and argued that the compensatory education program’s outcome of the war on poverty had disappointing results because students of color, the targeted population, had relatively low IQ scores.

Herrnstein and Murray (1994) suggested that policy formation must consider low intelligence as the root cause of all society’s ills. These arguments reflect the

longstanding history and the binary Black-White opposition that proposes that “Blacks are simple, lazy, and undeserving people.” while “Whites are intelligent, diligent, and deserving people” (Tate, 1997, p. 200). This ideological foundation was laid by the framers of the United States Constitution when: (a) Blacks were counted as three-fifths of a person; (b) the effective date for outlawing slavery was delayed 20 years; and (c) the government was obligated to uphold fugitive slave laws and used its troops to terminate Black insurrections and violence (Anderson, 1994).

Lawrence (1993) argued that *Brown v. Board of Education* held that segregated schools were unconstitutional primarily because of the message segregation conveyed: the message that Black children are an untouchable caste, unfit to be educated with White children...It stamps inferiority upon Blacks, and this badge communicates a message to others in the community, as well as to Blacks wearing the badge, that is injurious to Blacks. (p. 59)

Because people of color have been characterized and stereotyped in both educational research and law, these assumptions have raised doubts about the benefit of and have impacted the degree of equitable investment in education and other social resources needed and provided for them. According to the review of social scientific paradigms conducted by Carter and Goodwin (1994), social scientists have historically used race to determine the intellectual and educational aptitude of people and students of color. Bell (1987) and Omi and Winant (1994) maintained that the framers of the United States Constitution and policymakers of our legal system constructed and implemented laws that impact education policy based on the ideology that race is a factor.

Kozol (1991) described the inequities that exist between the experiences of White middle-class students and those of poor African American and Hispanic or Latin students. Kozol declared that these “savage inequalities” are unfortunately a logical and predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized. Delpit (1988) maintained that one of the tragedies of education is the way in which the dialogue of the people of color is silenced.

Race is a story. It’s a very dangerous and destructive story that has resulted in the dehumanization, marginalization, and deaths of millions of people. It is a story constructed by European men who sought to colonize and exploit the earth, a story told to justify oppression and uphold hierarchy. The story’s power comes from the fact that it has been institutionalized. But race is a construct. By naming it as a story, and acknowledging it as a story, we can transform it (Aguilar, 2019, p. 65).

In the United States, the criminal justice system, as well as economic, education, housing, and other systems are set up in ways that privilege some and underserve others. Neither equity nor justice can exist until bias, racism, and oppression are dismantled. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1994) assert race remains a salient factor in U.S. society in general and particularly in education. According to Omi and Winant (1994, p. 56) “race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation.” Harris (1993) stated:

Slavery linked the privilege of Whites to the subordination of Blacks through a legal regime that attempted the conversion of Blacks into objects of property. Similarly, the settlement and seizure of property rights in land supported White

privilege through a system of property rights in land in which the 'race' of the Native Americans rendered their first possession right invisible and justified conquest. (p. 1721)

Therefore, only Whiteness has value and becomes the ultimate property, and possession of it defines what is acceptable when identifying cultural practice in the United States. The property function of Whiteness includes the rights of disposition; rights to use and enjoyment, reputation, and status; and the absolute right to exclude (Lac, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). A central feature of Whiteness, or power in America, is the unlimited ability to define what is property, and to possess and own property without any restraint.

When a government was constructed to protect the rights of property owners, there was no incentive to secure rights, including rights for human property for African American slaves (Tate, et al., 1993). Bell (1987) maintained that Blacks continue to remain disadvantaged and deprived because of their race. This is because men of property could not or would not fathom individual rights not connected to property rights of which African Americans were not allowed to possess. Property owners in affluent communities continue to seek property tax relief and resent paying for a public-school system that serves a majority of non-White and poor students (Houston, 1993; Lac, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Wainer, 1993). Property values influence not only the quality but the quantity of curriculum that is offered. Kozol (1991) detailed that schools serving poor students of color are more likely to not have access to science labs, computers, and other state-of-the-art technologies. These schools are also not likely to have appropriately

certified and prepared teachers. The lack of both human and instructional resources limits the opportunity for students to reach their full potential despite the same mandated educational standards for all students (Kozol, 1991).

### *Relational-Cultural Theory*

RCT scholars recognize the possibility of empathic failures and relational disconnections in all relationships and that they are especially distressing for the more vulnerable clients, especially for students from marginalized and devalued racial/cultural groups (Comstock et al., 2006).

Proponents of RCT acknowledge that all relationships move “through connections, through disconnections; and back into new, transformative and enhanced connections with others” (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 282). Movement through these different phases is called relational awareness. Relational awareness is the first step in developing more refined relational capacities that enable human beings to “identify, deconstruct, and resist disconnections and obstacles to mutual empathy in counseling/ educational relationships and the broader culture” (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 282).

When students of color fail to operate within the established norms of Whiteness when confronted with these unfamiliar systems or norms that are not culturally responsive to their needs, they are described as being abnormal or unhealthy (Miller, 1976).

Jordan (2000) summarized seven core tenets of RCT that detail the process of psychological growth and relational development:

1. People grow through and toward relationships throughout the life span.

2. Movement toward mutuality rather than separation characterizes mature function.
3. The ability to participate in increasingly complex and diversified networks characterize psychological growth.
4. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships.
5. Authenticity is necessary for real engagement in growth-fostering relationships.
6. When people contribute to growth-fostering relationships, they grow as a result of their participation in such relationships.
7. The goal of development is the realization of increased relational competence over the life span. (p. 1007)

Relational development across the lifespan is inextricably linked to an individual's racial identity, cultural identity, and social identity (Jordan, 2000). Counselors' and educators' relational, multicultural, and social justice competencies are grounded in their awareness and knowledge of how cultural oppression, marginalization, and varied forms of social injustice led to feelings of isolation, shame, and humiliation among persons from devalued groups (Comstock et al., 2008). Birrell and Freyd (2006) proposed that "although oppression is often institutionalized at societal levels, it is necessarily enacted in the context of interpersonal relationships" (p. 52), and "the fragmentation caused by the violation of human bonds can only be healed by new and healing human bonds" (p. 57). Counseling and educational relationships must be guided



by relational, multicultural, or social justice ideology or they potentially further preserve and sustain the silencing and oppression marginalized individuals face outside these mutually empathic relationships (Day-Vines et al., 2007; Walker, 2003).

Like multicultural and social justice counseling, RCT has been met with resistance in professional training and clinical practice (Birrell & Freyd, 2006).

Regarding this resistance, Birrell and Freyd contended:

It is fashionable, in this age of managed care and risk management, to advocate for a treatment that not only takes time, but also involves the possibility, on the part of the therapist [or educator] of coming to new understandings of that forgotten realm of what Buber (1975) calls the “interhuman.” A treatment that does not address this level of experiencing risks objectifying the already wounded and creating a superficial adjustment to society which involves the risk of further abuse. (p. 54)

Counselors [and educators] are sometimes challenged in their attempt to form therapeutic alliance with their clients/students and to assist them in the building of healthy relationships with others (Kress et al., 2018). According to Kress et al. (2018), counselors can establish this alliance using principles of RCT when there is a focus on mutuality, shared power, and authenticity to provide clients/students with a safe relational context within which to explore their connections and disconnections. They also asserted that counselors empower their clients/students to foster self-empathy and to examine their own relational strategies. Therefore, principles of RCT can be used to repair problematic relational images that were influenced by traumatic experiences and begin building new,

healthy connections. DiLillo (2001) claimed that traumatic interpersonal experiences may have a considerable impact on one's well-being and functioning across the stages of life and can be particularly harmful when forming and/or maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships. Kress et al. (2018) declared that since relational-cultural theorists speculated that isolation from others is a major source of emotional suffering, social withdrawal extends and intensifies a trauma survivors' emotional pain. Principles of RCT represent a culturally sensitive framework counselors [educators] can use with clients [students] who have traumatic stress disorders and are in search of improved connection and self-worth in their relationships with self, others, and the broader society (Kress et al., 2018).

School connectedness refers to a youths' perception of safety, support, and sense of investment in school (McNeeley & Falci, 2004). School connectedness has been linked to better emotional health and a reduction in adolescent risky behavior (Brooks et al., 2012; Kidger et al., 2012). McNeely and Falci (2004) noted that school connectedness involving connections to peers and teachers who participate in prosocial behaviors serve as a protective factor. Estell and Perdue (2013) as well as Wang and Eccles (2012) linked peer influence and school connectedness when affective engagement and school compliance are considered. Great school connectedness yields incredibly positive student outcomes (Weist et al, 2009). Masko (2005) and Murrell (1994) noted that school connectedness may be realized only when students feel safe and respected in their learning environment. Students look for the adults in their lives to support and protect

them, and students of color look for the adults in their lives to protect them from racism (Leary et al., 2005; Masko, 2005; Wells, 2018).

Quimby et al. (2018) investigated whether peer influence “can promote positive youth development and deter negative behavior among African American adolescents living in low-income, urban, high violence neighborhoods” (p. 1). In a longitudinal study, Quimby et al. examined the relationship between positive peer association and the outcomes of self-esteem, school connectedness, normative beliefs about aggression, and parental relationships (p. 1). Quimby et al. recognized that despite the high degree of economic and cultural diversity within the African American community, the targeted group studied experienced poverty which compounds the experience of oppression and discrimination these students shared with more well-resourced African American youth (Reeves et al., 2016; Williams & Mohammed 2013). According to Quimby et al. (2018), Afrocentric theories suggest peer relationships may be a key influence because of the values placed on interpersonal relationships. Afrocentric theories are cultural perspectives used to describe the development and well-being of people of African descent which are based on the values and belief systems thought to be shared amongst those within the African American community (Gilbert et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2012). The core elements of Afrocentric approaches include “cultural orientation toward spirituality, interpersonal relationships, communalism, and expressive communication (Jones et al., 2012).

Tolan et al. (2002) demonstrated the importance of interpersonal relationships for African American youth when targeted samples were found to use social support as a coping strategy more than their European American and Latino peers. Peers that exhibit

positive behavior were found to be a protective factor and a motivator for prosocial behaviors (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2015; Van Hoorn et al., 2014). Positive peer influence was also found to lead to increased academic achievement or increased self-esteem, according to Padilla-Walker and Bean (2009) in studies conducted with predominantly White middle-class samples.

Positive youth development theory suggests youth progress through healthy developmental trajectories when both appropriate internal strengths and positive external strengths, including self-esteem and social support, are nurtured, and fostered (Benson et al., 2006; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Geldhof et al., 2014). Benson et al. (2010) discovered that across ethnic groups and socioeconomic levels, when children and adolescents experience more developmental assets, they are more likely to demonstrate decreases in deviant behaviors and increases in healthy behaviors. Given the marginalization African American youth face, consistent with findings from developmental assets literature, the American Psychological Association (n.d.a) identified, factors of aggression, self-esteem, and relationship with parents and schools as important in ensuring optimal functioning of these students.

Pyszczynski et al. (2004) asserted that a person's evaluation of oneself or self-esteem is connected to one's well-being. The development of self-esteem in African American youth from low-income, urban communities is thereby important due to its potential to serve as a protective factor when environmental stressors are considered. In studies of various ethnicities, Padilla-Walker and Bean (2009) observed that self-esteem

is inversely related to negative peer association and is positively related to positive peer association.

Quimby et al. (2018) studied one component of ethnic identity, affirmation and belonging, which represent feelings, attitudes, and pride regarding one's ethnicity. Derlan and Umana-Taylor (2015) found this concept has stronger connections to African American adolescents' mental health than other components of ethnic identity. Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) asserted that affirmation and belonging moderate the influence of positive peer association among African American adolescents by enhancing the benefits of positive peer association in a protective model. Quimby's study corroborated existing evidence that positive peer association, when intentionally fostered, may be a force to encourage positive youth development among African American youth from low-income urban communities.

Social learning theory suggests that adolescents adopt a behavior by merely perceiving that their peers accept and view the behavior as desirable (Jennings et al., 2010; Petraitus et al., 1995). Peers emerge during the developmental stage of adolescence as another influence in their lives and in shaping behavior (Quimby, et al, 2018). According to Wentzel (2014), positive peer influence contributes to the explanation of how youth develop healthy and prosocial behaviors like abilities of negative peer influence to promote antisocial behavior.

Adler and Adler (1987) stressed the importance of connectedness in fostering psychological development and emotional well-being. Focused on the importance of love and belonging, Adler indicated love and belonging are essential to a person's mental

health (Ivey et al., 2007). Erikson used the term homonymy to refer to children's ability to readjust and enlarge their relational circles according to their individual and developmental needs (Coy & Kovacs-Long, 2005, p. 139). Connectedness is embedded in both traditional and contemporary counseling scholarship and is central to the application of RCT (Coy & Kovacs-Long, 2005; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Despite the acknowledgement of traditional theorists of the role of relational factors in fostering people's sense of psychological well-being, these concepts have been subdued or muted by counseling theorists who "over emphasized therapeutic and developmental goals that are culturally, and gender biased" (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 281).

Coy and Kovacs-Long (2005) proposed the use of RCT concepts and recommended mental health professionals and culturally competent and responsive educators include the ability to connect with others in mutually empathic and empowering ways as a signal of emotional maturity and psychological well-being. Carl Rogers' theory focused on the one-way client-therapist [student-teacher] relationship as a primary source of healing in counseling and extended counselors' thinking about the importance of empathy in the healing process (Comstock et al., 2006; Ivey et al., 2007). RCT expands the Rogerian theory by:

1. extending the one-way concept of empathy espoused in Rogers's counseling theory to a two-way process referred to as mutual empathy.
2. describing relational movement that occurs in all relationships, including the counseling [educational] relationship, which involves inevitable periods of connection and disconnection.

3. resisting and eradicating sociopolitical factors that operate as the source of relational disconnections among many individuals in diverse and marginalized racial/cultural groups who are discouraged from naming their own reality and authentically expressing many of their thoughts and feelings.
4. serving as a theoretical framework from which to promote the concept of mutual empathy as key to healing and relational transformation in therapy, as well as in other relational/professional contexts, including the work counselors do as multicultural/social justice advocates, consultants, and organizational development agents (Comstock et al., 2006, p. 281).

Mutually empathic encounters demand a degree of vulnerability “when the ability to be authentically present, emotionally responsive, empathically attuned, and open to change” is required of both the client-therapist [student-educator] (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 281). It is these times of connections and disconnections that allow school counselors and other educators to learn about individual worldviews and beliefs in new and different ways. Mutual empathy grants self- and cultural-learning that enable all parties to respectfully come to a mutual agreement about intervention strategies that are more likely to promote the type of counseling or educational outcomes that are compatible with culturally different worldviews, beliefs, and values (Day-Vines et al., 2007; Ivey et al., 2007).

Comstock et al. (2008) found that mutual empathy in multicultural counseling/educational situations resulted in a deepened understanding of and compassion for all people. Birrell and Freyd (2006) noted that the Dalai Lama suggested

this type of mutual empathy leads individuals to be more “genuinely ethical” (p. 59) in all the work they do.

According to Miller (1986), “five good things” are identified as the specific experiential outcomes of being in connection:

1. Each person feels a greater sense of zest (vitality, energy).
2. Each person feels more able to act and does act in the world.
3. Each person has a more accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s).
4. Each person feels a greater sense of worth.
5. Each person feels more connected to other persons and exhibits a greater motivation to connect with other people beyond those in one’s primary relationships. (p. 3)

Conversely, Jordan and Dooley (2000) regarded disconnection, which produces a general decreased sense of energy or deflation, as simply the opposite of the five good things.

Disconnection is often accompanied by feelings of shame, fear, frustration, humiliation, and self-blame. Jordan (1997) declared that “shame is most importantly a felt sense of unworthiness to be in connection, a deep sense of unlovability, with the ongoing awareness of how very much one wants to connect with others” (p. 147).

Comstock et al. (2008) asserted disconnections that cannot be transformed potentially lead to feelings of condemned isolation. Individuals who experience condemned isolation are at high risk of displaying emotional and psychological difficulties. Additionally, persons in marginalized and devalued cultural groups



experience condemned isolation resulting from power “differentials, gender role socialization, racism, cultural oppression, health disparities, heterosexism, and other social injustices” (p. 282). Chronic experiences of disconnections, according to Miller and Stiver (1997), led also to the ongoing disempowerment of persons identified in oppressed groups today. When counselors/educators fail to acknowledge the contextual factors and social injustices that contribute to the stressors and problems marginalized people experience, the sense of disconnection, condemned isolation, and disempowerment are heightened and intensified (Hartling et al., 2000; Walker, 1999, 2003, 2005).

Miller and Stiver (1997) declared that condemned isolation results from chronic relational and/or cultural disconnections that promote the feelings of being “locked out of the possibility of human connection” (p. 72). Feelings of condemned isolation produce a deep sense of shame and a belief that they are defective human beings, and these marginalized and devalued individuals begin to blame themselves for their failures (Hartling et al., 2000; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Strategies for surviving the emotional stress related to feelings of condemned isolation involve hiding or denying life experiences or relating to others in ways that are not genuine to reconnect in non-mutual relationships. This paradox may often result in further disconnection as individuals use strategies to avoid perceived or real risks of hurt, rejection, and other forms of relational disconnection, social exclusion, and marginalization (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

To become a culturally competent counselor/educator or practitioner requires developing relational resilience and working through disconnections with students from

diverse groups and backgrounds as these interactions enhance awareness, knowledge, and skills (Sue et al., 1992). Counselors/educators must first undergo their own as well as the students' level of racial identity development and then recognize that it is the counselors'/educators' duty and responsibility to begin the conversation. Culturally competent practitioners understand the delicacy that is necessary when discussing issues of difference with clients—students—and must be prepared to hear their frank and honest responses to mediate the mistrust that so often is possible in multicultural settings (Miller & Stiver, 1995) It is equally important for both the marginalized students and privileged counselors/educators to understand what they have been taught to expect from the larger culture of marginalized members of society, respectively, as they work through the effects of the historical mistrust that has developed between persons in different racial/cultural groups. Comstock et al. (2008) proposed that counselors/educators do three things to address the mistrust and other obstacles to building the empathic mutuality necessary in multicultural settings:

1. Acknowledge to culturally different clients that all individuals experience a yearning to connect but that feelings of fear, shame, suspicion, and mistrust sometimes make movement into connection difficult.
2. State how the disconnections that emerge from such experiences are fueled by the broader societal/cultural context in which all individuals are situated.
3. Explain how the counseling [educational] process can address clients' intrapsychic concerns as well as the contextual challenges clients [students]

encounter that undermine their sense of authenticity, mutuality, and connection with others. (p. 284)

Miller and Stiver (1995) defined relational images, and obstacles of mutuality as expressions of individuals' expectations and fears of how others will respond to them. When persons, specifically students of color, are repeatedly denied empathic possibilities in the school setting, expectations of relationships in school may become negative and distrustful. Walker (2005) noted that RCT submits that counselors/educators must understand that "chronic exposure to disaffirming stimuli" (p. 52), including negative race-, gender-, and class-based stereotypes, activates many people's senses of self-doubt and ongoing feelings of their unworthiness to participate in mutually empathic connections with others. Internalized racism makes it difficult for marginalized persons to identify and translate experiences in ways that are self-affirming. RCT proposes that persons who have suffered these negative stereotypes and other forms of social injustice are less likely to seek out relationships that have the potential to support healthy psychological development (p.52).

Franklin (1999) defined invisibility as "an inner struggle with the feeling that one's talents, abilities, personality and worth are not valued or even recognized because of prejudice and racism" (p. 761). Dowden et al. (2014) explored the lived experiences of seven African American males in a phenomenological study and were able to uncover four thematic codes for clinical practice: (a) self-affirmation; (b) self-awareness; (c) coping with invisibility; and (d) effectively counseling African American males. Self-affirmation, according to Lannin et al. (2013), is the process of responding to threats to

one's self-image or self-worth with affirming strategies to maintain one's positive self-image. Self-awareness is evidenced when one acknowledges the biases of others and understands the impact those biases might have on attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions (Suthakaren, 2011).

Dowden et al. (2014) indicated that coping with invisibility is challenging and often overwhelming. Franklin (1999) noted that coping with invisibility requires "being able to discern when behavior is racist, and then acting consistent with one's sense of self" (p. 764). Effectively counseling African American males included approaches which were humanistic in nature: "(a) authenticity, (b) unconditional positive regard, (c) empathetic understanding, and (d) self-awareness" (Dowden et al., 2014, p. 67).

Three propositions were identified for counselors working with African American males:

1. Support and collaborate with the African American male as he labors to make sense of himself as a social being (Cross, 1991; Cross & Vandiver, 2001).
2. Understand and value the African American male's feelings, opinions, and values (Scholl, 2008).
3. Strive to become more aware of both one's own culture as the counselor [educator] as well as the culture of the African American males to build rapport, to eliminate barriers, and to overpower social stereotypes and bias (Dowden et al., 2014, p. 68).

By advocating resiliency, fostering self-awareness and identity development, supporting African American identity, both individually and collectively, promoting African

American mentorships, teaching African American males how to negotiate race, and affirming historical and cultural knowledge and understanding counselors [educators] can facilitate African American males and their ability to cope with feelings of invisibility. Counselors [educators] can also advocate and bring about change relating to individual, systemic, and institutional barriers that control these persisting feelings of invisibility (Dowden et al., 2014).

Hill Collins (2000) described another obstacle of mutuality controlling images that are used “to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustices appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (p. 69). Normalizing these social injustices contributes to the resistance that continues to be directed at the multicultural/social justice movement, and thus traditional public education, and is considered the source of helplessness that is experienced by potential allies. Jordan and Hartling (2002) asserted that members of the dominant culture normalize the process of systemic oppression when negative relational and controlling images are promoted. An RCT perspective used by Jordan and Hartling is reflected in the following observations:

#### *Perceptions*

Perceptions of others often involve implicit biases—unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that impact our responses to certain groups of people, especially around race and ethnicity, class, and gender (Aguilar, 2019). These biases present themselves automatically and unconsciously without our awareness because they have been absorbed since birth (Aguilar, 2019). Prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision when schools were separate and unequal, Ladson-Billings (1999) described a utopia, an Eden,

known as the Public-School Way Back When (PSWBW) that was described by the majority population as wonderful. According to Ladson-Billings, it was common to hear that it was then that teachers knew how to teach; that children were smart and capable; and that there were no worries about discipline or students who were not capable of learning. It was after the Brown decision that children who were different from these wonderful, smart children could integrate and the PSWBW began to crumble and even now in the 2020's, as schools have become more segregated, many are content in making America great again. Teacher education programs had not prepared teachers to teach "these kind of children" (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 11). Children who were not White and middle class were viewed as culturally deprived or disadvantaged and were defective and lacking. The school's role, nevertheless, became to compensate for the *different* children's lack of socialization and cultural resources (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) contended that the issues African American and working-class males have with literacy at school may be linked to teacher perceptions of the intersection between ethnicity, poverty, and schooling. hooks (2004) requested illustrations of boys "being still, enjoying solitude, reading" for her book *Be Boy Buzz* because she perceived such images are particularly important since most images of African American boys show them in motion, running, jumping, and playing and send the message that they do not need to be readers (p.40). hooks noted also that most African American boys from underprivileged classes are socialized to believe that an education is not needed for survival. They are led to believe physical labor is all that is needed for survival, not education and reading as their means to liberation in the form of the

American dream (hooks, 2004). These negative perceptions are unacceptable; however, they continue in many classrooms across America. Added to the negative perceptions are prevalent issues in urban public schools that continue to reveal themselves in “low expectations, poor instruction, uneven support for students and teachers, and decisions that evolve around the needs of adults rather than the needs of students” (Holzman et al., 2012, p. 4).

Irvine & Irvine (1983) argued that before desegregation, African American teachers’ high expectations for African American students contributed to their school achievement. In 1980, African American teachers represented 12% of the teaching profession (Irvine, 1990). According to the Center on Education Policy (2006), there was a decrease of 50% for African American teachers to 6 %, while 90% of the teaching profession was White. In a report of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005), 80% of pre-service teachers were White females with no familiarity with the culturally diverse students they were likely to encounter in America’s public-school classrooms. Meier et al. (1989) investigated the relationship between the presence of African American teachers and their impact on the African American students’ access to an equal education and school success. Meier et al. concluded, “The single most important factor for all forms of second-generation discrimination is the proportion of Black teachers” (p. 140). Meier et al. also noted that in districts with large proportions of African American teachers, fewer African American students were suspended, expelled, or placed in special education classes. Additionally, in settings where the African American teachers were proportional to the African American

students, more African American students were served in gifted and talented programs, and more African American students graduated from high school (Meier et al., 1999). Meier et al. emphatically concluded that “Black teachers are without a doubt the key” to African American students’ academic success (p. 6). Data reanalyzed from the Tennessee Project STAR (Dee, 2004) determined that the racial pairing of teachers and students increased the reading and mathematics scores for both African American and White students by as much as three to four percentage points. According to Dee (2004), the race effects were particularly strong when poor African American children attended segregated schools.

During the days of segregation in Georgia, Black educators inspired Black children to succeed in a challenging and inequitable school climate while creating a system for advocacy for the children they served (Walker, 2019). In *The Lost Education of Horace Tate*, Walker (2018) represents that Black educators wanted the desegregated schools to provide students with all the structures they had created to sustain students in the segregated schools plus provide them with the equality and resources they had been denied. These educators had encouraged their students to aspire and to believe that they could be anything they wanted to be despite the segregated world they lived in. These educators helped to build a resilience to overcome the daily challenges that still confront African American children today while also preparing us for a world that did not currently exist. They never imagined that integration would require sacrificing inspirational and nurturing educational practices that encouraged children to achieve and that cultivated resilience for access to “a desegregation compromise between the



advocates for integration and the defenders of segregation” that allowed Black bodies into White school buildings but failed to fully address the actual educational needs and interests of African American children (Walker, 2019).

School boards, that were 99% White, forced African American principals to forfeit their leadership positions based on the prevailing belief that Black principals did not have the educational capacity to run a school in which they would supervise White teachers and oversee the education of White children (Walker, 2019). Around 30 to 50 thousand Black teachers and principals, who understood how to build aspirational and supportive climates for all children, never entered the desegregated world (Walker, 2019). The merging of Black and White educational organizations meant that the legacy of the White organization remained dominant resulting in a diminished agenda of advocacy to protect the needs of African American children. In this sense, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) served to protect the interests of White children in Georgia instead of fulfilling its design and purpose to protect the interests of Black children. The formula of aspiration, collective advocacy, and access Black educators used in the days of segregation is needed today to improve the conditions for students of color—a supportive and caring climate for all students (Walker, 2019).

Separate is still unequal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. African American and Latino students are more likely than White students to attend schools where 60% or more students are living in concentrated poverty with high teacher turnover, less experienced teachers, and inadequate facilities and resources (Kneebone, 2014). The United States Department of Education collects data on schools, teachers, and administrators using its National

Teacher and Principal Survey (formerly known as the Schools and Staffing Survey) every four years. In 2017, based on a nationally representative sample of 40,000 teachers, the average teacher (80%) is White, female, 42 years old with 14 years of experience, makes \$55,100 base salary, and works 53 hours a week (Loewus, 2017).

Principles of Whiteness are reflected in the American way of life as well as the American public teaching force. American K-12 classrooms have 82% White teachers. Urban school settings have a majority of students of color, and it is predicted that by 2024 53% of all students in public schools will be students of color (USDOE, 2016). This combination creates a racial and cultural mix, especially with the current rise of White Nationalist ideologies, that could negatively influence classroom relationships when students are subject to the biases that could result from that mix (McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Rothenberg, 1997). The long-term physical, mental, emotional, and psychological effects of racism is weathering (McGee & Stovall, 2015). Weathering is the result of the repeated trauma of institutional racism and leads to symptoms of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, humiliation, poor concentration, and/or irritability (Turner & Richardson, 2016; Wells, 2018) and this significantly impacts students' opportunity to achieve and excel.

Considering the current teaching force in America, 75% of White adults in the United States have entirely White social networks with little interaction with people of color (Rebora, 2019). What these adults know about racial diversity, or people of color, comes from stereotypical media images reinforcing Whiteness as the norm for better schools, better neighborhoods, and better people (Rebora, 2019). According to Rebora

(2019), many White people never confront one-on-one and never begin to think about racial issues until they get to college, the most diverse learning environment they have ever been in. Students of color need to see themselves in the picture—in the curriculum materials, in the learning environment, and in a positive light. Students and teachers need self-education to understand the issues of race and racism and the role these factors play in the classroom (Rebora, 2019).

Wells (2018) contended that racism breeds mistrust and argued this mistrust was kept safely hidden before schools were integrated but has run rampant since. Wells noted that how teachers identify with the students they serve influences the level of trust, affects overall mental health, and energizes racism. Wells also noted that how teachers identify with their students impacts the degree to which they can build relationships.

Awareness that inequity exists is only the beginning of becoming culturally competent. Conformity to the dominant culture remains the expectation in schools across the nation for students who do not look, act, or sound like the dominant culture (Wells, 2018). The goal for cultural competence becomes the destruction of oppressive systems and structures that traumatize students of color when they step outside the line that defines what is considered the norm and is expected by the dominant culture. According to the United States Department of Education (2016), many who control what goes on in schools across the nation continue to represent the White dominant culture, and there is little concern for training that addresses cultural competence, mental health, or racial trauma to meet the diverse needs of students attending public schools. Stivers (2015)

surmised, “The way racism works: I blame you for not being who I think you should be” (p. 86)

Reissman’s book, *The Culturally Deprived Child* (1962; as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1999) was noted as one of the most influential books published for teachers and educators. The author, according to Ladson-Billings, acknowledged the use of the term culturally deprived as being problematic, but he proceeded to equate the normal and correct way of being in school or in society with White middle-class norms and expression. Zeichner (1992) offered two approaches for preparing teachers for diverse student populations: (a) integrating issues of diversity throughout course work and field experiences; and (b) representing a subtopic or add-on to regular teacher education programs. Zeichner recognized that the integrated approach was preferred. However, the segregated approach remains dominant in American teacher education programs. Ladson-Billings (1999) argued that teacher education programs “attempt to embrace the idea of diversity as long as it does not require any fundamental attack on the PSWBW structure” (p. 223).

Irvine (2009; as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1999) illustrated the principle of interest convergence from the CRT perspective and suggested that teachers’ interests, when working in urban classrooms, must be more effective to avoid public scorn and criticism. Their interests must also relieve the guilt and hopelessness often connected to teaching in urban schools while providing urban students and their families opportunities for more effective instruction. Irvine, the Charles Howard Candler professor of Urban Studies at Emory University, explored cultural synchronization as a necessary mediation

for bridging the interpersonal contexts of students and teachers. As project director for the Center for Urban Learning/Teaching and Urban Research in Education and Schools (CULTURES), this cultural synchronization was part of a process model of achievement for African American children that included the following: (a) societal contexts (b) institutional contexts, and (c) interpersonal contexts of students and their teachers, as well as teacher and student expectations. The mission of CULTURES was to enhance the success of elementary and middle schools in educating culturally diverse students by providing professional development to 60 teachers annually. CULTURES exposed these 60 teachers to effective, research-based teaching strategies while providing cultural immersion experiences, opportunities for reflective practice, visits to classrooms of exemplary teachers, and a chance to develop action research projects (Ladson-Billings 1999).

Irvine (2009) defined culturally relevant pedagogy as effective teaching in culturally diverse classrooms and asserted that many well-meaning educators tend to believe in the following myths:

1. Only teachers of color can be culturally relevant.
2. Culturally relevant pedagogy is not appropriate for White students.
3. Caring teachers of diverse students have no classroom management skills.
4. The purpose of culturally relevant pedagogy is to help students *feel good* about themselves.

5. Culturally relevant teachers attend to learning styles by addressing African American males' need for kinesthetic activities or by allowing Asian American students to work alone. (p. 42)

Due to these myths, these educators assume that acknowledging holidays, including popular culture in their curriculum, or using colloquial speech is all that is needed for their efforts toward culturally relevant pedagogy. Another myth, according to Irvine (2009), is that culturally relevant pedagogy comes at the expense of rigor and high expectations. She contended that effective instruction must be approached through a cultural lens, making connections between the content, concepts, and ideas and their students' existing schema, prior knowledge, and their cultural perspectives. Irvine (2009) shared a culturally relevant solution for teaching a business letter in a low-income school. The text suggested bringing a toy catalog and having students write letters placing an order for a popular item. Considering that many students could not afford many of the popular items, the solution was to have students write a letter to the mayor suggesting changes that would improve life in their neighborhood after asking their relatives, neighbors, and church leaders about the problems they saw in the neighborhood. Letters were mailed and to their surprise, the mayor requested a visit with the class to address the concerns they shared. This activity was rigorous, relevant, and students had authentic participation in the writing of a business letter. Irvine (2009) noted that culturally relevant teachers form caring relationships with their students and often reflect on their "actions, instructional goals, methods and materials in reference to their students' cultural experiences and their preferred learning environments". (p.44)

### *Achievement Gap*

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as The Nation's Report Card, has been the common measure of what American students know and are able to do in mathematics, reading, science, and other subjects (USDOE, 2019, 2020). The NAEP provides national, state, and some district-level student achievement results, as well as results for different demographic groups. Academic performance gaps between African American and White students appear as early as age nine and persist through age 17, as measured by the NAEP (USDOE, 2019, 2020). The NAEP provides a benchmark for states to target efforts to improve student achievement and to ensure all students have equal and equitable opportunities to succeed as adults (USDOE, 2019, 2020). The NAEP assessments were designed to provide information on the changes in the basic achievement level of America's youth since the early 1970s (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016).

The NAEP assessments are administered nationally and report reading and mathematics performance of students at ages 9, 13, and 17 (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Musu-Gillette et al. reported the Black-White achievement gap narrowed in the 1970s and early 1980s but has not narrowed further since. There was no measurable difference between 1994 and 2014 for Hispanic students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). The Black-White reading achievement gap grew from 24 points in 1992 to 30 points in 2013 while there was no measurable difference in the Hispanic-White achievement gap which remained at 22 points (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). The Grade 12 average reading scale score for African American students dropped from 273 in 1992 to 268 in 2013 (p. 44).

Since 1990, the average mathematics scores for White students at all grade levels have been higher than scores for African American and Hispanic students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). The Black-White math achievement gap narrowed between 1990 and 2013, from 32 to 26 points with no measurable difference in the math achievement gap for Hispanic and White students (p. 49).

A growing disparity remains between the Nation's highest and lowest achievers in reading and mathematics between 2009 and 2019. From 2017 to 2019, there was a decrease in fourth grade reading achievement nationally, and there remained a 26-point gap between African American and White students. The 29-point gap in Hispanic and White students reflected no significant change during this same period (USDOE, 2019, 2020). A decrease in the reading achievement for eighth graders from 2017 to 2019 occurred for White, African American, and Hispanic students and reflected a 28-point Black-White gap and a 20-point Hispanic-White gap. Mathematics achievement during 2017-2019 showed no significant change; however, there was a score increase in fourth grade for Hispanic students, resulting in a 25-point Black-White gap and an 18-point Hispanic-White gap in fourth grade. The mathematics achievement gap in eighth grade was reported to be a 32-point Black-White gap and a 24-point Hispanic-White gap (USDOE, 2010, 2015, 2019, 2020).

*A Nation at Risk* (United States NCEE, 1983), the landmark report about the American public education system, released in 1983, painted a troubled picture and compared the mediocre performance of schools at that time as an act of war. Before this time, America's preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological



innovation was unchallenged (Jackson, 2017). In the decades after *A Nation at Risk* was published, both Black and White students-made important gains. These subgroups enrolled in more high-level courses in math and science and took advanced placement examinations. According to NCES, fewer students dropped out between Grades 10 and 12. However, African American students trailed White students despite these gains.

Irvine and Irvine (2007) suggested the *Nation at Risk* report has been strangely silent on the lack of educational progress of African American students since the release of the report. Irvine and Irvin stated:

1. African American students were three times as likely to be enrolled in a class for the educable mentally retarded, as were White students, but only one-half likely to be in a class for the gifted and talented.
2. NAEP data confirmed that although 53% of White 11th grade students could perform complex reading tasks, only 20% of African American students performed similarly.
3. The average SAT verbal score for African American students was 377 as compared to 476 for all other test takers.
4. One-half of African American students who were sophomores in 1980 had dropped out or graduated *high risk* by 1984. (Irvine, 1990, Irvine & Irvine, 2007, p. 298)

By age 13, African American children are more likely to perform below the most common grade level for their age (USDOE, 1995). Most 13-year-old students enter the eighth grade, but in 1989, 49% of 13-year-old African American males were in a lower

grade compared to 32% of their White peers. Students who repeat grades are at a greater risk of dropping out of school. African American and White students between the ages of 16 and 24 who had been retained were about equally likely to drop out of school in 1992 (USDOE, 1995). Young African American adults were much more likely to have repeated one or more grades (USDOE, 1995). The percentage of students retained between 1994 and 2014 decreased for African American students, from 4.5% to 3.0%, and for White students from 2.5% to 2 %. (USDOE, 1995).

Noguera (2012) argued that educational policy fails to acknowledge the multidimensional phenomenon that contributes to disparities in academic outcomes that correspond to race and class backgrounds of students. These phenomena include “unequal access to early childhood education (the preparation gap), inequities in school funding (the allocation gap), differences in the amount of support well-educated, affluent parents can provide versus poor less-educated parents (the parent gap)” (p. 1).

Additionally, Noguera (2012) suggested a teacher-student gap and a performance gap exist. The teacher-student gap is fueled by strained relations between students and teachers that result in the setting of lower expectations for poor and minority students. The performance gap is often determined by student performance compared to how they might have performed had they been motivated to do their best daily.

Noguera (2012) contended that America’s history of racial oppression and discrimination based on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century views that non-Whites “were genetically inferior and possessed lower levels of intellectual capacity than White people have contributed to low expectations and resulted in predictable achievement gaps” (p. 4).

Noguera (2012) maintained that this history of beliefs about the relationship between race and intelligence in the United States continues to be extremely relevant to efforts to close the achievement gap.

In 2012, Noguera argued that little progress will be made in addressing the achievement gap until the end of the debates regarding who or what is to blame. Noguera (2012) believed there must be a willingness to learn from schools where progress is being made. Noguera (2012) suggested that when the evidence is closely examined, gaps in achievement reflect the disparities in opportunities resulting from the differences in income, healthcare, and parental education. Exceptions are seen when poor African American children excel and do well, when wealthy White children do not, or when Asians are not good at math. For years, according to Noguera (2012), achievement gaps are a result of inequity in the form of underfunded and racially segregated schools most poor children of color are relegated to attend. This history corresponds with the American approach to school funding based on property taxes that generate revenue for public schools; wealthy communities can spend more money on their children than poor communities (Noguera, 2012). More is spent on children who come from families with the most resources, and the least is spent on students with the greatest need but the least resources (Noguera, 2012).

Racist thinking about intellectual capacity of different ethnic groups have contributed to the development of racist educational policies and practices of maintaining racially segregated schools by law or social convention (Noguera, 2012). According to Noguera (2012), schools throughout the United States to this day continue to be

characterized based on race and class to a higher degree as was done prior to the Brown decision in 1954. Noguera (2012) noted that the decision removed the requirement for African American, Mexican, Asian, and Native American children to attend racially segregated schools. Noguera (2012) contended that there is little evidence that policymakers consider the impact and influence these dimensions have on student learning.

Noguera (2012) found patterns in achievement vary considerably based on the make-up of the school or community the Black-White achievement gap demands the most attention, especially when the gaps between White and minority students widen by the third grade. The disparity is more pronounced when examining higher order thinking skills— “drawing meaning from text, drawing inferences beyond the literal text, and understanding rate and measurement” (Noguera, 2012, p. 4).

The experience of poverty compounds the experience of oppression and discrimination that is shared with more well-resourced African American youth (Reeves et al., 2016; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). Because African American youth have experienced excessive amounts of marginalization and environmental risk, it is important that the cultural values of collectivism and interdependence be examined to determine the role they play for African American youth to maintain healthy developmental trajectories (Quimby et al., 2018). To encourage ideal functioning for African American youth, given the marginalization and high incidence of environmental risk they face, it is important to focus on developmental assets literature, factors of aggression, self-esteem, and relationships with parents and schools (American Psychological Association, n.d.a). Self-

esteem development, a person's own assessment of self, potentially serves as a protective factor during environmental stressors commonly confronted by low-income, urban, African American communities (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). Studies involving adolescents of varied ethnicities demonstrate that self-esteem can protect against susceptibility to negative peer influence (Wild et al., 2004). Clasen and Brown (1985) defined peer influence as the "pressure to think or behave along certain peer-prescribed guidelines" (p. 452).

The National Bureau of Economic Research (Card & Rothstein, 2006) published statistical models for school and neighborhood segregation and concluded that the Black-White test score gap is related to neighborhood segregation. This report also concluded that neighborhood composition mattered more than school composition. Another finding revealed that schools with significant numbers of ethnically diverse students segregate within as students of color are assigned low-tracked classes while White students tend to be overrepresented in honors, Advanced Placement, and college preparatory classes (Card & Rothstein, 2006).

Hollins (1990) suggested that when attempting to raise the academic achievement level for inner-city students, one of three theoretical perspectives must be followed: (a) remediation or acceleration without regard to students' social or cultural background; (b) re-socializing urban students into mainstream behaviors, values, and attitudes while simultaneously teaching basic skills; and (c) facilitating learning by building on students' own social and cultural backgrounds. Hollins also addressed how teacher preparation is organized and implemented with respect to the three theoretical perspectives. Zeichner

(1991, 1993) argued that teacher education programs were based on a variety of traditions, including academic social efficiency, developmentalist, or reconstructionist approaches. Hollins' theoretical perspectives aligned with Zeichner's traditions, except for the social efficiency tradition. The social efficiency tradition focused on teacher education and the perceived power in the scientific study of teaching as a discipline that measured a fixed set of teaching skills that determined the proficiency of prospective teachers. Zeichner's academic tradition aligned with Hollins' first perspective, which focused on the academic abilities of the teachers. The developmental approach defined by Zeichner focuses on helping teachers to re-socialize students. Zeichner's social constructionist approach served to have teachers address issues relating to the persistence of social inequity as well as how education plays a role in social change.

### *Opportunity Gap*

Over the last 25 years, the social, economic, and educational outcomes of African American males have been more systematically devastating than any other racial, ethnic group or gender. According to the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2012), of all racial groups, African American males are least likely to achieve a high school diploma in four years. The 2009-2012 Schott Foundation report, citing data from 38 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, revealed that African American males had the lowest graduation rates among African American, Latino, White students. The African American graduation rate is 47% which is 28 % below that of White males.

According to the NCES report on the condition of education, the overall dropout rate decreased from 9.7% in 2006 to 5.3% in 2018 (USDOE, 2020). However, the

dropout rate remains high among African American students. The gap has narrowed, but when compared with the dropout rate of White students, the dropout rate remains high (USDOE, 2020). The Schott Foundation (2012) found that in states where African American populations are small, African American males are more likely to graduate than White males.

Public schools hold the promise of the American dream because at their best, they are places of opportunity where economically disadvantaged students learn the skills necessary to thrive in today's global economy and to advance beyond their parents' income and education (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). When poor students encounter inequality in the public school, the academic disadvantage they sometimes bring reinforces the school readiness gaps that grow more than they narrow during the next eight years of public schooling (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). Schools possess the potential to be the catalyst for increasing equality of opportunity and closing gaps in opportunity, support, and resources to ensure that by the end of high school, all students are prepared for college or career endeavors, regardless of their parents' income or level of education.

For many generations, most American children achieved a higher standard of living than their parents. Access to education and educational achievement were the vehicles that made this possible. By 1972, more than 90 % of male high school graduates were able to begin promising careers and were working full-time according to a follow-up survey in 1979 (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). Duncan and Murnane (2014) declared that "high school diplomas were an indication of the kind of intergenerational mobility

that was a source of pride for most Americans. Nearly one-third of the graduates had already completed more schooling than either of their parents” (p.128).

The world demands much more to succeed—from greater parental oversight to exposure to a wider range of adults and experiences, to more income so that parents can cultivate the skills, interests, and pursuits that help set a child apart in a highly competitive economy (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). Technological change and globalization are important factors in the eroding labor-market position for workers with less education. Sluggish growth in college completion has been due to weak academic preparation of high school graduates and a sticker price of college that has more than doubled in the last 20 years. The slowdown in the rate of growth of the educational achievements of American young adults coincided with a growing divergence in educational outcomes between children from higher- and lower-income families (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). African American women earn substantially more bachelor’s degrees than African American men. The difference doubled between 1977 and 1991. In 1991 only one-quarter of African American students who dropped out of high school between 1990 and 1991 were unemployed. African American males with nine to 11 years of schooling earned 35% less than their counterparts who graduated (Duncan & Murnane, 2014).

In his speech during the 1963 March on Washington, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir” (p. 1) The American dream is encompassed in



schools, but schools in America are too often segregated by socioeconomic status, and despite the rulings of *Brown v. Board of Education*, schools are places of unequal rather than equal opportunity (Putnam, 2015), especially for poor students of color. The problem with the American dream is that from its founding the “we” in “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” has not included all of us who would eventually consider ourselves as American citizens (Hannah-Jones, 2019). The “we” did not, and in many instances still does not include “all” men, but only White men, and the “men” referred to was not originally inclusive of women.

The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, adopted March 30, 1870, granted the right to vote to African American men. However, due to poll taxes and literacy tests, for all practical purposes, the fundamental right to vote was denied until the Voting Rights Act was signed by President Lyndon Johnson on August 6, 1965 (Drexler, 2019; U.S. National Archives, 2019). It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution was ratified on August 18, 1920, that American women were granted the right to vote, but that right applied only to White women (Drexler, 2019).

A well-established cause of the opportunity gap is the extreme isolation of poor students in economically disadvantaged schools (Putnam, 2015). Students of high socioeconomic status and students of low socioeconomic status live in a separate and unequal America today (Oakes et al., 2004), very much like the pre-1954 America before *Brown v. Board of Education* (Putnam, 2015). Too often a child’s fate is sealed when it is

unfairly tied to his or her *choice* of parents, the side of town, and the zip code in which he or she is born and reside (Putnam, 2015). This fate is sealed for the poor, regardless of talent and potential, because opportunities for nurturing and developing the talent to the fullest are limited from birth.

Oftentimes, students of low socioeconomic status have no other option than to attend schools that lack a strong academic culture and are staffed by less experienced teachers who attempt to teach students needing the most support to learn and grow (Putnam, 2015). Many people concur with Putnam (2015) who summarized the thoughts that too often racial intolerance, economic inequalities, unemployment or underemployment, lack of education, and violence are the factors that impact life experiences. Putnam (2015) noted that these factors contribute to the marginalization of the African American and Latino males in the United States (Dwyer, 1994; Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993; Gilder, 1995). The Schott Foundation (2012) contended that outcomes for young African American boys and young men do not reflect their potential or abilities, but they are a result of the opportunity gap—denying them equitable supports and resources needed to access, to be fully engaged, and to succeed. This opportunity gap is the root cause of the achievement gap (Holzman et al., 2012).

### *Poverty*

Students living in poverty need high-quality instruction, which is difficult to achieve within a segregated educational system that reinforces the inequality of school quality and resources (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). High quality, effective teaching is more important than investments in buildings and in technology (Phillips & Putnam, 2016).

Equalizing opportunity for both economically advantaged and disadvantaged students must include not only school quality and resources but must also include opportunities for all students to be welcomed into the school environment and valued by the teachers who serve them. Both advantaged and disadvantaged students should be provided the opportunity to prepare for and participate in advanced courses and should be encouraged to set goals that involve higher education (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). To recruit and retain the best teachers for schools serving the majority of economically disadvantaged students, the challenge is to make urban schools attractive places to work. Salary incentives or bonuses are a draw, especially for teachers with a strong sense of efficacy when they are empowered to make a difference each day (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). Professional development and evaluative feedback are other strategies for improving the quality of teaching. Teachers and teaching improve when serving in an environment that supports collaboration and improvement.

The United States Census Bureau uses two methods to measure poverty: (a) the official poverty measure and the (b) Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM). The official poverty measure, developed in 1960, uses a set of thresholds for different sizes or compositions of families compared to before-tax cash income to determine poverty status (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). The SPM adds to the family income, provided by the official poverty measure, the value of benefits received from government programs designed to assist low-income families. Taxes and expenses (child-care, medical expenses) are subtracted and poverty thresholds for differences in housing are adjusted. In 2015, the number of Americans living in neighborhoods with extreme poverty had risen from 7.2

million to 13.8 million—more than 90 % since 2000 (Jargowsky, 2015). In 2013, 39 %, the largest percentage of children under 18 living in poverty, were African American children (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016).

According to the official poverty measure, from 2000-2013, African American children living in poverty increased from 31 to 39%; Hispanic children from 28% to 30%; and White children from 9% to 10% (p. 20). There was no measurable difference between the SPM for African American children (28%) and Hispanic children (27%) in 2013. However, only 9% of White children under 18 were living in poverty. Living in poverty during early childhood is associated with below average academic performance that begins in kindergarten, extends through high school, and leads to a lower-than-average high school completion rate.

Education policy must reflect the changing demographics of American youth. In public schools, children of color continue to increase in percentage: 37% in 1997; 50% in 2014; and 55% projected by 2024 (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). The percentage of English Language Learners (ELL) has also grown rapidly since 1998, and that trend is projected to continue. Additionally, there has been a rise in the number of children growing up in poverty--from one in seven in 1969 to one in five in 2010. In 1992, 46 % of African American children compared to 16 % of White children lived in families with income levels below the poverty line (USD OE, 2019). Public schools are charged more than ever to meet the needs of children of color, children whose first language is not English, and children who are poor (Phillips & Putnam, 2016).

Payne and Slocumb (2011) found that boys living in poverty commit most violent crimes, participate in drug trade, and are accountable for juvenile incarceration rates. Schools should be a safe place for boys in poverty, however, these boys find early on that school is not a place where they can thrive and therefore, they tend to drop out by the time they reach middle or high school. Teachers are often unaware of the important ways that boys and girls learn differently and how those differences impact teaching and learning across the curriculum. According to Payne and Slocumb (2011), male dropouts cost society tens of billions of dollars, creating a crisis. Gurian (2011) suggested, in a foreword written for Payne and Slocumb's *Boys in Poverty*, that "If we can educate boys raised in poverty to become successful men, we will do something not only educationally mandated, but also socially and personally heroic" (p. ix).

#### *Multi-Cultural Education*

More than 60 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) students of color are more segregated than ever before (Bell, 1987; Hawley, 1988; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Orfield, 1988; Schofield, 1989). In 1991, African American students represented 12% of the nation's population, yet they were the majority in 21 of the 22 largest urban school districts in our country. Taeuber (1990) observed that school desegregation increased White flight instead of providing more and better educational opportunities. African American and Latino students continued to be underserved by the public-school system which defined a model desegregation program as one in which the Whites were happy enough to remain in the system regardless of whether African American or other students of color achieved or even remained in it. In these model desegregation programs,

the academic performance and achievement for students of color had failed to improve while their rates of suspension, expulsion, and dropping out continued to climb. To identify a school or program as non-White diminishes its status or reputation. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1994; as cited in Dixson et al., 2017) noted that the term urban is now synonymous to African American, and urban schools tend to lack the status and reputation of suburban schools. When urban students move to or are bused to suburban schools, these schools' reputation and status tend to decline.

In 1979, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) drafted standards and began to require institutions applying for accreditation to “show evidence of planning for multicultural education in their curricula” (Gollnick, 1991, p. 226). These standards were to be implemented by 1981. The original standards were revised in 1990 and in the review of the first 59 college and university teacher education programs seeking accreditation under the new standards, only eight were found in full compliance with these multicultural education requirements. The programs were found deficient in the areas of student admission (54.6%) and faculty qualifications and assignments (57.6%). In terms of professional studies, 44% of this group was deficient, and 32.2% was deficient in clinical and field-based experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Thirty-six years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Grant and Secada (1990) reviewed multicultural teacher education programs and revealed that few empirical studies existed to determine program effectiveness. Ladson-Billings (1995) reviewed multicultural teacher education programs and found few were grounded in theoretical and conceptual principles of multicultural education. Most programs were

content with adding multicultural content in lieu of adjusting “the philosophy and structure of their teacher education programs” (p. 12).

The 2000 United States Census data reported that the White population was decreasing as the percentage of ethnic groups were increasing (Irvine & Irvine, 2007). Despite these numbers, segregation continued to be on the rise (Laoso, 2001; Orfield et al., 2002, 2003). The 2000 United States Census data also revealed that the typical White American resided in a neighborhood that was 89% White and only 7% African American. Conversely, the average African American person lived in a neighborhood that was 51% African American and 33% White (Metropolitan Center for Public Education, 2005).

The average White student attended a school that was 80% White. The Metropolitan Center for Public Education (2005, as cited in Irvine & Irvine, 2007) documented that “school segregation is a result of residential segregation that has been supported by decades of reversals of school busing cases, particularly in medium to large urban areas” (Irvine & Irvine, 2007, p. 298). According to the Center on Education Policy (2006) and Orfield and Lee (2006), the average African American student attended a school that was 67% African American and 75% poor.

#### *Graduation Data*

The 2009-2010 Schott Foundation graduation rate data analysis indicated African American males had the lowest graduation rate among African American, Latino, White, non-Latino students in 38 of the 50 states (Holzman et al. 2012). The data revealed Latino males had the lowest in 11 states. The 2012 *Urgency of Now Report* revealed that only 52% of African American males and 58% of Latino males nationally graduate from high

school in four years compared to 78% of White non-Latino males (Holzman et al. 2012). This was the first time, however, that more than half of the African American males in the ninth grade graduated with a regular diploma within four years. The increase, however, demonstrated a three-percentage point decrease over the last decade, from a 29% to a 26%-point graduation gap between African American and White males. A 20-point percentage difference defined the Latino/White male graduation gap (Holzman et al. 2012). The largest gaps between graduation rates for African American and White non-Latino males were in four states—District of Columbia, 50%; Iowa, 49%; Nebraska, 43%; and New York, 42 %. African American males achieve high graduation rates in Maine, Utah, Vermont, Idaho with relatively small African American populations. The graduation rate for Latino males is highest in Alaska, Vermont, and New Hampshire. The Schott Foundation’s data indicated African American males performed better in places where they were not confined to understaffed or under sourced districts or schools. The study also revealed that African American males were more likely to produce similar or better results when provided similar opportunities as their White peers (Holzman et al. 2012).

A decade ago, Georgia, New York, South Carolina, Delaware, and the District of Columbia ranked in the bottom 10 in graduation rates for both African American and Latino males (Holzman et al., 2012). Holzman et al. (2012) suggested these states be among the first group of states to be investigated, revamped, and monitored because their support-based reform models limited the impact of poverty and resourced disparities. A common reaction to the dismal graduation rate data has been a leap toward the formation



and promotion of negative public perceptions of African American males' inherent abilities and stereotypical roles in society. Despite the “evidence of an unconscionable level of willful neglect and unequal resource allocations by federal, state, and local entities (Howard, 2008), and a level of indifference by many community leaders...many Black males progress to further education and work in communities across the nation making positive impacts” (Holzman et al., 2012, p. 28). Their accomplishments, however, are not highlighted as much as the negative perceptions and could be far more of an asset to communities, states, and the nation. The Schott Foundation noted efforts to support and encourage these students to stay in school, learn, and succeed in life is needed (Holzman et al., 2012).

The United States Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for public high schools has been collected since 2010-2011 and increased from 79% to 85% in 2016-2017 (USDOE, 2019). The ACGR is calculated by identifying the group of first-time ninth grade students in a school year. The cohort is adjusted by adding students who transfer into the cohort after the ninth grade and subtracting those students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or who pass away (USDOE, 2019). The ACGR represents the percentage of students in this cohort who graduate within four years with a regular high school diploma. The ACGRs for African American and Hispanic students were below the United States average, 78% and 80% respectively. The ACGR for African American students ranged from 65% in Minnesota to 87% in West Virginia. Only four states—Alabama, Maryland, Texas, and West Virginia—reported rates that were higher than the United States average ACGR (Education Week, 2019; USDOE, 2019). For

Hispanic students, the average ACGR ranged from 66% in Minnesota to 92% in West Virginia, and these students had a higher than U.S. ACGR in six states—Alabama, Arkansas, Maine, Texas, Vermont, and West Virginia (Education Week, 2019; USDOE, 2019). In the 2016-2017 school year, Georgia remained among the bottom 10 states, and although there has been improvement with an average ACGR of 80.6 %, the ACGR for African American students (77.8 %) and for Hispanic students (73.6 %) continue to lag behind the White student ACGR average of 84 % (Education Week, 2019; Gewertz, 2019; USDOE, 2019). Georgia’s College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) reported a 2019 graduation rate of 82 %, however, only 57 % of these graduates are demonstrating college or career readiness, with African American (45.27 %) and Hispanic (45%) students lagging (GaDOE, 2020).

#### *Dropout Data*

A population survey in 2015 indicated that the dropout rate decreased from 10.9% in 2000 to 5.9% in 2015. From 2010 to 2015 the dropout rate fell from 7.4% to 5.9% (McFarland et al., 2017). During this same time, the male status dropout rate declined from 12.0% to 6.3%, while the female status dropout rate declined from 9.9% to 5.4%. The status dropout rate was lower for White youth than for African American youth from 2000 to 2015, and the rates for both groups were lower than the rate for Hispanic youth (USDOE, 2019). In this 15-year period, the status dropout rate showed a narrowing of the gap between White and African American youth from 6.2 percentage points in 2000 to 1.9 percentage points in 2015. The gap between White and Hispanic youth resulted in a narrowing from 20.9 percentage points in 2000 to 4.6 percentage points in 2015.

Hispanic status dropout rate decreased from 32% to 12% from 1990 to 2013 (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). During this same time, the African American rate decreased from 13% to 7% and the White rate decreased from 9% to 5%. The Hispanic dropout rate remained higher than both the Black and White status dropout rates. In 2013, however, the high school completion rates for both Black and Brown students remained lower than the completion rate for White students, between 18- and 24-year-old (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Any 16- to 24-year-old who is not enrolled in school and who has not earned a high school credential (a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a GED certificate) is considered a high school dropout and is counted as part of the state status dropout rate (USDOE, 2019).

Examination of class and gender does not account for the extraordinarily high rates of school dropout, suspensions, expulsions, and failure among African American and Latino males. Smith (1993) insisted “blackness matters in more detailed ways” (p. 76). According to Cooper et al. (2011), as students move through primary and secondary school to college, the numbers of immigrant, ethnic minority, and low-income youth who continue through high school to college shrinks dramatically and disproportionately. The high school to college transition is a critical process, and when successfully navigated, it establishes a firm foundation for students’ educational progress and success in becoming productive and contributing citizens (Cooper, et al., 2011).

### *Strategies and Interventions*

Students living in poverty require a rigorous and engaged curriculum that focuses on: (a) early literacy and early numeracy that is both knowledge and vocabulary rich; (b)

higher order thinking about issues that are relevant and add meaning to their lives; and (c) rich content that includes and integrates science, social studies, art, and music (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). The reading achievement gap between African American and White students was 26 points in 2013, which was not measurably different from the gap that existed in 1992. The White-Hispanic gap narrowed from 26 points in 1992 to 21 points in 2013 (Musu-Gillette et a., 2016). Four strategies were recommended by Phillips and Putnam (2016) for poor students who start school far behind: (a) tutoring, (b) wraparound supports for youth, (c) enrichment and extra-curriculars, and (d) reinforcing the link of school to work. These strategies are best provided within the context of an extended school day or school year (Phillips & Putnam, 2016).

Professionally trained, culturally competent and responsive tutors are a proven strategy for improving academic performance and the test scores of economically challenged students. Tutors are found to be effective both as early warning monitors to identify barriers in the home that are not conducive to studying, signs of depression, or other socio-psychological issues. Serving as academic guides during the high school years, tutors help prepare first generation college students for navigating through college (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). These caring and consistent adult figures share their social, intellectual, and cultural capital with their students. Wraparound support within the school community reveals potential promise, especially when caring, and competent adults are matched to students; when student's strengths and needs are assessed; and when students are referred to service providers in an efficient manner (Phillips & Putnam, 2016).

K-12 schools foster human development and human relationships. It is at school where children first encounter society and it is within this institution that children learn how to be citizens and members of society (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary for schools to be welcoming and make every effort to scaffold the learning potential of students from all backgrounds. Phillips and Putnam (2016) cited certain psychological interventions, including “growth mindset” that asserts that the brain strengthens with practice. Dweck (2006) noted that everyone, every human, is born with an intense drive to learn. Dweck divided people into two categories: (a) learners who possess a growth mindset and (b) non-learners who possess a fixed mindset. Findings revealed that non-learners decide early it is not worth the effort if it is too hard. Findings also revealed that learners are like babies; they do not worry about making mistakes or about humiliating themselves. Learners see success as stretching, growing, and becoming smarter in the process; they embrace a challenge and even though they experience the pain of failure, they are not defined by it (Dweck, 2006). Their growth mindset allows them to learn from failure or mistakes as they continually seek success. Growth mindset is a continuous journey; fixed mindset is a destination.

Phillips and Putnam (2016) argued that it is important to help students living in poverty see that early years of school are hard for everyone while helping them to see the relevance of school to their future lives. They declared that affirming the underlying competencies students living in poverty bring will help them to overcome the negative stereotypes ingrained about race and gender that suppress and impede their overall achievement and test score performance. Additionally, they avowed that a supportive

culture that provides a greater understanding of the “growth mindset and a greater sense of agency” (p. 39) might give students living in poverty a greater sense of belonging in school (Phillips & Putnam, 2016).

“Black [and Brown] students need teachers who understand that they are capable of the full range of anxieties and insecurities, greatness and success, hilarious moments and generous surprises,” declared Jackson (2017, p. 3). This ability to treat students like human beings and express love does not rely on race. Jackson noted that he has many nonblack colleagues who see students of color as having incredible potential and are powerful advocates for them. Lertora et al. (2019) employed principles of RCT to create a safe environment for counselors in training (CIT) to learn and to practice basic counseling techniques. When used in counselor education environments, Lertora et al stated counselor educators can:

- (a) encourage growth-fostering relationships through “real plays” in class for students to authentically engage in relationships with one another;
- (b) display mutual empathy by modeling reflections informed by a counselor’s personal reactions (i.e., somatic reactions, emotional reactions, etc.);
- (c) foster authenticity in their classrooms through facilitating small group and large group discussions;
- (d) help heal disconnection by encouraging CITs to sit in uncomfortable emotions and to continue reflections even when inaccurate; and
- (e) address any misleading assumptions of counseling that may be detrimental to counselor growth. (p. 10)

During the days of segregation in Georgia, African American educators inspired African American children to succeed in a challenging and inequitable school climate

while creating a system for advocacy for the children they served (Walker, 2019). In *The Lost Education of Horace Tate*, Walker (2018) contended that African American educators wanted the desegregated schools to provide students with all the structures they had created to sustain students in the segregated schools plus provide them with the equality and resources they had been denied. These educators had encouraged their students to aspire and to believe that they could be anything they wanted to be despite the segregated world they lived in. These educators helped to build a resilience to overcome the daily challenges that still confront African American children today while also preparing us for a world that did not currently exist. They never imagined that integration would require sacrificing inspirational and nurturing educational practices that encouraged children to achieve and that cultivated resilience for access to “a desegregation compromise between the advocates for integration and the defenders of segregation” that allowed Black bodies into White school buildings but failed to fully address the actual educational needs and interests of African American children (Walker, 2019, p. 16).

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

Elias (2013) defined the school-to-prison pipeline as the discipline policies used in public school districts across the country that force students into the criminal justice system when suspended or expelled at distressing rates. Skiba (2000) found that students of color, including those with disabilities, were far more likely than their White peers to be suspended, expelled, or arrested for the same kind of conduct their White peers exhibited at school. Elias found that African American and Latino males continued to be

sent to the office in numbers far greater than their counterparts. Mujic (2015) concurred with Elias (2013) and found that African American students continued to be suspended at disproportionate rates.

The United States Government Accountability Office (2018) found that African American students represent 39% of students suspended, although they account for only 15.5% of all public-school students (Aguilar, 2019). Mujic (2015) discovered that in 2012, 48.3% of African American males had been suspended at least once (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). This number more than doubled the percentage for Hispanic (22.6%) and White (21.4%) males who had ever been suspended. For females, African American females were more than twice the percentage (29%) of Hispanic (11.8%) and White (9.4%) females who had ever been suspended (Mujic, 2015).

Noguera (2012) cited a Texas study, *Breaking School Rules*, that followed incoming seventh graders for three years, or more. This study revealed some shocking findings that documented nearly 60% of the students in the study were suspended at least once (including In-School Suspension or ISS), and 31% of these students were suspended a minimum of five times. These findings revealed that African American students were over-represented among those who were suspended, and their punishment were the “harshest forms of discipline, including placement in alternative classrooms” (Noguera, 2012, p. 4). Of the African American and Latino males in this study, 83 and 74%, respectively, were suspended at least once. The study revealed that one in seven students was suspended as many as eleven times. Even though students perform less well than their peers when suspension as punishment excludes them from school, policy makers



focus little attention to this connection between the discipline gap and achievement, thereby, ignoring this as one example of the multiple dimensions of the achievement gap in America (Noguera, 2012).

Implicit bias contributes to the high rates of suspensions and expulsions of students of color, according to researchers at Stanford University (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Findings indicated implicit bias led teachers to punish African American males more harshly. Interestingly, findings indicated African American teachers had equally high rates of unconscious bias regarding disciplining students of color.

The ACLU (n.d.) contended that numerous policies and practices within the public schools and the juvenile justice system must be challenged because children should be “educated, not incarcerated” (p. 1). The school-to-prison pipeline begins in failing schools with inadequate resources including overcrowded classrooms, lack of qualified teachers or ineffective teachers, and insufficient funding to provide supplemental supports: (a) counselors, (b) special education services, and (c) textbooks (ACLU, n.d.). Failing public schools provide second-rate educational environments that fail to meet the individual needs of students, and therefore, contribute to the disengagement and dropout rates that tend to lead to eventual involvement with the court system (ACLU, n.d.). African American students are more likely to face a disorderly learning environment than their White peers, although they share similar attitudes about the teaching quality in their schools (USDOE, 1995). Many failing schools with limited resources increasingly rely on police or resource officers to maintain discipline, and the

students are more likely to experience school-based arrests for non-violent offences such as disruptive behavior (ACLU, n.d.).

The Southern Poverty Law Center, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Dignity in Schools, and representatives from the Departments of Education and Justice across the United States provided testimony to a subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee to shine a light on what had typically been a local responsibility. The first federal hearing, held in 2013 by Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL), played an important role in addressing the culture of zero tolerance policies prevalent in many schools in the United States which denies children of their fundamental rights to a free and appropriate education (ACLU, n.d.). Losen (2011) found that suspension rates have increased since the early 1970s and suspension has become a regular disciplinary tool. Losen further noted and concluded that behavior is not improved when children are removed from school, but removal from school does increase the likelihood that students will eventually drop out of school and wind up behind bars. Cregor (2012; as cited in NAACP LDF, 2012) contended suspension as a disciplinary tool must be confronted to reduce the dropout rate and close the achievement gap.

Most students who enter the juvenile justice system never graduate from high school (ACLU, n.d.). Harlow (2003) reported that 75 % of state prison inmates dropped out before completing their high school diplomas. Arum and Beattie (n.d.) concluded that males who graduate high school with a D average are 14 times more likely to become incarcerated than males who graduate with an A average.

### *The Nontraditional Educational Reform Model*

Although access to education in the United States has improved for students across race, class, ethnicity, and gender, progress for all demographic groups has not kept pace with access (Mujic, 2015). Much of the improved access places the African American student at the center since *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Cumming v. Richmond County Board of Education* (1899) gave communities the right to deny Black students access to a public education (Mujic, 2015). Segregated schools are re-emerging, despite *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). White schools are getting whiter and Black schools in poor, inner city communities and neighborhoods continue to have huge achievement gaps and as much as a 20-point gap in graduation rates (Mujic, 2015). “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must be what the community wants for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy” (Dewey, 1907, p. 36).

To remedy African American males’ underachievement in traditional school settings, schools and programs were specifically established to educate African American males and reverse their underperformance (Tatum, 2005). Traditional schools have exposed the African American male and other students of color to teachers who do or say things on a day-to-day basis that provoke anger in their students. According to Pierce (1970), these micro-aggressions have allowed teachers to project their stereotypical images on African American males. Nobles (1987) described a psychometric warfare in the traditional school setting when test scores are used to support the belief that the African American student’s capacity to learn is different from their White peers.

Traditional school settings have historically placed the African American in special education classes at disproportionate numbers rather than provide the culturally relevant and appropriate instructional practices needed to support their education. Too often, traditional schools for students in poverty are defined by underprepared teachers, inadequate facilities, low teacher expectations, and ineffective administrators. Additionally, despite being only 12% of the public-school population, African American males account for almost 40% of the suspensions that occur. The traditional school environment is perceived by many African American males as unwelcoming and volatile, causing them to perceive themselves as victims (Tatum, 2005). According to Tatum this perception, real or imagined, has an impact on reading and overall academic achievement for students of color.

Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) declared the emphasis on alternative education programming was likely to increase due to: (a) disturbing statistics on dropout rates, (b) school failure, (c) delinquency, (d) abuse and neglect, (e) substance abuse, (f) teen pregnancy, and (g) an educational structure that is often slow to respond to calls for reform. Katsiyannis and Williams recommended the following guidelines for establishing or refining existing alternative programs:

1. Ensure a broad-based representation of students, school personnel, and community representatives to examine policies and practices that might be negatively affecting student performance.

2. Engage in collaborative agreements between the school and other agencies (including local businesses) when designing/implementing alternative education programs.
3. Provide necessary training and ongoing support.
4. Allow for flexible programming and scheduling.
5. Implement programming in the most inclusive environment possible.
6. Establish entry and exit criteria that are clear and understood by all relevant parties.
7. Provide for systematic program evaluation efforts. (p. 283)

Educational policy that focuses on raising standards, improving assessments, and evaluating teachers are not effective drivers to make significant changes in conditions for students needing more student-centered support (Holzman et al., 2012).

Nontraditional reform programs provide over-aged and under-credited students with the opportunity to earn a high school diploma. Standards-based reform models use practices that make it practically impossible for educators to meet the needs of students who do not fit the *standard student* criteria and engage them in a meaningful learning process. A standards-based reform model that is focused on raising the bar and assessing who makes the cut creates winners and losers. A supports-based reform model provides for and strategically aligns the necessary resources so that each student can reach the bar (Holzman et al., 2012). A supports-based reform model focuses on creating the learning environment and the conditions in which a critical mass of students of color and all

students can learn, succeed, and reach the standards with options to achieve the American dream (Holzman et al., 2012).

Traditional schools tend to operate within one mold, as if every student learns the same way, under the same conditions. However, to ensure all students are afforded the free and appropriate education that has been the promise of public education in America, schools must adapt to meet the needs of modern-day students (Hurst, 1994). D'Angelo and Zemanick (2007) proclaim that in the nontraditional high school reform model setting, educators must be willing to think outside the box to meet the educational needs for students who have been left behind, failing multiple courses, being disruptive if they showed up, and eventually dropping out altogether. Although the curriculum conforms to and aligns with state academic standards, the nontraditional high school reform model setting allows flexibility for teachers to accommodate the varied grade and achievement levels students who have not been successful in traditional school settings often bring to the table (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2007).

A nontraditional high school reform model serves different purposes for different groups and provides the last opportunity for students to: (a) earn a diploma before dropping out, (b) prove they can turn things around and return to the traditional setting, or (3) recover credits and get back on track for graduation (Bickford, 2001.) When teachers and adults in the nontraditional high school setting practice a *give respect to receive respect* philosophy, relationships and rapport are intentionally built. Teachers in the nontraditional high school setting teach not only content; they also serve as mentors and job coaches, satisfying the culturally competent and responsive human need for

belonging and establishing a feeling of school connectedness (Ferris-Berg & Schroeder, 2003). Behavior issues that may have been of concern in the traditional setting are rarely exhibited in the nontraditional setting (Guerin & Denti, 1999).

### *Twilight School*

Twilight school is a nontraditional reform model that addresses the needs of students who have not been successful in traditional settings where they were expected to fit the mold (Ferris-Berg & Schroeder, 2003). Twilight offers a different atmosphere with individual attention, personalized learning, and a focus on skills for success in the world. It has become a necessary alternative to dropping out of school for students, many of whom had been given up on in the traditional setting (Ferris-Berg & Schroeder, 2003). The Twilight nontraditional reform model serves students with such issues including truancy, chronic suspension, multiple repeated grades, and even those returning from outside placement (i.e., juvenile detention or another alternative educational placement). Twilight serves different purposes for different groups of students: The focus is on academics and in many places, a minimum of 20 hours of work is required, and if no work is completed, attendance in a vocational-technical school program is required. Educators serve as instructors as well as job coaches and mentors. Opportunity is often made available for students to attend school functions such as pep rallies, award ceremonies, dances, or the prom, satisfying the need for belonging and feeling part of the group (Ferris-Berg & Schroeder, 2003). A home school connection is made during luncheons held for parents and students to become acquainted with school staff and to discuss the commitment to treat students with respect and provide a fresh start, regardless

of past experiences in schools (Downs, 1999). Twilight programs acknowledge that a different approach to classroom instruction and innovative instructional methods that reduce behavioral issues are needed. The instructional methods include the use of software for individualized and personalized educational programming (Anastos, n.d.).

Some lecturing may be used as part of the direct instruction based on students' level and ability. Individualized and personalized educational programming allow students generally reluctant toward academic achievement to exceed and excel without being stigmatized or embarrassed. These options create momentums of confidence for underachieving students who have had few opportunities to feel successful in the traditional school setting. Because educators in the Twilight setting tend to think outside the box, students discover they can learn and grow when provided the opportunities to learn in their own best ways (Finders, 2000).

The Twilight Academy concept was born when research confirmed that the antiquated approach, one size fits all, had become less effective and educators began using common sense to adapt education processes to address the different needs of modern-day students. (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2007). Traditional educational environments have contributed to a growing number of students being left behind, failing multiple courses, being disruptive if they showed up for school, and eventually dropping out altogether. The Twilight Academy is housed in a traditional high school building; however, it provides an alternative to dropping out for many students the traditional system had written off (Ferris-Berg & Schroeder, 2003).



The Twilight alternative high school offers small class sizes and strong instructional support that is student focused and personalized for students who have not experienced success in the traditional school setting. Typically, schedules are flexible and extend into the late afternoon to accommodate students who find it a challenge to attend during the traditional school day. The resources and tools provided in the nontraditional setting prepare students to either return to their home schools or complete a program of study for post-secondary education or career endeavors (Nassau BOCES, 2021).

Nontraditional programs such as Twilight are often the last and best opportunity for high quality instruction in a nurturing yet demanding environment. Educators in the Twilight setting constantly challenge students to reach academic and life potential through focused and diligent effort and by establishing relationships and building rapport through open communication with administrators, faculty and staff, peers, and community partners. Some Twilight programs are open to overaged students with few credits as well as to adult learners who wish to earn their high school equivalency (Trenton Public Schools, 2018).

Twilight offers a customized and personalized education plan for students that fit individual life schedules, understanding that a traditional school day diploma path is not the perfect fit for everyone (Kokomo Schools, 2021). Educators serving in Twilight programs sacrifice time to help students aged 16-20 to get diplomas and find a path to succeed in life through courses aligned to state standards with a requirement to pass end-of-course assessments. Students may attend full- or part-time if they are recovering courses needed while attending a traditional program full-time. However, they are

required to abide by the student code of conduct, adhere to the dress code, and wear identification cards always (Savannah-Chatham Public Schools, 2020). Graduation within four years is the goal of Twilight, if feasible. Committed students within a few credits of graduating are supported in their efforts to recover credits to get back on track to graduate (Guilford County Schools, NC, 2002-2021).

In the Twilight Academy, educators must be willing to think outside the box, realizing that all kids can learn, although not all kids learn in the same way (Finders, 2000). Most of the students being served in Twilight programs are students who have experienced limited academic success in the traditional school setting. The success of the Twilight program hinges on an innovative approach that removes the traditional lecture and take notes scenario and includes individualized, personalized educational programming that incorporates differentiated instructional strategies and computer programs (Anastos, n.d.).

The greatest success of Twilight programs is the graduation of students predicted to have had little chance of graduation by their former teachers (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2007). The nontraditional school day reflects improvement in the level of instruction provided due to decreased classroom disruptions and distractions. Parents are supportive and thankful that the Twilight staff never gave up on their children who had been told they would never earn a diploma (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2007). After one year of successful implementation of Twilight school, there was a voluntary pending list of students desiring to attend the program (Anastos, n.d.). According to Anastos (n.d.) student outcomes improved to the extent that in the first year, 11 of 12 students eligible to

graduate actually graduated. Students worked through the summer on the jobs they held during the program, and first-year teachers serving in the Twilight program made substantial improvement.

*The Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI).*

AHSI is a network of youth development organizations (AHSI, n.d.). AHSI, supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is committed to creating educational opportunities for students who have not experienced success in traditional high school settings. The goal of AHSI is to develop programs that will “prepare young people through programs characterized by rigor, relevance, and relationships, to graduate from high school and achieve college success” (AHSI, n.d., p. 1). Indicators that provide evidence of progress in quality high school alternatives include: (a) increased high school graduation rates, (b) decreased dropout rates, (c) higher rates of college entry, and (d) initial signs that students considered at-risk for dropping out are on track to succeed and complete post-secondary education (Genao, 2010). AHSI schools possess a universal set of distinguishers in their design, including: (a) authentic learning; (b) teaching and performance assessment; (c) personalized school culture; (d) shared leadership and responsibility; (e) supportive partnerships; and (f) a focus on the students’ future (AHSI, n.d.). These distinguishers link directly to program goals that reduce dropout rates, increase college entry, and provide early indicators of post-secondary education success (National League of Cities, 2021).

## *Challenges*

Relationship building is the major challenge in getting students to trust the Twilight program staff and teachers and in convincing them that the program is their opportunity to attain a high school diploma (Ferris-Berg & Schroeder, 2003). Building relationships creates a foundation that encourages resilience and perseverance and breeds success that helps to maintain consistent rosters (Anastos, n.d.). Much time must be invested in building relationships and in convincing the students that Twilight could be the key to their future success in life. Once trust is established and the students begin to see that the staff and teachers demonstrate a genuine concern for their success and well-being, they begin exhibiting confidence and performing at academic levels once thought impossible (Ferris-Berg & Schroeder, 2003).

Student discipline is viewed by critics and skeptics as one of the major challenges in establishing Twilight programs, since many of the students attending twilight programs exhibited discipline problems in the traditional school setting. In the Twilight setting, adults practice a give respect to receive respect philosophy which is, unfortunately, a new experience for most students served (Ferris-Berg & Schroeder, 2003). Getting students to trust the staff and teachers in Twilight school is a bigger challenge than behavior. Twilight administrators and staff intentionally build relationships and rapport, which consistently improves behavior. Student discipline gradually becomes a minor issue when students are treated with the respect human beings deserve, rather than as behavior problems. Students with the most chronic behavior concerns in the traditional school settings rarely exhibit behavior issues in the Twilight school setting (Guerin & Denti, 1999).

Twilight programs require the curriculum to align and mirror state academic standards and be flexible enough to address and accommodate the varied grade and achievement levels served (Anastos, n.d.). Finding a curriculum that conforms to this mold is another challenge. It is accomplished, however, through the planning and flexibility of classroom teachers and through the use of computer software. The software allows teachers the ability to tailor daily lessons to address the ability levels of each student (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2007). Emerging research that suggests that the mixing of face-to-face instruction and technological instruction is more effective than face-to-face instruction only (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2007; Phillips & Putnam, 2016). Phillips and Putnam (2016) maintained that there is evidence that few educated adults rarely succeed in purely online courses and expressed skepticism that any technological applications can substitute for good teaching and the social isolation experienced by students who live in poverty.

Maintaining consistent attendance rosters of students enrolled is an additional challenge of Twilight programs. For varied reasons, the rosters are ever changing. Some students attend for a few weeks or months and disappear for a while, only to return sometime later. Others must take care of their own children or other family members. They may also have juvenile detention issues. This challenge is manageable because of the flexibility of staff and small class sizes (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2007).

Genao (2010) conducted a comparative analysis of the AHSI program and the Twilight Program, a dropout prevention program designed to meet academic, social, and emotional needs of students that could not be met in the traditional high school setting.

The Twilight program was established in eight settings by Newark Public Schools in 1999. Because the existing Twilight Program had not fulfilled the expectations, Newark Public Schools Office of Alternative Education (OAE) added a research-based alternative model built through AHSI. The addition of the research based AHSI model produced performance results that were significantly higher than performance results in the traditional Twilight Programs. It was determined that the improved achievement had more to do with resources made available than with the collaborative process (Genao, 2010). According to Genao (2010), the performance superiority was evident in grades nine through 11 in AHSI programs, but the performance superiority disappeared in grade 12, eliminating the existing performance gap between the two programs. Although there was an AHSI performance advantage maintained in seven of the eight schools, it was speculated that the implementation effectiveness of the Twilight Program in the one outlier matched the effectiveness of the AHSI program (Genao, 2010).

While the overall performance of the AHSI students was significantly higher than the students in the Twilight Program, the Twilight Program students had a higher mean performance in the Applied Skills courses (Genao, 2010). There was no indication of a difference in the curriculum used between the two programs. This study also indicated that students were more likely to drop out rather than transfer from the AHSI program than from the Twilight Program. Participants in the study attributed the failure of the Twilight Program to the internal administrative leadership rather than to students' accountability and performance. Participants in the study also expressed a preference to

mend the issues within the Twilight Program instead of reinventing the wheel (Genao, 2010).

### *Barriers*

Extracurricular participation has been found to predict success in school and life beyond. Because reformers felt an academics focus alone may not provide students living in poverty all the skills needed to succeed, band and sports were added to the school curriculum (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). These offerings, however, have been cut during the last several decades and *pay to play* has made it impossible for poor families to afford the fee associated with extracurricular activities, creating a gap in participation between rich and poor students. Phillips and Putnam (2016) contended that school districts should end pay to play systems. States must also work to equalize extracurricular opportunities between economically advantaged and disadvantaged schools and districts (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). More opportunities for free after school tutoring and summer extracurricular activities in disadvantaged communities are also needed (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). High quality tutoring or enrichment activities are needed as an extended day period. Longer school days and/or school years can ensure that students are safe and supervised during afternoon hours and during the summer when students are idle and at the greatest risk (Phillips & Putnam, 2016).

Phillips and Putnam (2016) contended accountability must extend beyond test scores and that additional resources must be provided for schools serving students of low socioeconomic status. Charter schools, despite some promising results and useful lessons that could be replicated, are not the magic bullet or cure-all. School choice for

disadvantaged families should include high-quality options within a reasonable distance from their homes.

### *Summary*

Perceptions of others often involve implicit biases—unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that impact our responses to certain groups of people, especially around race and ethnicity, class, and gender (Aguilar, 2019). These biases present themselves automatically and unconsciously without our awareness because they have been absorbed since birth (Aguilar, 2019). When teachers have negative perceptions of their students, the students know and feel them. African American and Hispanic students, particularly males, have experienced teachers' negative attitudes for decades.

Research supported existing literature that some students need a nontraditional form of education. The traditional system does not work for them. This subgroup, African American and Hispanic students who live in poverty, have many issues that cannot be resolved in a traditional classroom (Mujic, 2015). African American and Hispanic students continue to fall below their White peers in terms of academic performance and graduation. The graduation rate for African American and Hispanic students is below the national average (USDOE, 2019). Too many are still not completing high school in four years. An alternative is nontraditional education. Unlike teachers in the traditional school system, teachers in the nontraditional classroom have more positive perceptions of the students they serve. Some serve as mentors to the students, coaching and encouraging them along at their own pace, to complete the requirements to recover credits and



graduate. This encourages the students and give them a feeling of connectedness and self-confidence, which yield improved performance.

The research method and design used in conducting this study is presented in Chapter 3. Included is an explanation regarding participant selection and sampling technique. Additionally, I include the instrument used and the procedures followed in collecting and analyzing the data and describing validity and ethical considerations.

## Chapter 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Equal opportunity to education in the United States has improved for all demographic groups within the past two decades. However, the progress has not kept pace with access (Mujic, 2015). This disparity has resulted in devastating consequences for African American males more than any other group or gender. Additionally, high schools serving students from predominantly low-income African American and Hispanic families experience high dropout rates caused by many factors (Schott Foundation, 2012). I examined educators' life and career experiences in a nontraditional setting, preparing students of color living in poverty to graduate. I wanted to learn of strategies used in this setting to help improve the graduation rate among this subgroup.

Additionally, I sought to learn of barriers in implementing a nontraditional approach to help this subgroup complete high school. This chapter introduces the qualitative portraiture design and rationale based on the research questions. After justifying the method used, I explained the criteria used to establish the relevance of the setting and the sample selection. I also included the portraitist's role to define my relationship to the problem, reveal biases, and identify methods to monitor issues of subjectivity. Next, I established participant selection criteria, including attributes from life and career experiences that led them to serve in the nontraditional setting. I conducted interviews with the participants to examine their life and teaching career experiences in a nontraditional setting preparing students living in poverty to graduate. I observed six participants.

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of educators regarding the use of a nontraditional school reform model to improve graduation rates in an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status. Thus, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ 1. What are the life and career experiences of educators who implemented a nontraditional high school reform model to improve graduation rates at an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students from low-income families?

RQ 2. What strategies did educators use to implement a nontraditional high school reform model to improve graduation rates at an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students from low-income families?

RQ 3. What were the barriers, if any, when educators implemented a nontraditional high school reform model to improve graduation rates at an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students from low-income families?

The findings from this study may inform national policymakers, federal and state departments of education, university and college teacher preparation programs, and regional and local educational agencies on the urgency of the need to establish nontraditional school reform models. Specifically, the focus should be on using culturally

competent and responsive strategies appropriate for diverse students in urban school settings.

### *Research Design and Rationale*

I used the portraiture approach to examine the perceptions of educators regarding the use of a nontraditional school reform model to improve graduation rates in an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status. The portraiture approach is a phenomenological method that involves a skillful balance between art and science when data is interpreted by painting a narrative portrait of individual subjects (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (2016), portraiture is the “first social science methodology that is explicit in blending art and science, bridging empiricism and aestheticism” (p. 19). The qualitative methodology allowed me to conduct an in-depth examination of educators' experiences, feelings, and beliefs on the research topic. “In lots of ways portraiture resembles most kinds of good, deep, layered qualitative inquiry” (p. 22).

The portraiture approach was chosen to represent my findings because it allowed me to give voice to each educator's story and the complex details and experiences that contributed to each one. It was the best approach because it supported me when seeking to capture educators' life experiences and voices accurately and simultaneously incorporate the knowledge and experiences in the study (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). The bond and relationship between the portraitist and the participants were critical components that I needed to establish when conducting the interview sessions.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) described portraiture as a shared dialogue between the portraitist and the participants. They noted that the approach features five distinct elements: (a) context, (b) voice, (c) relationships, (d) emergent themes, and (e) the aesthetic whole. I embedded participants' voices and mine throughout the narrative. My voice resonated throughout the study and framed the questions, the data, and the story. Themes were crafted based on the review of literature, positions gleaned from participant voice during the interviews, and my own personal experience. I used these to create the portraits, and I brought all the data components together to complete the picture, which resulted in the aesthetic whole.

### *Setting*

The site selected for this study is an urban Georgia school district serving primarily poor students of color. Designated as a Title I district, the enrollment is approximately 23,000 students in grades Pre-K through 12. A Title I district has high numbers or high percentages (at least 40 percent) of enrollment from low-income families and receives financial assistance to provide additional academic support and learning opportunities to help low-achieving children master challenging curricula and meet state standards (USDOE, 2015). The district's percentage of poor students is 100% (Georgia Department of Education, 2020). According to the American Psychological Association (n.d.b), students who attend high-poverty schools are at risk for lower achievement and higher dropout rates.

The demographic makeup of the targeted district is 73% African American, 18% White, 5% Hispanic, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Multi-racial. Regarding the

graduation rate criterion, the proposed district scored below 70 on Georgia's CCRPI and earned a "D" on the letter grade scale for three years, until recently. The four-year graduation rate is currently 78.5%, which is higher than only six percent of the districts in the state, and only 51.5% of these graduating students demonstrate college and career readiness and academic growth higher than only 37% of Georgia's schools (Georgia Department of Education, 2020). The town's population as of 2020 was 157,346, with a racial makeup as of the 2020 United States Census of 54.3% African American, 39.3% White, 3.4% Hispanic or Latino, 0.02% Native American, 0.65% Asian, 2% Pacific Islander, 0.46% other races, and 3.2% from two or more races. The median family income in 2020 was \$41,317 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

The nontraditional site for this study will be referred to throughout as The Academy. The Academy serves middle and high school students referred for alternative education from the six middle schools and six high schools within the district. Students attending The Academy are provided personalized learning through their individual personal learning plans. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) promotes school safety and good behavior. PBIS is an evidence-based framework that emphasizes prosocial skills and expectations by teaching and acknowledging appropriate student behavior and integrates academic and social emotional behavioral data systems and practices to improve overall student outcomes. Schools that successfully implement PBIS well experience a reduction in office discipline referrals, school administrators and staff feel more effective, and students achieve improved behavioral, social, and academic outcomes (Center on PBIS, 2022).

The Academy employs a personalized learning approach to customize learning for students based on their needs, strengths, skills, and interests. It also ensures that each student is provided a learning plan that is specific to what they know and need to master, and how they learn best (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). The Academy implements a purposeful design of blended instruction that combines in-person teaching, technology-assisted instruction, and student-to-student collaboration for deeper learning. Twenty-eight professional educators—18 females and ten males—are employed at the nontraditional high school program. Regarding race, twenty-two are African American, five are White, and one is Asian. An equal number of these educators—36%—hold Level 4 (bachelor’s) and Level 5(master’s) degrees. Twenty-one percent have Level 6 (education specialist) certification, and 7% hold Level 7 (doctorate) certification (BCSD, 2021).

These educators are evaluated annually using Georgia’s Leader Keys Effectiveness System (LKES) for administrators (GaDOE, 2014), and Georgia’s Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) for teachers. LKES evaluates school administrators on performance standards, student growth, and school climate. TKES evaluates performance standards, professional growth, and student growth (Georgia Department of Education, 2020).

The LKES evaluates leaders on performance standards (30%), which include: (a) instructional leadership, (b) school climate, (c) planning and assessment, (d) organizational management, (e) human resources management, (f) teacher and staff evaluation, (g) professionalism, and (h) communication and community relations. Student

growth (40%), the second component of LKES, comprises Student Growth Percentiles (SGP), calculated annually, based on state assessment data. The College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) is the comprehensive school improvement, accountability, and communication platform for all educational stakeholders that will promote college and career readiness for all Georgia public school students. The CCRPI School Climate Star Rating (10%), the third component of the LKES, indicates how well a school fosters an atmosphere where students feel welcomed, safe, and respected. The final part of the LKES is the Achievement Gap Reduction (20%), Beating the Odds, and CCRPI (Georgia Department of Education, 2020).

The TKES is the evaluation system for teachers. It measures Teachers Assessment on Performance Standards (TAPS), professional growth, and student growth. The TAPS evaluates teacher performance in five domains: (a) planning, (b) instructional delivery, (c) assessment of and for learning, (d) learning environment, and (e) professionalism and communication, and 10 additional performance standards.

The planning domain addresses the teacher's professional knowledge when demonstrating an understanding of students' curriculum, pedagogy, and needs while providing relevant learning experiences. The planning domain also addresses instructional planning when using state and local curricula and standards to address the differentiated needs of individual students. The instructional delivery domain includes how a teacher uses research-based instructional strategies to engage students and promote learning to facilitate students' acquisition of essential knowledge and skills. The instructional delivery domain also includes differentiated instruction to challenge and



support individual learning differences. Teachers choose various diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment strategies appropriate and valid for the content and student population. These assessment strategies include measuring student progress to inform instructional content and delivery methods within the assessment for learning and of learning domains.

The learning environment domain focuses on the classroom atmosphere, which should be safe, orderly, respectful, and conducive to learning. Another focus of this domain is the academic environment, which should be challenging with the teaching and learning processes occurring at high levels. The students are encouraged to become self-directed learners. Finally, the professionalism and communication domain addresses demonstration of a commitment to professional ethics and the school's mission, participation in professional growth opportunities, and contributions to the profession. Communication involves effectively collaborating with all stakeholders to enhance student learning (Georgia Department of Education, 2020).

The Academy's vision is that each student will demonstrate leadership, scholarship, and citizenship while thriving in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century global society. The mission is to create and provide personalized learning experiences dedicated to developing the whole child. The instruction provided is designed for college and career readiness with individualized in-person academic support; partnership and apprenticeship opportunities in collaboration with work-source agencies; and in-person sports, club, and performance-based extracurricular activities.

The Twilight program was started during the 2014-2015 school year when the current director served as principal of one of the district's six high schools. She examined the circumstances that hindered her students from graduating on time and decided to provide time outside of the regular school day for students to earn the credits they needed to graduate. Twilight provided a personalized learning environment that allowed students to navigate their own learning. This afterschool program offered overaged students on the verge of dropping out some hope in the form of smaller classes with a personalized learning plan to earn the credits necessary to graduate. Academic accountability was required, and graduation was the number one goal.

The program was originally funded using the school's federal School Improvement Grant, or SIG. The director presented this plan to the superintendent to consider for the district's alternative program in the Fall of 2017. When the previous director of the program resigned at the end of the school year, Dr. J was asked to implement the plan she had presented for consideration the following Fall 2018.

The reality of the revolving door between the home school and alternative program eventually led to the formation of the Personalized Learning Center (PLC) and the YouthBuild programs. These programs provide the small group setting nontraditional students crave and in which they can thrive. These programs also allowed students to experience some success. At the Academy, they are able to experience that family-type setting that is possible with 15 students in a class versus 35 students or more in a traditional classroom setting.

### *Role of the Researcher*

I, the portraiture researcher, had to remain aware of how my own background, experiences, and perspectives contributed to my interpretation and understandings during the conversations with the participants in my study. I assumed the role of interpreter-participant during the collection of data as my personal life, and career experiences are also part of the story. The portraiture approach contrasts with a typical qualitative case study in which storytelling requires a separation from intimate relationships and reduces researcher influence during the data collection process. At the onset, I sought to develop relationships and gain trust because of the absence of prior daily interaction with participants (Adler & Adler, 1987). Establishing a participant-observer relationship with the educators who agreed to participate in the portraiture study was critical to obtaining legitimacy and trust (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2002). The observer-participant role facilitated the establishment of the trusting relationship necessary for investigating the study. As an interpreter-participant, I interviewed each participant and analyzed the data and associated artifacts.

Social relationships played a significant role when observing and interviewing participants (Beuving & Vries, 2015). The first step in building rapport and creating legitimacy within the setting and within the group required open and courageous communication with administrators and teacher leaders who served as gatekeepers in this nontraditional setting and introduced me to the group (Adler & Adler, 1987). I was invited to observe the 8.5 Summer Opportunity session for a week, Monday-Thursday. This program was specifically for overaged middle school students to accelerate their

transition to high school. The goal was to retrain their mindset and thinking, so they would be ready to hit the ground running in the fall. I was also invited to attend the Academy's Leadership Retreat 2021 during which the building leaders planned for the first nine weeks and, therefore, identified and created a Power Standards Curriculum Map for each course that had an end of course (EOC) assessment associated with it. From that point, I continued to strengthen the interpreter-participant relationship through ordinary everyday conversations with minimal participation in group activities, e.g., collaborative planning sessions and faculty meetings.

I served 34 years as a public-school educator before retiring. I taught at the elementary level and spent 10 years at the district office. I have returned to work in education in my current position as executive director of Student Support Team Association for Georgia Educators (SSTAGE), a non-profit organization. I discovered a school principal in my former district using the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) to implement a nontraditional school reform model, the Twilight model, to improve the graduation rate in her high school. Anxious to learn about nontraditional programs, I selected this building as the site for my study. Although I was employed in the same school district, I maintained no direct communication with district employees, including the director/principal. I do not have any relationships with participants at this school that might jeopardize the integrity of this study.

### *Participant Selection*

For this study, my participants were members of the school leadership team and teachers who had served for three years or more in this nontraditional environment. All

participants willingly volunteered once they were made aware of the focus and purpose of the study and the portraiture approach being used.

### *Sampling Method*

I used purposeful sampling to select and maximize learning through a comprehensive investigation (Merriam, 2002). This method was appropriate as I intentionally sought informants who held the knowledge about this phenomenon.

### *Participants*

The selection of the participants is essential, and consideration should be given to commitment to participate and sincerity to contribute (Creswell, 2014). For this study, the participants from the site were the director/principal, the teacher support coach/PBIS coach, the media/technology/literacy teacher, Edgenuity coordinator/Genius platform manager, the math teacher, and the education support coordinator/social worker. This director/principal led the implementation of the selected nontraditional reform model and has consistently attained proficient to exemplary performance on the Leader Keys Effectiveness System (LKES) since the 2014-2015 school year when she piloted a Twilight program at the high school she was assigned to. The other selected participants have worked in the chosen nontraditional reform model for three years or more and have achieved proficient to exemplary performance on the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) as required for their position and certification level.

As aforementioned, I reviewed the appropriate evaluation data for participants in this study. All have met the established criteria for the study. I outlined the selection criteria in the next section.

### *Criteria*

Participants in this study were required to: (a) be certified professional educators who have obtained at least a bachelor's degree, (b) be currently employed in a nontraditional school reform model at the high school level, (c) have worked under the current principal for three to five years or more, and (d) have attained proficient to exemplary performance on the TKES or LKES.

### *Instrumentation*

The instruments used in this portraiture study included three semi-structured interviews, an interview protocol, an observation, observation protocol, and me, the portraiture artist. I selected Seidman's (2013) interview protocol for use in this study. I followed Seidman's interview questioning techniques and suggestions for phenomenological interviewing, which is an approach that is compatible with the portraiture methodology and allowed the participants to reflect and make meaning of their perspectives between our interviews and other interactions.

### *Interview*

I conducted three interviews with each participant. The face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded and occurred on-site at school at the participants' convenience. The questions on the interview protocol were semi-structured, open-ended, and probing when further clarification or detail was needed. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes. I used Seidman's three-interview model to draw participants' stories to understand the implementation of this nontraditional high school reform model (see Appendix B).

I created three open-ended semi-structured interview guides. The participants' interests guided the conversations. Informal conversations to *get to the story* were the first steps in the data collection process (Gilligan et al, 2003, p.157). According to Maxwell (2013), the researcher should always include informal data-gathering strategies, which might include hanging out, casual conversations, and incidental observations. Such information obtained informally can provide essential contextual evidence, diverse perspectives and can be used to verify or confirm interview data (Weiss, 1994). I used these informal conversations to revise the research questions if they were too narrow or too general. For example, when participants would refer to certain programs or strategies being used, they were asked to share specifics as to what personalized learning model was being used; or what was the YouthBuild program exactly and what were the criteria for student participation. Follow-up questions were not a part of the interview protocol, so they were generated after actively listening to the participants' responses.

In the first interviews, I asked participants about their experiences that led to their current placement in this nontraditional high school reform model setting. This interview framed the context of the participants' story (Seidman 2006). In the second interview I focused on strategies participants used to improve graduation rates and post-secondary options for students of color living in poverty who had experienced little to no success in traditional educational settings. I focused on specific strategies used. I also asked the participants to describe a typical day or week in the nontraditional setting. In the third interview I focused on barriers encountered while implementing the nontraditional high school reform model up to this point. I asked the participants to reflect on successes they

have experienced. I also asked the participants how they sustained or created the desire to persevere, despite the obstacles.

### *Observations*

I used a record of informal conversations and observations in authentic settings such as daily operations during the summer opportunity program, the leadership retreat, collaborative planning, faculty meetings, and instructional settings to develop participants' portraits. During these observations, I was attentive to how the participants willingly collaborated and exhibited a commitment to professional ethics and the school's mission. In addition, I considered how the participants partook in professional growth opportunities that supported student learning and contributed to the profession. This included contributions to the development of others and the well-being of the school and the community they serve. I also observed how the participants communicated with students in the classroom environment, with parents or guardians during intake interviews, with district and other school personnel who supported the daily operation, and other community stakeholders who supported the program through mentorship and workforce development. Additionally, I observed how the participants used various communication techniques in multiple situations to inform, network, and collaborate with stakeholders to enhance student learning (Georgia Department of Education, 2020).

Observations allowed me to draw inferences about the participants' perspectives as they may have been reluctant to explicitly state them during an interview (Maxwell, 2013). Observational data provided a firsthand report related to the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account obtained from an interview. Merriam (2002)



contended that observation is “the best technique when an activity, event, or situation can be observed firsthand, when a fresh perspective is desired, or when participants are not able or willing to discuss the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 2002, Ch. 1, Data Collection and Analysis section, para. 3).

The observations supported the lived experiences described as the data were gathered (Patton, 2002). These descriptions provided a “vicarious experience for the reader” to help their understanding of the research questions (Stake, 1995, p. 63). Detailed reports of the participants’ lived experiences provided valuable data to shape meaning and increase understanding of the nontraditional high school reform model under investigation. I maintained appropriate records through reflective memos and journaling recorded as field notes (Maxwell, 2013). Of particular interest to me were the standards that address the learning environment, professionalism, and communication.

### *Memoing*

Maxwell (2013) defined the recording of fieldwork observations and experiences through journaling and memo writing as memoing. This reflective writing process included “methodological issues, ethics, personal reactions, or anything else” (p. 20). Memoing represented the record of my thinking and revealed biases, chronicled the history of the study, critiqued, and evaluated significant events that occurred. Memoing also captured the essence of my interactions with people and the artifacts, and it was critical for ongoing data analysis (Maxwell, 2013). Memoing as a reflective writing process contributed to the story’s credibility as it added a layer of data that confirmed and explained the results and findings in the study. Memos also captured what is seen or

heard and connections discovered between and among themes and categories (Merriam, 2002).

According to Merriam (2002), memos ultimately become the data used to construct and write the final narrative or possibly even serve as a first draft. Howard and Barton (1988) claimed memos are essential techniques for generating ideas and understanding and making sense of the topic, setting, or study. The thoughts and reflections recorded through memoing were coded, filed, and analyzed for developing ideas more fully, just as interview transcripts and field notes from observations.

#### *Data Collection and Procedures*

I generated data from interviews and observations of the participants in the work setting. I also documented environmental artifacts—bulletin boards, artwork, posters—with commentary noted in my journal. The constructivist epistemology influenced the data collection in this study. Constructivists seek to understand the context of a setting by personally gathering and interpreting information, according to Creswell (2014). This inductive approach applies to qualitative data collection methods and includes interviews, observations, and cultural artifacts framed by personal relationships (Creswell, 2014). The research questions relied on participants' unique perspectives and descriptions gained from interviews to enhance the individual portraits derived from answering research questions. In addition to the interviews, combining data collection methods provided a greater understanding when interpreting findings (Maxwell (2013).

The observations of positive affirmations throughout the building assisted me in connecting the participants' descriptions and perspectives to the data obtained while

interviewing them in their current roles. Observations of the participants at work generated naturalistic field notes. These documents helped me to understand the leader/educator context better.

I requested permission to conduct the study from the Board of Education in the public school district where I proposed to conduct the research (see Appendix A). I also requested permission from the principal of the selected nontraditional school reform model to conduct the study at that site. Once the Board of Education and principal approved, I submitted the proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Valdosta State University for review and approval. After obtaining IRB approval (see Appendix C), I scheduled a meeting with the principal at the selected site, discussed criteria for selecting participants, and acquired commitment from her and the other building leadership to participate in the study.

After meeting with the director/principal and receiving approval to conduct the study, I coordinated a scheduled meeting with the principal for the educators who met the criteria. At the meeting, I introduced myself, explained the study, and answered questions. I also discussed details of the portraiture methodology and its processes. Additionally, I described how portraiture focuses on the successes of the study participants and their triumphs (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). To support learning and provide additional background information, I shared a copy of a portrait from Lawrence-Lightfoot's book, *I've Known Rivers*.

I provided my email address to those who attended the meeting, requested their email addresses, and informed them I would be emailing information about the study. I

also explained how the data would be collected. Additionally, I asked that they provide a verbal consent/written response within seven days if they would like to participate. Upon receiving the verbal consent and/or the written responses via email, I select the six participants for the interviews and observations and schedules dates and times. The first six qualified individuals who provided verbal or written consent were among those selected to participate. I developed a reflective journal to record my thoughts, specific interactions, and dialogues regularly during the research process.

The data collection process began with detailed descriptions of the physical environment, including details about furniture arrangement, art and other aesthetics, and the primary culture and climate of the setting where the participants work. The general environment included the participants' appearance, attire, facial expressions, body language, mannerisms/gestures, and general behaviors. These detailed descriptions provided rich layers of information about participants and emphasized what was important to them. My thoughts and feelings about the environmental details were documented in the journal and included as collected data.

### *Data Analysis*

Analysis in the qualitative portraiture method “seeks to record and interpret the perspectives of the people they [researchers] are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. xv). My responsibility was to interpret participants' understandings and interpretations of the actual reality of how their life and career experiences contributed to their current work in a nontraditional high school reform

model. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed as I listened to the recording of each interview and transcribed them into units for analysis. I used thematic analysis in this qualitative portraiture study. I chose thematic analysis because it can analyze semi-structured interviews in examining various experiences in using a phenomenon (Percy et al., 2015). In this study, the phenomenon was a nontraditional school reform model.

Merriam (2002) stressed that the researcher begins analyzing data with the first interview, the first observation, the first document accessed in the study” (Merriam, 2002, Ch. 1, Data Collection and Analysis section, para. 6). My role as the portraitist was to listen, observe, and remain open to whatever was occurring in the environment, documenting my first impressions as well as the unexpected. These impressions and surprises were critical and assisted as I interpreted my observations and created additional questions. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) suggested and recommended sorting, grouping, and classification of data in anticipation of the narrative that resulted from the data gathering process. Gilligan (1982) recommended that interview transcription be reviewed and scrutinized as many as four times to allow me the opportunity to listen to different voices. I used data from interviews with selected participants, observations, field notes, and artifacts to create portraits.

Maxwell (2013) listed three main analytic options for analyzing qualitative data: (a) memoing, (b) categorizing, and (c) connecting. Coding was the main categorizing strategy used (Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2013). Maxwell described these options in conjunction as a process that involves:

reading and thinking about your interview transcripts and observation notes, writing memos, developing coding categories and applying these to your data, analyzing narrative structure and contextual relationships, and creating matrices and other displays that are *all* important forms of data analysis. (p. 105)

Data analysis was ongoing and occurred while reading and thinking about interview transcripts and observation notes, writing memos, developing coding categories, and applying them to the data when studying the narrative structure and contextual relationships. Maxwell (2013) noted that these processes are essential forms of data analysis. I conducted my data analysis in phases. Data analysis involved reviewing the interview transcripts, field notes from observations, artifacts, and memos.

Phenomenological coding charges the researcher to focus on themes that stand out from the interviews that described career and lived experiences and other field notes (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990). According to van Manen (1990), themes are the “experiential structures that make up the experience” (p. 79). Thomas and Pollio (2002) define themes as patterns of description that repetitively recur as important aspects of the participant’s description of his/her experience” (p. 35). Van Manen proposes that the researcher approach data in three ways: (1) holistically, (2) selectively, and (3) sentence-by-sentence. Themes are continually developed and refined until the researcher is convinced the themes describe the participants’ experience. It is posited by van Manen that phenomenological themes tend to be phrases because phrases “provide a fuller description of the structure of a lived experience” (p. 92). Thomas and Pollio suggested looking for metaphors the interviewees used to represent the various facets of their

stories. The metaphors my participants used illuminated how they made connections to their work with nontraditional students and how their lived experiences brought them to enthusiastically serve in this nontraditional environment.

There are four categories phenomenological studies seek to address according to van Manen (1990). He articulated, “The four fundamental existentials of spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and rationality may be seen to belong to the existential ground by way of which all human beings experience the world” (p. 102). Thomas and Pollio (2002) named these thematic structures “world” (p. 103), “body” (p. 59), “time” (p. 161), and “other people” (p.84). People experience, understand, and interact with the world in these major ways (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1990).

I initially sampled trials of coding software and attempted to upload transcripts of participant interviews and my field notes but found the two software programs to be awkward to use. I resorted to printing the transcription documents and creating in vivo, or first round, coding using a Microsoft Word document. Saldaña (2013) recommended that I keep a codebook to record provisional codes, emergent codes, content descriptions, and a brief data example of each so the codes can be reviewed periodically and reorganized into categories and subcategories. Code mapping enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of observations (Saldaña, 2013) to retell their stories and describe participant experiences. More than 50 key words and phrases were identified from participants lived and career experiences, in addition to the many powerful quotes that emerged. These key words and phrases were grouped during the second cycle of coding into sections with similar properties as they applied to the research questions regarding

participants' career and lived experiences, the particular strategies they adopted and used when implementing the nontraditional program, and the barriers that were encountered along the way.

Coding with the participants' own words enhanced and expanded my understanding of the participants' culture and perspectives (Saldaña, 2013). In the third coding phase, codes were connected and condensed into data categories. This phase also involved establishing categories that recapitulated participants' responses and succinctly answered the research questions. Theoretical categories represent concepts derived from prior theory and according to the research question topics. Ultimately, the themes were categorized based on the participants' emphasis on relationships, opportunities to ensure students experienced success, and deterrents to the school-to-prison pipeline. Each participant discussed the importance of building strong relationships with their nontraditional students. Strong relationships are a critical part of positive human interaction and are especially important for nontraditional students who are discovering how to listen, learn, and accept tips and strategies to ensure their success at school as well as their ability to navigate life outside of school. Students' humanity is honored and valued in this nontraditional environment that is fair, firm, and consistent while nurturing their often-untapped capacity to reach their full potential.

Each participant emphasized the importance of providing personalized learning opportunities for nontraditional students to attain the credits needed for graduation. Dr. J, the principal/director of the Academy, has a plan in place for the entire staff to earn their personalized learning endorsement by the end of the 2022-2023 school year. All



participants addressed their own roles in supporting student agency and the partnership between the Academy's staff and students to ensure all parties shared in the collective accountability required to achieve the goal of graduation. Accountability is huge and foundational at the Academy. The staff works together to collaborate and support each other and their nontraditional students with literacy strategies or technology resources to ensure their personalized learning plans are completed. Dr. J's mission is to ensure that staff members at the Academy are only those who truly desire to serve nontraditional students in this nontraditional environment. Expectations and norms are taught and made explicitly clear for staff and students. Crucial conversations are had when necessary if these norms and expectations are violated in any way.

On the surface, each participant had very different experiences that led them to public school service, but many commonalities were apparent when expressing their desire to impact the lives of their students. Each participant recognized the importance of establishing boundaries as well as building strong relationships, providing personalized learning opportunities, and collective responsibility. The sentence-by-sentence reading of transcripts identified quotations that reinforced the themes, making them clearer and more exact. The metaphors were particularly touching, especially the metaphors about love, and loving and caring for students. Participants understood their students were quite adept when it came to discerning if their teachers truly cared for them on a human level.

Participants navigated this world including the students they served in this nontraditional environment, reflected on the ways they interacted in this world to build strong relationships, and provided personalized learning opportunities while holding both

themselves and their students accountable for achieving the goal of graduation with college or career options after high school. All themes connected back to opportunity and the opportunity gap that is evidenced and perpetuated in traditional settings when specific needs of nontraditional students are not met.

Finally, I connected themes to theoretical frameworks critical race theory (CRT), relational cultural theory (RCT), and the school-to-prison pipeline. Since there are few research studies done that examine nontraditional educational environments and the impact these settings have on graduation rates for students from marginalized communities and populations, my prayer is that this portraiture study will ignite a sense of urgency for policy makers to act accordingly as this counternarrative suggests an alternative to traditional education is necessary and efforts will be made to provide more nontraditional options for students needing them. Nontraditional students require nontraditional options to enhance their future outcomes as contributing and productive citizens who are able to prosper and become an asset in our communities, state, and nation.

### *Trustworthiness*

Creswell (2014) believed all research should be credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. Guba and Lincoln (1981) used the term audit trail to suggest that researchers establish a path to authenticate their findings during a study. This audit trail “describes in detail how the data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, Ch. 2, Reliability section, para. 3). The audit trail required me to maintain a research journal

of memos throughout the study, including reflections, questions, and decisions related to any ideas, issues, or problems encountered during the data collection process.

Member checking affords the researcher the assurance that the portrayal of participant voices is accurate by allowing participants the opportunity to confirm or deny the interpretation of the data. This adds credibility in a qualitative study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995). Madill and Sullivan (2018) suggested that member checking is regarded as the gold standard of qualitative research.

I used member checking to share the findings of this portraiture study in rough draft form with the participants (Creswell, 2014). A draft of each participant's portrait was shared with them to assess the authenticity of their portraits once all data had been analyzed and synthesized into the individual portraits. This member checking process allowed participants to check for accuracy to ensure their perceptions were properly echoed and allowed them the opportunity to provide necessary feedback to adjust or make corrections as needed. Member checking is commonly used in qualitative research to create trustworthiness and to maintain validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

My interpretations were deemed an accurate reflection of the participants' perspectives according to the feedback received. Feedback from the participants contributed to the accuracy and consistency of the data. The responses from the participants after reviewing the drafts of their portraits were those of gratitude for capturing their efforts on a daily basis serving their nontraditional students. Dr. A and I had to google an expression she made during her first interview, "down pat". She suggested the spelling was "down pack", but finally there was agreement with my

original transcription of the expression. Dr. J's response was, "Omg!!! This is amazing!!!! I have told my story, but to see it written is powerful."

### *Credibility*

In critiquing the credibility of portraiture studies, English (2000) stated, "There is no external, internal referent for ascertaining the truth-telling capacity of the portraitist because the definition of truth is circular" (p. 21). In this portraiture study, I attempted to enhance credibility and validity by collecting rich data to construct a credible picture of what I learned about each participant. My use of six participants who have acquired experience working in a nontraditional school reform model, combined with data collection methods including interviews, observations, and field notes, increased credibility in the conclusions that I have drawn (Creswell, 2014).

### *Transferability*

According to Creswell (2014), findings in this portraiture study should be transferable. Other researchers should be able to apply the conclusions of this study to their study or further studies. A critical issue with any qualitative research is generalizability (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2002; Miles et al., 2013; Stake, 1995). Qualitative researchers rely solely on their interpretation of the study to transfer the findings they discover to other situations or settings (Merriam, 2002; Miles et al., 2013). The selected site for this portraiture study has similar characteristics to other nontraditional high school reform models designed for students who have had little to no success in traditional educational settings. I attempted to provide a rich and thick

description of the findings (Miles et al., 2013) to create an image that readers can apply to their situations or settings.

### *Dependability*

According to Miles et al. (2013), dependability relates to how the portraitist addresses quality and stability issues. As a result, I used auditing and triangulation of interviews, observations, and field notes to demonstrate consistency and integrity within the data. Memoing that documents all aspects of the study provided an audit trail that includes personal reactions, data collection, organized records of idea development, ethics, and methodological issues (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2002). I documented the research path through reflective memos for further interpretation or clarification if needed.

### *Confirmability*

I triangulated multiple data sources including interviews, observations, and field notes to confirm clarity and understanding of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2002; Stake, 1995). I used a methodological protocol to verify the consistency of findings among the three data collection methods, including transcribed interviews, memos of interactions and observations, and the document/artifact review. The research questions were focused, allowing me to clarify themes that emerged from interviews, including the life and career experiences, strategies used to improve graduation rates and post-secondary options, and barriers encountered.

### *Ethical Procedures*

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) addressed the researcher's ethical dilemmas and moral responsibility in conducting a portraiture study. Featherstone (1989) as cited in Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis (1997) noted that portraitists have an ethical obligation to recount their participants' stories in authentic, factual, and respectful ways. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis stated that the portraitist must avoid entering participants' lives, establishing relationships, engaging in discourse, and making an impression, only to leave abruptly. I believe my relationship with the participants in this study will sustain itself as the implementation of this nontraditional high school reform model evolves over the years. There is a common interest in improving graduation rates and post-secondary options for students of color in urban educational settings.

This portraiture research meets the definitions and requirements established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Valdosta State University. I am sensitive to the protection of human subjects. I know that an understanding of the risks of qualitative research methods will assist me in protecting the identities of the participants and invalidating the accuracy of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This portraiture research was eligible for exemption under 45 CFR 46 101(b)(2) part 46 requirements (Office for Human Research Protections, 2016). The portraiture study involved interviewing and observing willing participants in an established nontraditional educational setting. I recorded information from interviews to protect the identities of the participants. The participants' responses do not place them at risk for criminal or civil liability or damage

to their financial standing, employability, or reputation (Office for Human Research Protections, 2016).

Because there are only a few nontraditional high school reform programs in the urban research districts around the state, it may not be easy to ensure confidentiality for participants, despite efforts to do so. I have not provided complete descriptions of the research site and masked personal information to maintain strict confidentiality. I assigned pseudonyms to all participants throughout the study. I assured the participants that no harm will come to them from participating and informed them of the liberty to withdraw at any time desired.

The Valdosta State University IRB requires that the informed consent process includes an explanation of the portraiture study, an opportunity for potential participants to ask questions, and adequate time for participants to decide if they will participate. I included the purpose, methods, duration, and potential risks of the study. Informed consent provided free of deception, detailed disclosure to assist potential participants in their decision-making process (Office for Human Research Protections, 2016). Observations and interviews with the participants ensured privacy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Stake (1995) maintained that some invasion of privacy occurs during the data gathering process. Full disclosure of research and explicit protocols for participant agreement offers protection against the intrusion and interference of others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I have treated all data as confidential (Maxwell, 2013) as the recordings were made on a password protected device and were destroyed once the member

checking process was completed. Confidentiality of information requires secure methods for collecting, managing, and destroying data. I assigned pseudonyms to establish anonymity of the site and participants (Protection of Human Subjects, 2010). I am the only person with access to digital and print records from this study.

I recorded interviews on a device with built-in storage. I ensured that it is password protected. I manually transcribed each interview. These steps made the data inaccessible without the appropriate password, ensuring the secure management of data and participant confidentiality.

A balanced relationship between the participants and me required professionalism. Both the Leader Keys Evaluation System (LKES) and the Teacher Keys Evaluation System (TKES) provide professional standards that are explicitly known to the leaders and teachers throughout the state of Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, 2015). See Appendix D. In addition, I required a keen awareness of Georgia's Code of Ethics when immersing oneself into any school system to address ethical concerns that may develop during the data collection process. Relationship and trust-building activities included communicating full disclosure of the portraiture research design, protections of privacy and confidentiality of participants, using member checks, and truth-telling during the entire course of the study (Miles et al., 2014). I established a working research relationship with the participants. The research was affected by the relationships established before and during the data collection (Maxwell, 2013). This trust-building empowered the participants to engage in the portraiture project actively.



### *Summary*

This portraiture research study addressed the graduation rates that were impacted for students of color in Georgia's identified urban school district. The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of educators regarding the use of a nontraditional school reform model to improve graduation rates in an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status. The goal of this study was also to understand how school personnel at a nontraditional high school implemented a reform model to improve the graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students in an urban school district in Georgia. The proposed research site has implemented Twilight, a nontraditional high school reform model, to improve the graduation rate for a low-performing high school. The selected urban high school district meets the parameters for this portraiture study.

I purposefully selected school personnel to create a portraiture of the school. Seidman's (2013) interview protocol ensured comprehensive, detailed data. I coded meaningful words, phrases, and quotes to identify research themes. Furthermore, I used member checks, peer review, description, code mapping, and audit trails to enhance the study's validity. I took precautions to adhere to guidelines provided by the Valdosta State University IRB. I addressed critical issues associated with portraiture, research, planning, structured data collection protocol, and analysis processes as they helped to ensure the resulting findings are credible.

## Chapter 4

### SIX EDUCATOR PORTRAITS: CREATING AN ATMOSPHERE OF HOPE

#### Introduction

The Academy is a nontraditional alternative educational program in an urban school district in Georgia. The philosophy is that all children can learn and achieve. The administrators and staff endeavor to ensure that each child grows holistically to achieve their maximum potential. The students experience individualized learning opportunities that help them get back on track. The Academy focuses on personalized learning, an educational approach that aims to customize learning for students based on their strengths, needs, skills, and interests. Personalized learning ensures that each student receives a learning plan specific to what they know and need to master, and how they learn best. A purposeful design of blended instruction, personalized learning consists of a combination of in-person teaching, technology-assisted instruction, and student-to-student collaboration for deeper learning (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). Students work with their teachers or instructional teams to establish both short-term and long-term goals. This process gives students a voice and choice to encourage ownership of their learning. The teachers ensure learning plans are aligned with academic standards.

To promote school safety and good behavior, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are in place. PBIS is an evidence-based three-tiered framework for improving behavior and integrating all data, systems, and practices that affect student outcomes on a daily basis. When PBIS is implemented well, schools experience a reduction in office discipline referrals, school administrators and staff feel more effective,

and students achieve improved behavioral, social, and academic outcomes (Center on PBIS, 2022).

The PBIS framework emphasizes prosocial skills and expectations by teaching and acknowledging appropriate student behavior according to those outlined in the school's PBIS matrix. The PBIS coach/administrator uses a matrix that defines school-wide expectations with a continuum of procedures for encouraging appropriate behavior and discouraging problem behavior. Procedures are established for encouraging school-family partnerships. The leadership team (a) guides the implementation, (b) monitors the effectiveness of processes, and (c) provides the required resources for a successful PBIS framework.

The matrix for the Academy focuses on four practices or expectations:

1. Speak Appropriately at ALL times.
2. Obey *all* [emphasis added] adults without hesitation. (from the director/principal to the custodial and food service staff)
3. Achieve academically in school.
4. Respect adults, peers, and yourself.

The continuum of procedures describes and demonstrates each expectation for arrival and dismissal; during assemblies or special events; while in the cafeteria, classroom, restroom; and in the computer or technology lab. The expectations are explicitly taught and frequently monitored.

During the summer of 2021, I shadowed several professionals that serve at the Academy while their 8.5 Summer Opportunity program was in session. This program was

designed for overaged middle school students to prepare them for the upcoming school year. The goal of the program was to retrain students' thinking so that they would be motivated and mentally prepared for the fall semester. Some students were from the same family. On my first day, one student was pulled aside to regain focus before returning to the instructional environment. The Academy's director, Dr. J (pseudonym), came in to interact with the group during their lunchtime. Calming music with a message played in the background. The banter between them was light and friendly. The students were engaged and seemed to enjoy the experience with their director who was there to instill hope. The discussions during the 8.5 Summer Opportunity sessions addressed Cornell notetaking, establishing routines, setting short- and long-term goals, self-advocacy, future jobs, and graduation. The students were respectful and were treated likewise. They were constantly acknowledged and thanked for remaining in compliance.

The Academy's leadership retreat, facilitated by a performance learning consulting group, was held the week after the culmination of the 8.5 Summer Opportunity program. Processes were outlined and established for face-to-face and asynchronous learning, instructional frameworks and building teacher capacity, Common Assessment Benchmarks (CABs), and using USA Test Prep and Study Island. Edgenuity remained the resource for credit recovery and assistance with credit-bearing courses. Discussions also ensued about virtual study groups to provide students some interaction with their peers. Power standards, or critical standards, were identified from the curriculum maps of every course for which there is an end-of-course assessment. Each course was assigned a limit of six power standards for each nine-week period, and the

level of rigor was identified for each. Content similar teams worked collaboratively to determine power standards to align with state and district curriculum maps and pacing guides. These documents would be in place for teachers' use during pre-planning.

The Leadership Team consisting of the director/principal, the teacher support/PBIS coach, the media/technology/literacy teacher, and the subject matter department chairs discussed students taking courses leading to career pathways and ensuring students complete all courses. Another discussion revolved around ensuring that students are administered the assessments and that they pass them all and receive pathway cords for graduation. An additional discussion concluded with the leadership team ensuring that pathway certification is documented on students' resumes upon graduation.

Subject matter department chairs along with the teacher support/PBIS coach, the media/technology/literacy teacher, the Edgenuity coordinator/Genius platform manager, and education support coordinator scheduled a minimum of three Professional Learning Community (PLCs) sessions when school began in August. The PLC sessions during the year would address (a) curriculum and instruction; (b) reading across the curriculum; (c) technology; (d) assessment data reporting and use; (e) attendance procedures; (f) student support; and (g) MTSS/SEL. Instructional frameworks for all content areas would include an opening that addresses a component of literacy and involves a constructed writing response. MTSS/RTI meetings and support were included in the instructional framework on Fridays for middle school students.

Once school began in August, I was privileged to be in and out of the building weekly, mostly on Wednesdays to observe daily practice and to meet with participants whose portraits are included in this portraiture study. On one of these occasions, Dr. J met with the faculty to discuss personalized learning endorsements (PLE). She explained that personalized learning means one size fits one, not all, and that when students' strengths, needs, and interests are known, the learning modules must be customized accordingly. I observed the customization of student learning using all available data sources addressing academics and attendance and student voice. These sessions included the teacher support/PBIS coach, the media/technology/literacy teacher, the Edgenuity coordinator/Genius platform manager, and the Education Support Coordinator/Social Worker. Personalized learning provides the opportunity for students to take charge of their learning as they were provided a voice and choice as to how, when, and where their learning occurred after the team presents their individualized learning plans. Students had input as to the order and combination of courses on their individualized learning plans.

During one collaborative planning meeting, teachers illustrated and shared how they had begun to set up their personalized learning classrooms and the challenges to implementation they had experienced in the process. Some of the features of the new classrooms now include classroom libraries, social media areas, meditation bags, lounge areas, data walls, research stations, and standing desks. Expressing understanding and consideration for time, Dr. J noted that those pursuing the endorsements would be provided time during the school day to complete some PLE assignments. She expressed

that everyone in the building was expected to begin the shift in their teaching practices to *just right* instruction.

### **Portrait #1--Ms. D—A Life-Long Learning Journey**

Ms. D (pseudonym) is an enthusiastic educator from a small town in southwest Georgia. She is a young African American woman in her early 40s. She wears her natural hair, very little make-up, and her style of dress is business casual. When I met her a few years ago, the first thing I noticed was her passion to steer the students she served toward positive futures and citizenship that contrasted the trajectory and path many students who were being chronically suspended were on. Ms. D is one of those educators who recognizes the possibilities for her students, and her goal in life was to help them overcome the obstacles in their way to achieve every possibility life has to offer.

Ms. D began her career with the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) immediately after graduating from a historically Black college/university (HBCU), serving several rural counties in proximity to her hometown. During her time at DJJ, she noticed the majority of her caseload consisted of males. Ninety percent of them were African Americans between the ages of 13 and 17. They had been criminalized early on. By the time they entered the system, they were considered failures in school and had become high-end offenders, accused of violent crimes e.g., murder or aggravated assault. The common thread was that they all had been identified as special education (SPED) students and classified as either Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) or Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD). Most could only read and write at a first- or second-grade level. Their average age was 15.

With a double major in criminal justice and political science, Ms. D found the law to be skewed. One case involved a 15-year-old youth who had broken into the house of an individual who had hired him for lawn service. He was only accused of stealing basic necessities, like food. He was not accused of stealing money, jewelry, or any valuable items. During the interrogation it was determined that his mother chained and locked the food cabinets and the refrigerator. Being the oldest of four or five siblings, he had assumed responsibility for their care. Ms. D knew it was wrong to break into someone's home, but she could not understand the lack of empathy from the court regarding the background of the youth and the types of items. He was sentenced to one year in a youth detention center. On another occasion during Ms. D's tenure at DJJ, a White male was caught leaving dead cats at his ex-girlfriend's door. He had threatened to kill everyone in the house. The judge sentenced him to therapy. Ms. D. was disturbed over the sentencing of Americans Africans as compared to the sentencing of Whites. It was shortly after the sentencing of the White offender that Ms. D decided to submit her resignation because she did not want to be associated with an unequal justice system. She also did not want to work within a system that locks young African American men away rather than provide intervention and support to help them resolve internal issues. Ms. D reported that the African American offender is more likely—seven times to one--to receive a harsher punishment than a White offender who commits the same or similar crime. Ms. D's caseload consisted of 90% African American offenders who had been identified as SPED. A number had been sentenced for years when their White male offender counterparts were only sentenced to therapy. These observations caused her to lose hope



and establish two goals: (a) stop the school-to-prison pipeline and (b) stop generational curses that adversely affect the African American community but African American boys and men in particular.

*From DJJ to Public School Educator*

The shift to education led her straight to oppositional defiant disorder/emotional and behavioral disorder or disability (ODD/EBD) classrooms working with similar students she had on her caseload at DJJ. “I did not see my students as not capable of learning, but I felt like educators were not digging deep enough to see what was going on in the students’ lives, the root causes, which led to the acting out behaviors they displayed.” Her initial experience in education was not an alternative or nontraditional setting. The students were at risk as they struggled academically and behaviorally. However, she felt they needed and deserved the very best teachers a school system could offer. “I wanted to teach them that they did not have to be the victims of their circumstances but needed to find the things they were good at, their strengths. I wanted to help them learn to advocate for themselves to ensure their needs were met after determining where they were academically and defining how they learned best.” From that time to now, this has been Ms. D’s goal in life—her mission. After several years working in rural southwest Georgia, Ms. D desired a change of scenery and sent out 50 or more applications to schools and districts across the state. The search involved many discussions, and the result was a call from the director of the alternative education program in the urban district in which this study was conducted. The alternative program evolved into the nontraditional program where she has now served for the last six years.

Ms. D chuckled as she remembered being hired within three seconds at the start of her interview because of her emotional and behavioral disability (EBD) teaching experience and criminal justice degree. She said she had worked in the nontraditional school for almost a year before she realized there were training gaps that needed to be closed. She researched and found professional development opportunities specific to nontraditional educational settings and sought permission to attend. She was supported and encouraged to attend training sessions and earned several endorsements. One of the endorsements was Teacher Support Coach. She received it because her administrator recognized her strengths—classroom management and the use of collaboration in support of her colleagues. The Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS)) endorsement included professional development for social-emotional learning (SEL) and restorative practices, which are in line with her favorite talking and teaching points. She sees both PBIS and SEL as necessary elements for supporting students on the path to success. She shares that she really did not know what she was getting into when volunteering to become the PBIS Coach. She had no idea that the program was very intense. However, she embraced teaching teachers how to manage their classrooms, how to respond to their students, and how to teach and follow the schoolwide behavior expectation matrix. She also embraced the impact of teacher mindset on student mindset.

### *Serving the Academy*

For six years, she has served at the Academy. She has used PBIS, which focuses on extrinsic motivation, to encourage and inform students that if they are on their best behavior they will be rewarded. She compares this response to Pavlov's experiment. She

noted that her goal is to save lives, and her growth point is to encourage intrinsic motivation. which results in life skills necessary to be successful citizens. When the district offered the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) Endorsement, she signed up to improve her efforts to support students who arrived after a hearing without an intervention plan in place. The evolution from Response to Intervention (RTI) to MTSS provided a huge umbrella under which all school improvement initiatives operate. When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized in 2004, schools were required to provide academic and/or behavioral support and intervention for students who struggled in these areas. Under the MTSS umbrella, all students are provided the support—intervention or enrichment—they specifically need. Ms. D. stated, “MTSS/RTI practices must be incorporated into our daily work,” When providing professional learning sessions to staff, she shares practices she has learned and found to be beneficial. She also models these practices for staff. Practices and processes are constantly evolving providing opportunities for continual learning and growth.

Ms. D attested that training is necessary and must be a prerequisite and ongoing to change the perceptions alternative settings typically have. She declared, “When people think alternative school, they typically think bad kids.” A mindset shift is needed to change this perception, and Ms. D admitted that initially, she had to make a shift in her own mindset. Too often, various forms of media display negative images of alternative schools. Ms. D mentioned the reform schools of old and how systems, i.e., the school-to-prison-pipeline, uses fourth-grade test scores and numbers of disciplinary referrals to determine and project the number of prison beds a state may need in the future. This

popular urban legend has been deemed a myth, however, there is a strong correlation relationship between incarceration and low literacy rates (Literacy Mid-South, 2016).

Ms. D shared an experience from a conversation that occurred while she was in line with other Teacher of the Year winners. A teacher from one of the magnet schools discovered Ms. D was from the alternative school and immediately became apologetic and offered her sympathy. Ms. D responded that the students served in the nontraditional setting are some of the same students who walked the halls of other schools in the district. She noted that their needs were not met, and their issues were not resolved. As a result, some exhibited negative behaviors that caused them to be placed in an alternative school setting, and others simply needed alternative forms of instruction and additional opportunities to bring them up to their grade level.

#### *SPED to the Nontraditional Educational Environment*

Before accepting the position at the Academy setting, Ms. D had taught in the Special Education Department (SPED) with students identified with behavioral disorders. She had previously taught in a middle school that was in the heart of town in a southwest Georgia county. Two other middle schools were in the county—one in the north end of the county and one in the southern part of the county. The population in the small rural town was diverse. It consisted of Whites, African Americans, and Hispanics. The middle school where she worked had the largest population of Black and Brown students. When a gifted team was formed at this school in the center of town, the White population increased. Project-based learning also increased. Mrs. D noted that she remembers the SPED program as being comprised of Black and Brown males. She also recalled that

most SPED students were African American boys, The difference was that the SPED students in her small town were less likely to threaten her as was the case when she first arrived in the urban setting. Additionally, she recalled the culture shock during her first year involved adjusting to the offensive language and the high suspension rates.

Although she had always perceived herself as a good teacher, Ms. D quickly recognized that she must create or utilize other strategies at the Academy. Classroom management had always been her strength, and her strategies had worked with EBD students when reintegrating them back into the general education classroom. She was now challenged with behavioral issues that caused her to question how to prioritize, e.g., behavior before academics or academics before behavior. Ms. D instinctively knew that behavior had to be addressed initially and academics next. She found that resources were lacking, but being the daughter of an educator, she had watched her mother who made many of the resources she needed. She described her classroom as filled with teacher-made resources and authentic student work. She explained that her classroom was colorful and lively. She displayed the students' work and created excitement and a sense of accomplishment within them because they had not seen much of their work displayed before. Adjusting to the nontraditional setting was unlike anything else she has had to do. It involved a number of trials and errors. She noted these students were not shy about verbalizing what they would do.

Ms. D recognized that her students were only acting out of need, and their experiences at home and at school—what was being poured into them, what they were growing up around, and what they saw and experienced daily in their home

environments. She wondered, “What were their parents’ experiences with school?” When parents have not had a good experience in school, it is sometimes difficult for them to navigate a positive path for their children. If parenthood began during the teen years, or if they had not nurtured the love of learning and established the expectation that school is the vehicle for success, their experiences would have an impact on their children who are now in school. This impact is compounded when parents blame the teacher for problems encountered by their children. Also, when parents constantly receive negative calls, they become defensive or choose not to answer. Ms. D is working to change this perception. She identifies something positive in every student and includes it, regardless of the reason for calling parents.

After her first year in this urban setting and after training to become the PBIS Coach, Ms. D embraced the initiative-taking principles of the district’s non-negotiable practice. PBIS training helped her to view a student’s referral and placement in this alternative setting as a “consequential intervention.” She began to see the need for her role, and the role of those who serve these students. They would need to become experts in MTSS/RTI with the mission to get students back on track. Students who had serious infractions appeared at hearings. One event, unfortunately, became the baseline data to begin an intervention plan because no plan was in place. There had also not been an attempt to address the negative behaviors reflected in the long list of disciplinary infractions that occurred prior to the event. Often, the students referred to the alternative, nontraditional settings arrived with no data that documented efforts to address, intervene, or support the issues. Students arrived with old RTI folders containing data that were

three to four years old, with no documentation that anything was done to support students in the interim. According to Ms. D, the schools' perception of the alternative setting as the place to contain students until they enter the penal system must shift to being the place where students who have had little success in the traditional educational setting can receive the support needed to become productive citizens.

Ms. D started this journey as a classroom math teacher because of her love for the students enrolled in her classes. However, her role is now MTSS/RTI coordinator where she facilitates PBIS and Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL). Her director considers her also as her administrative support since no assistant principal is assigned to the program. There have been two leaders in this nontraditional setting—the first was strictly by the book, very precise and procedural. The current principal/director, Dr. J., thinks outside the box and is very innovative in her approach, doing whatever it takes to get students to the finish line. In her current role, Ms. D chooses a combination of the two leadership styles. Under the leadership of the current director, the program is receiving national recognition. One reason is that Dr. J is moving closer to having a full staff with a growth mindset that embraces the vision and mission of becoming a model for students who have not been successful in traditional settings.

In a recent professional learning session, Ms. D asked the staff to do a comparative analysis of their experiences and those of their students. The analysis was based on responses to four questions: (a) Were you reared by both parents? (b) Have you ever failed a course? (c) Have you ever been retained? (d) Do you and your siblings have the same mother and father? Ms. D realized as she spoke that “Although many of us are

African American, our experiences are vastly different from those of the students served in this alternative nontraditional setting.” To make a difference, Ms. D declared we must respect and empathize with students’ experiences to relate to them. Coaching and modeling for adults require training. Being aggressive is ineffective. Adults, like children, cannot process too much at the same time, Ms. D views the endorsements she has received as being more valuable than advanced degrees. They have required her to implement and practice new learning strategies as she progresses through.

#### *Nontraditional Program Options*

Regarding this nontraditional setting, there were two programs originally serving students within The Academy—the Opportunity Achievement Center (OAC) and the Personalized Learning Center (PLC). Ms. D stated that the OAC serves all middle and high school students who have been removed from their traditional home school environment because they have had chronic disruptive behavior or are overaged and credit deficient due to academic gaps that had never been addressed. Failure to implement MTSS/RTI, according to Ms. D, is the major contributing factor for student placement at the Academy. Teachers and administrators back at the home school assume little to no responsibility with the placement but exhale when students are out of sight and out of mind. When students are referred to the alternative setting, Ms. D said, “We do what we can to prepare them to return to their home school where they are most often met with the same negative mindset that sent them away. rather than allowing them to return with a clean slate and a fresh start.”



Unfortunately, many students return to the alternative setting within weeks or days because of an incident leading to another hearing. One female youth had spent a significant amount of time during her high school years in and out of the alternative nontraditional setting. However, she desired to begin her senior year at her home school to participate in senior pictures and prom. Ms. D admitted she had often been difficult and added that she was the adult in her home, working to help her mom pay bills. According to Ms. D, she also took care of her younger siblings. Ms. D reports that she did not last 10 minutes in her home school because individuals remembered her the way she was before. Instead of being given a fresh start, she was provided a “bullseye” and was provoked to wrath. Disciplinary action led to a hearing which resulted in a referral back to the Academy. She was welcomed back and received appropriate accommodations within the PLC. It was, however, disturbing that little effort was made to restore her with a clean slate after having satisfied all requirements for re-entry into her traditional home school. According to Ms. D, the recidivism rate is accelerated by the response students receive upon returning to their home school.

The Personalized Learning Center (PLC) students are enrolled to recover credits and are allowed to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities at their home schools. Transportation is provided to and from the home school to accommodate the process. COVID-19 brought school, as we know it, to a screeching halt. Much discussion has ensued about learning loss. However, most of the struggling learners were struggling well before the pandemic shut the world down. The virtual learning environment revealed many disparities including: (a) learning gaps, (b) a lack of individual devices, and (c) a

lack of public internet to access virtual learning opportunities. The best meals some students received each day were served for breakfast and lunch at school.

The Virtual Instructional Program (VIP) began for the 2021-2022 school year as a consequence and outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic. VIP is completely online and is currently serving 540 students in grades K-12. The students in K-5 are those students whose parents have opted to continue virtual school rather than send their students back to the face-to-face environment during the pandemic.

The Youth Build program provides another nontraditional opportunity for students to earn a GED while learning a construction trade, e.g., carpentry, drywall installation, electrical, and painting. Between 120 and 180 students up to age 24 are served in the program. Students enrolled in the program receive a stipend for participation. The first house was completed during the 2020-2021 school year in collaboration with HUD.

### *A Lover of Learning*

Ms. D loves learning and growth. She cannot be accused of having a fixed mindset. During the 20-plus years that she has served as an educator, she has watched her students evolve. This evolution has piqued her interest in the Personalized Learning Endorsement program she is currently enrolled in. She described the 150 years of students sitting in rows and the current shift to individualized, personalized learning, a provision of nontraditional educational settings. In traditional classrooms, the teacher is the driver. He or she is in control of learning with little to no student voice or input as to how their learning needs are best met. This is a contributing factor for the number of

students who are far behind grade-level expectations or who are quietly suffering and performing below the radar that camouflages the massive deficits they bring to school. Personalized learning presents the opportunity to end the silent suffering that is too often unaddressed in traditional settings. Personalized learning also addresses disruptive outbursts of outraged and disgusted students when their specific needs are unconsidered and unaddressed.

Currently, working on a Personalized Learning Endorsement, Ms. D recognizes individual student needs must be met, especially when students have experienced little to no success in traditional educational settings. Ms. D believes students bring the skills and norms of home to school. She also believes the school's role is to modify and at times replace those skills and behaviors. She also noted that she believes students can demonstrate skills and norms that are acceptable in a productive society that will permit them to dream bigger and differently. Ms. D acknowledged that when people are treated with respect, they will reflect respect in their treatment of others. Because of her upbringing in the church, she believes when respect is mutual, blessings will be bountiful. Thus, when students experience success and good things begin to flow their way, they can begin to operate within their own blessings, gifts, and talents. Without this overflow, there can be no growth. Ms. D stated, "I speak to students about walls. I share the analogy that walls are obstacles that get in the way. Sometimes, you must go around them. Sometimes, you must climb over them or start beating a path through them, but you never allow a wall to keep you from your goals or your destiny."

Ms. D described the three types of personalized learning she is studying to acquire the endorsement: (a) differentiation, (b) individualization, and (c) personalization. In personalization, the learner drives the learning and actively participates in the learning. Learners are responsible for their learning which includes their voice and choice on how and what they learn. The teacher provides instruction to groups of learners designing instruction based on the learning needs of different groups of learners for differentiation. The teacher also identifies the same objectives for varied groups of learners and supports those who rely on the objectives for their learning. For individualization, the teacher provides instruction to an individual learner and customizes the learning based on the learning needs of the individual learner. Ms. D mentioned that many teachers think they are personalizing learning when students are assigned work on different technology platforms. Personalized learning, however, does not involve teachers driving the instruction.

Personalized learning offers the prospect of correcting the conflicting data found between the pass rate of courses and the pass rate of end-of-course (EOC) assessments required for certain credit-bearing courses in high school. Ms. D believes personalized learning will contribute to the development of students' executive functioning skills when they are allowed to plan, prioritize, schedule, and navigate their own learning paths. The district's mission states as its goal that students will be college or career ready. However, if students do not acquire the knowledge required to demonstrate proficiency measured by standardized tests, this goal cannot be realized. The Academy provides the structure to break the mold of traditional classrooms and meet the individual and personalized needs

of students. It prepares students to reach their full potential and ultimate success in life. Ms. D appreciates the role poverty plays but believes a mindset shift or growth mindset can be a greater determining factor for student success. Because of systemic racist practices impacting the education of African American people before and since *Brown v. BOE*, poverty has always been an issue. However, historically, poor African American parents desired an education for their children. They wanted to ensure their children's futures did not include the struggles they endured. Ms. D understands the role nontraditional educational settings play in breaking the cycle of failure, despite the trauma of poverty students in this nontraditional setting experienced prior to referral.

#### *Data-Driven Triage Groups*

A recent review of student data indicating the students were farther behind than originally thought stunned Ms. D's team. The result of the finding was a "triage group" created by Ms. D. All students are in the 8.5 group made up of overaged eighth- and ninth-grade students. Six weeks into the school year, these students needed executive functioning skills and a personalized learning plan; so, one was developed. These students participated in creating their own schedules. They included times for extra support in literacy or in math. They determined the time they would work independently and when they would take their breaks. Once schedules were created and agreed upon, students were expected to commit to them and be held accountable to follow through. Ms. D sees this as building student self-efficacy because students are provided a choice and a voice into how their days will be spent. The first academic triage group is progressing because the students were given the opportunity to express how they needed

the educational process to work for them. This process, however, must be repeated for the students to develop discipline and for the program to acquire intrinsic value.

Working with triage students with behavioral concerns requires consistent expectations. Ms. D often reminds the staff that students are prone to revert to old ways whenever expectations are relaxed in the slightest way. Students watch and know teacher routines sometimes better than teachers know themselves. Kids are brutally honest about their interactions in the classroom—good or bad. The PBIS framework encourages extrinsic rewards and positive acknowledgment to develop the habits that eventually have intrinsic value and are intrinsically motivated. The goal is to teach the students to not expect rewards for controlling themselves and their emotions as they should exercise self-control because it is the right thing to do. Expectations are learned behaviors and must be taught. Ms. D declared, “We stress the right thing to do is the right thing to do.” Her team has set up their PBIS Café as a place for students and staff to get what they need to meet expectations. The focus is providing support to meet expectations versus having students and staff expecting to be rewarded when fulfilling the norms and expectations.

Ms. D prefers the standard practice of pre-assessing students when new learning is introduced. This data is used to drive the instruction that follows. Academic, and behavioral, expectations must be taught as well as the standards of mastery or proficiency. Only then can progress toward expectations be monitored and documented to determine if expectations are being met. Students with identified behavioral problems must have their progress charted based on the plan agreed upon by the teacher and student. Teachers must utilize an established plan to document and modify behavior just

as they do in the teaching-learning process regarding the academic standards. The adults must collaborate and cooperate to ensure students are provided the opportunity to be successful. Ms. D confessed that she is always looking for new and different ways to meet the needs of the students she serves. She understands that authentic personalized learning requires constant innovation to identify ways to support students. She acknowledges that she is a little ADHD and understands that sometimes students will get fidgety. A variety of “fidgets,” e.g., stress balls and spinners, are kept on hand to provide for students who need something to do with their hands to sit still longer than 10 minutes.

Regarding the universal design of learning, Ms. D reflected on her early years as the only student of color in her class and on the project-based learning she enjoyed. She noted that it permitted her to decide what she wanted to learn and how she wanted to demonstrate that learning. Project-based learning involves seeing, hearing, doing, discovering, and creating, and it is personalized. During the summer 2021 session, Ms. D worked with a group of students to help them get caught up to begin the school year on track. She assured the students that she would not allow them to fail if they committed themselves to the process, that they would have the teacher support needed to pass their classes and the EOC assessments to ensure that they were college or career ready. She encouraged teachers to become life-changers and to ensure that the students are prepared to be productive citizens upon exiting the program. She noted that she looks deeper than the skills students possess when they arrive. Just like any story that is written, she says, “We can change the plots and climaxes if we are willing to change the trajectories of our students’ lives.”

*Compassionate Educator DNA*

Ms. D's mother was the eldest of seven children between her grandmother and grandfather. However, she was the only one among her sixteen siblings to finish college. She became an educator and prided herself as the teacher who asked for the student other teachers on her team described as "bad". She requested that these students be assigned to her class all the years she was a classroom teacher. She served as team leader, lead teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, college professor, and educational consultant before retiring. Growing up in the house with her mother and watching her navigate the profession for 45 years provided much exposure to the life-long learning of a career educator and instilled the love of learning within her.

Ms. D's parents met in college and married at the age of 21 because of a pregnancy. Her dad dropped out during his senior year and went to work for the railroad without finishing the physical education degree he had been working toward. Her mom completed her degree and went to work as a teacher in her dad's southwest Georgia hometown.

When it was time for Ms. D to attend kindergarten, she tested so well on the pre-assessment that she was assigned to the new magnet school that had recently opened. The year was 1979. Her mom dropped her off on the first day of school but was reluctant to leave her because she was the only student of color in her kindergarten class. Her mom scanned the room and immediately began to back out of it with the young Ms. D in tow. Ms. Walker, the kindergarten teacher who remains one of her favorite teachers still today, followed her mom into the hallway. "Ms. Walker explained that my placement in her



class was based on my performance on the pre-assessment given to all kindergarten students and that if I were denied this opportunity because I was the only African American child in the class, I would be denied the opportunity to learn and grow and achieve to my fullest potential.” Ms. D reflected that Ms. Walker was able to convince “my mom to allow me to stay.” Ms. Walker shared with her mom that the young Ms. D would probably face many similar challenges along the way throughout life, but this should not deter her from allowing her child a chance to reach her full potential and that her little girl with brown skin and red hair would be just fine in her class.

“It turned out that that classroom was quite diverse despite the appearance of me being the only student of color in the room. There were Muslim, Jewish, and a whole hodgepodge of students that appeared White. It was my first ‘We Are the World’ experience, and the beginning of my journey of learning and excelling in school.” Ms. D also noted, “There were performing arts and project-based learning in this magnet school. The teachers used lots of innovative, hands-on activities to keep us engaged.” The first time she experienced any struggle was in the fourth grade. “I’m not sure if it was the teacher or if it was only that I needed glasses.”

Then Ms. D’s parents divorced. They had done quite well as a young couple. They had bought a house and cars, but distractions and temptations, including infidelity and drug abuse, were too much. Thus, her mom, her younger brother, and she moved back to her mom’s hometown. This move introduced Ms. D to her first African American teacher who noticed her interest in the arts, and with her mom’s permission, she exposed Ms. D to operas, plays, and symphonies. “I was also very athletic and extremely popular

among my peers.” The remainder of her K-12 experience was that of being one of two or three African American kids in the class. She also had her first experience of verbal abuse from both African American and White kids. The African American kids accused her of thinking she was better than they were. The White kids felt she did not belong in the classes with them.

Ms. D feels she is a good fit for working with the students the Academy because she has a passion to see all students become all that they can be. She speculates that growing up in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church was what prepared her for her life’s work with students. From an early age, she was required to read and recite in front of audiences Easter speeches, readings, and poems. She was Sunday School secretary starting at age 5. These church activities prepared her to facilitate professional learning sessions. Educators benefit from the professional development training she redelivers.

### *Obstacles That Confront*

The major concern of Ms. D as she works in this nontraditional setting is the loss of life due to the awful cycle of violence—the current trend in this community. Another concern is the generational cycle of parents who have not had a great experience when it comes to school. To break this cycle, a GED program for parents has been established for interested parents. Parents want their children to be successful. However, they often do not possess the necessary skills or awareness of resources to assist in the process. Parents who request extra tutoring assistance for their students acquire some skills to help them because they are required to attend the sessions. Attending the sessions enables them to

assist their students, using the notes they took during the tutoring sessions. Parents are aware of their inability to help, but this process builds capacity within parents. The goal of the program is to prepare students to graduate and become productive citizens in the community. Ms. D finds it difficult to watch the local news because of the violence reported in the community. She is saddened by images of students she has worked with and nurtured who have either become the victim or the perpetrator in some violent act. She ponders the questions, as do I: “Why do these children think it is okay to go into the mall and randomly shoot someone? Where do they get these guns?” Too many young people seem to have no hope for their futures. She admits that it is often too much to bear.

Seven or eight students from this building have died since the COVID-19 pandemic began, but none were COVID-19 related. A recent loss of life involved two students—one was a victim, and the other was the shooter. Two families experienced a loss—one through death and the other sentenced to a 20-year prison term, without an education in a rapidly changing technological world. Most of the violence is environmental. Single mothers must work shifts that do not allow them to monitor what their children are doing. During a recent daily check-in, a student who was doing well, progressing toward his goal, and was working after school was found to be in possession of a gun. He said he had forgotten to remove it from his backpack. With tears in her eyes, Ms. D asked him if he were a killer. His response was, “No, ma’am.” She explained to him that if he were to point and fire that weapon, and the bullet hit someone, he could very well be a killer. She discussed the power and danger of carrying a gun. She

expressed that she does not understand why a 17-year-old feels the need to carry a gun for protection. Ms. D suggests that African American girls have more “bounce back” than African American boys because life has been beating them up since slavery. Ms. D confesses that she experiences internal conflict. She explained that she is excited to be positioned where she is because of the difference she feels she makes, but at times, she considers fleeing when she sees the students in whom she invests so heavily on the news as victims or perpetrators of violence.

Little victories are the catalyst that keeps Ms. D going. When she sees a student waiting to open the door for someone or hears a courteous “Yes, ma’am,” Ms. D noted that she calls these positive changes in students small wins. When she sees students who were written off by those who saw no potential, who could not envision them working diligently and independently, she noted that she counts the experience as a small win. She exclaimed, “The kids know that I love them!” She indicated that she understands the perfect lesson plan is not the perfect plan for every student—that one size does not fit all. She added that this practice, however, encourages the defense mechanism that is read by many in traditional educational settings as bad or apathetic.

This alternative, nontraditional setting is a program and program funding is different from school funding. Excluding the grants, the director/principal has been able to amass in the past couple of years, the program’s budget has been \$28,000 to serve the neediest students in grades 6-12 from the 12 middle and high schools in the district. During COVID-19, Ms. D reports a good bit of that \$28,000 has been allocated for cleaning supplies. Ms. D and her colleagues typically provide the funds for PBIS

celebrations. The original assumption was that referred students were to be assigned to the program for a designated period of time to be “cured” before returning to their home schools. Ms. D sees the authentic goal of this alternative nontraditional setting as being two-fold: (a) to provide intervention and support to prepare students to return to their home schools if possible and if preferred or (b) to remain in the program and complete requirements for high school and a career. Ms. D feels the funding should support this, but often it does not.

Books should follow students to the program. However, they do not. The staff must be creative about how it gets materials necessary to meet student needs. She has developed her own SEL curriculum although she received grant funds to support this effort. She thinks the grants are great but grants typically have a life cycle of two to three years. The task of finding ways to sustain grant-funded processes once the grant ends is tedious. Ms. D teased that she is quite adept at turning loaves and fishes into what the multitude needs. She expressed that they do what they can, despite the low budget. She glanced around the media center where the conversation took place and commented that the books need updating, but there are no funds to do so. She implied it feels like the days of segregation when it was standard practice for the African American schools to teach from used books and materials or with whatever was leftover or unwanted by the masses. She also noted that the students recognize and have commented that the materials in this program are not the same materials available to them in their home schools.

Many students find themselves in the nontraditional setting, not only because of chronic discipline issues but because they are 16 years old in the eighth grade. Evidently,

they were allowed to sit quietly while failing, without interventions or assessments to monitor progress. Ms. D calls this a disservice! Hopelessness is all they have known. Her goal is to teach students and their parents how to become advocates for themselves and their children. She has seen students who entered the Academy on the seventh-grade level and graduated. Many students eventually become eligible to return to their home schools but choose to remain. Others return to their home schools only to acquire a serious infraction so that they can return to the program. Ms. D has heard students state that they do not get the “same feel”, nor do they receive the same level of support at their home school that is available in the program. The student-teacher ratio is 15:1, and students can get the attention and personalized support they need to persevere and to be successful. According to Ms. D, it is an amazing feeling of pride to see students walk out wearing their caps and gowns after having worked through their issues, e.g., abandonment, moving from household to household, or bad attitudes. She admitted she had to learn that skills acquired in the DJJ probation officer position are not appropriate in this program. Those skills were replaced with social-emotional learning strategies and skills that remind her and the staff that students’ reactions reflect their lack of social-emotional intelligence. The five competencies of SEL are taught daily: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) responsible decision-making, (d) social awareness, and (e) relationship skills.

### *From Hopeless to Hopeful*

Ms. D feels the success rate of her students is impacted by the experiences they have had prior to their placement in the program. Students have experienced what it is

like to not be wanted. With that knowledge, she tries to not make them relive the trauma of the circumstances that have brought them to the Academy, i.e., the last incident that led to their referral to the program and the hearing with the district's chief legal counsel in a courtroom-like setting. Regarding criminalizing school behaviors and supporting the school-to-prison pipeline, Ms. D explained that she is disturbed that elementary test scores and behavior referrals are used to project the number of prison beds that will be needed. Her desire is to determine the root causes of the behavior. In most cases, according to Ms. D, students act out because some basic need has not been met. She believes traditional educational policies and practices contribute to the systemic racism students face in traditional educational environments and experience as early as kindergarten. Her belief is that the system is designed to discourage some students. Ms. D and I agreed that the system is perfectly designed to get the results evidenced today.

According to Ms. D, this cycle has existed since the end of slavery and Jim Crow. She reflects we had "separate but supposedly equal classrooms before *Brown v. BOE*, but if you did anything to violate the norms of a school, the risk was being sent to the chain gang, juvenile detention, or jail if you were African American and male." The alternative nontraditional setting is often seen as the place to hold students who do not conform to the "norms" of traditional school until they eventually become a permanent fixture in the penal system. Ms. D mentioned a discussion with a group of students about the movie, *Life*. The students had seen the movie and thought it was very funny. Ms. D explained to them that the movie was about chain gangs that were created when slavery ended because free labor was needed to work in the fields. Chain gangs were made up of mostly African

American males who were accused of minor crimes but were sentenced to 10, 20, or 30 years to fulfill the need for free labor. She shared with the young men that “the same bricks that build schools also build prisons.” Too often for the Black male, it feels like the system prefers to prepare the jails and prisons for them rather than to create schools that will prepare Black and Brown males to assume positive and productive roles in society. She equates this to modern-day slavery. Even today, we see African American men detained by the police for minor offenses, and for many, the result has been deadly. Even when one is well-educated and African American, he or she is constantly at risk of being targeted and profiled, ending up in a precarious situation for something minor. It is the system and the mentality of the community that must change. When students arrive and appear to have little hope, Ms. D believes the role of the school should be to provide hope to the hopeless. She believes stakeholder perceptions and mindsets must change, and all stakeholders must humanely manage behaviors to help students seek a better way.

As a mother of two African American males, I remember having to talk with them after they had earned their driver’s licenses to remind them to keep both hands visible, to not be combative, and to say, “Yes, sir” or “No, sir” when questioned because I needed them to come home safely. Even now when they come home to visit from Germany and Maryland, I am compelled to remind them, and they are adults ages 37 and 29, respectively. Because Ms. D has a good relationship with her students, she is able to share her wisdom. Because there is mutual respect, they listen, learn, and take in all the tips and strategies she shares to help them to navigate this world, which is often cruel. In providing a description of the cruel world, she noted that it is a world that sees an African



American male and immediately suspects that he is devious or guilty of something simply because of the color of his skin.

Ms. D is adamant that students learn better from teachers they like and teachers they know like and care about them. These teachers acknowledge them as human beings first. She indicated that she believes students will be better behaved, more engaged, and put forth more effort when they know they are loved. She focuses on teaching her students how to advocate for themselves the right way. She stated that she believes students' learning needs must be personalized to give them hope and the desire to persevere and move forward, despite the current circumstances of their lives. She also indicated she believes a non-aggressive approach to relationship-building is needed. She added that an aggressive approach would result in aggressiveness because many of the students are filled with aggression and were referred because of aggressive behavior. She stated that her colleagues with a growth mindset hold each other accountable, but those with fixed mindsets are offended by accountability. Accountability, especially at the Academy is huge. Her next point of growth is andragogy to improve her ability to work with adult learners during professional learning sessions. She noted that she believes educators must live in a constant state of learning to be effective and contagious life-long learners. She explained that contagious life-long learners spread the love of learning to the teachers and students in their circle of influence. Because her director has expanded her duties to administrative support, she is responsible for disseminating or redelivering professional learning to teams and departments.

### *Legacies and Dreams*

The legacy Ms. D would like to leave the students who pass through this alternative, nontraditional environment is, “Life is going to come at you, forever!” She explained that life does not stop; age does not matter. She expressed that how one conducts his or her life is what matters and what makes the difference. She indicated that every day may not be one of the best, but it is the decisions and reactions that one must learn to live with and own. She noted that she believes it is important that students learn to advocate for themselves. She shared this applies to herself as well. She stated, “I want them to learn how to advocate, to be successful, to have hope, to understand that it is okay to not be afraid to say what they can or cannot do, but to be willing to ask for help when help is available.”

On the third day of our interview, a student was presented with a sweater with the school’s crest. The sweater is presented to students when they begin to own their learning, focus on their goals, and begin to move independently toward meeting them. It was presented in the presence of staff, and the shock, surprise, and pride on the student’s face was something I shall never forget. This student has been staying late on most days lately. Ms. D is not sure if it is because she feels safe or because of the wi-fi. I was working in the media center this afternoon and had observed her being fully engaged in the assignment. After some time, I inquired as to what she was working on, and she said it was physical science and that she loved science.

Ms. D encourages students to focus on themselves and their individual needs while at school. She reminds them that people are good and sometimes helpful, but they

must learn to manage themselves for their own success. She noted that students should know their Lexile level, and she makes sure that they do. She tells them to become aware of their triggers—things that make them happy, things that make them sad, things they need help with; and things they can do independently. She helps them to develop the executive functioning skills needed to function during the day and to navigate life beyond school. She tells the story of two sisters who have been back and forth at the Academy for a couple of years. Their mom was 14 when she had her first baby and is just now beginning to be able to provide some stability for them. Ms. D notes that she can see the difference in their achievement and behavior now that they are no longer in and out of homeless shelters. The mother is working, and they have a house and a car. She sees hope in their eyes. A 16-year-old student trusted Ms. D enough to ask for help with life skills she recognized she needed. Specifically, she wanted Ms. D to teach her how to count change so her mother could stop arguing about her being unable to count if she did not receive the correct change at the store.

Ms. D recognized that building relationships can be difficult when students have only experienced suffering and negativism from many of the adults they have encountered in school. Oftentimes their parents' experiences with school do not bring back fond memories and this only serves to compound the mistrust and abuse they associate with school. Schools should be a place students love—a haven. However, many students do not love school. Traditional educational settings have failed to meet the needs of too many students, especially students of color who often arrive underprepared for the curriculum maps and instructional practices designed with the one size fits all mindset.

Ms. D has fond memories of her school experiences. Ms. D noted that as professional African American women, we can count our blessings as we were fortunate to have had great teachers, parents, and grandparents who made sacrifices to pave a smoother path for us to do better and achieve more than they had been able to. Our parents, along with the entire village, had high hopes that our struggles would not be as severe as theirs. We, in turn, have modeled those same behaviors for our own children, nieces, and nephews. We must see the importance of modeling the same for the students we serve because we may be the only positive model they see in their daily lives. She reflected and stated too many children have “daddies but no fathers to guide them” She indicated that they live in homes with single mothers. African American males will often assume the responsibility of having to take care of everyone else, even when they are children themselves. Too much responsibility too soon prompts them to exhibit negative behaviors at school because they serve in an adult role at home and are not accustomed to being told what to do.

As educators, we must be willing to get to know our students and determine what it takes to increase the desire to obtain an education and help them to understand what education has to offer them. The same method will not work for every student, but we must do whatever it takes to get them excited about school and allow the teachers and administrators to prepare them for a more productive life. This must be our mission and our resolve. COVID-19 revealed nationwide how unprepared our students are, how we have failed to meet the needs of large sectors of students in traditional public-school settings. The capacity is within the students, and teachers have the knowledge and tools

to develop that capacity. However, it is important for adults to do whatever it takes to get to know the students, build strong relationships, and nurture that capacity to its fullest potential. Educators must be willing to embrace ALL students to support them until they realize that a good education is worth the effort. Ms. D declared that kids are immune to punishment, and we confuse them when we love them. Suspension is never her first response. “I greet students with love. I tell them I love them. This blows their minds. They are familiar with adults telling them everything that they are not. I tell them everything that they are and help them to imagine the possibilities of what they can be.”

### *Contradictions*

Ms. D believes traditional instructional policies and practices sometimes contradict and appear to be counterproductive for the students served in this alternative nontraditional setting, e.g., a review of TKES, Number 4, which requires differentiated instruction, holds all students accountable using the same standardized assessment. Teachers are required to instruct and assess in ways the students learn best. However, at the end of the year, mastery of the course is determined by one standardized measurement. Ms. D reflected on her early years and the project-based experiences at the first school where she was the only student of color in her class. She was allowed to show what she was learning in the ways she learned and demonstrated best. Because some students experience test anxiety or are not good test-takers, a standardized test does not always reflect what they know and have learned. If teachers are expected to differentiate instruction for 179 days, one standardized assessment should not be used to determine if a student is proficient in any course.

Students walk into the building one way and leave a different way. Multiple programs are in place to meet the varied needs of students. The Opportunity Achievement Center (OAC) students are in grades 6-12 and are there because of the disposition resulting from an evidentiary hearing due to a behavioral incident that occurred at their home school. Six teachers serve these students, and their challenge is having to teach both middle and high school courses, e.g., the science teacher may teach or facilitate physical science, biology, chemistry, and physics; the math teacher may teach or facilitate seventh or eighth-grade math, algebra I and II, geometry, and trigonometry. Ms. D shared the story of an OAC student who was focused and working diligently but quit the program when he felt he had to go to work to help his mom make ends meet. This student was committed to school to the point that on several rainy mornings, he arrived drenched and had to have his clothes washed and dried. He was a brilliant student, made good grades, and had the highest Lexile of anyone in the OAC program. His job schedule prevented him from continuing in the program. According to Ms. D, she saw him working at a pizza restaurant. Although he made every effort to avoid her, Ms. D spoke with the manager to see if his hours could be adjusted to permit him to complete his credits to graduate and improve his options for a productive life. The downside to the OAC program is transportation. Transportation is provided; however, students must be picked up at unsupervised stops. When parents are committed to supervising their own students to and from these stops, the process works.

When asked what changes she would make at the Academy to make it more conducive for learning, Ms. D stated she would generalize funding to purchase proper

furniture, sponsor field trips—especially to museums—and other enriching opportunities. She added that she would also generalize funding to utilize mentors and speakers to facilitate exposure to various careers and to build a playground, which would be used to develop physical and interactive skills, which many of the students lack. When she worked in rural Southwest Georgia, Ms. D established a club to expose her Black and Brown students not served in the gifted program to different cultures. To become a member, students had to write an essay. She had over 250 students to apply, but only 50 were accepted. They learned that there were differences in cultures, but that difference did not mean better—"no one is better than you are" was stressed. They found adjectives, i.e., dauntless, and indestructible to describe themselves. They performed talent shows and presented a multi-cultural wax museum. They showcased their talents, even though they had not been privileged to attend formal dance classes, voice lessons, and gymnastics. Parents were so proud and excited to see their children showcasing talents that were often unknown to them. They visited HBCUs and learned about Greek fraternities and sororities. They took an overnight field trip to Atlanta during which Ms. D discovered many students had not been on the interstate highway or a charter bus before. When they passed through Cordele, Georgia, some students thought they were in Atlanta. Once in Atlanta, they purchased city passes and visited the Fernbank Science Center, the Georgia Aquarium, the MLK Jr. Center, and the home of MLK Jr. They had dinner at Dave and Buster's. This event was a major success! One day, a club member got in trouble at school and was wearing a club t-shirt. As club advisor Ms. D demanded that he turn his shirt inside out for the remainder of the day, and he was not allowed to

wear it to school for a month. He corrected his behavior and exhibited good behavior the remainder of the year.

When she was 17, Ms. D recalled a time when she tried her hand at being disobedient. Her mother stripped her of all her belongings for a month. Her white wrought iron bed was reduced to a mattress on the floor with one sheet. Her clothes were reduced to a pair of jeans and a white t-shirt. She was given one pair of no-name-brand tennis shoes. She could not use the phone, and her car keys were confiscated. Her mother reminded her that she worked hard to provide all she needed. Her only job was to go to school and do her schoolwork. “This taught me that respect was always my mother’s and how blessed my life was. I had the meanest mother. She was so mean that she never had to visit the cemetery, the jail, or the clinic. She was so mean that she got to see me graduate from college.” Clearly, Ms. D is grateful for her journey. Her goal is to help the students enrolled in the program understand that they can write their own stories if they can make the commitment to dream beyond their current circumstances.

**Portrait #2-Dr. J—Write a Vision, Make It Plain—A Time for New Wine**

Dr. J is a mid-50s African American woman who has worked in the field for more than 20 years. She is always well-manicured and nicely dressed, even on the days I visited, and everyone was dressed down in jeans or full camouflage. She has a reputation of being loved and respected by her staff and students.

Dr. J has served the past four years as principal and director of the Academy. Her role has evolved, and she is now the director of Personalized Learning and Alternative Education for the district. She uses the NAEA’s 15 Exemplary Practices as her



guidebook. Georgia has recently developed standards for alternative education that are aligned with the NAEA's 15 exemplary practices. A crosswalk of both sets of practices has been done and is part of the continuous improvement plan for the Academy. This Academy is an authentic model for alternative education, and action research is conducted regularly to maintain the mindset of continuous improvement as the Academy becomes the leading model for best practices in alternative nontraditional education and personalized learning within the state.

Dr. J started college to become a nurse, but because of the amount of reading required in the science courses, she was unsuccessful in this endeavor; so, she accepted a managerial position in a grocery store chain in her hometown. Her focus became store management, and she was well on her way in this direction until the day a professor from a nearby college who frequented the store observed her interacting with an employee in the produce section. The employee was building a box cart and was having difficulty determining the amount of wood needed. She explained to him how to set up a proportion and how to cross multiply and divide to determine what supplies were needed. When the professor checked out, she left her business card and invited Dr. J to a meeting the following week, which was all about becoming a teacher. Dr. J attended the meeting out of curiosity and discovered she had enough credits to enroll in the program. However, she made the professor aware that her goal and interest was to become the manager of this local grocery store. The professor convinced her that she could both teach and work at the grocery store. Dr. J explained that she continued to work and went through the program at this college and earned her traditional certification to become a mathematics teacher.

She had never planned or wanted to enter the field of education, although she has two older sisters who are educators—one is a retired principal, the other is a former English teacher, and her mother worked in schools later in her life. Dr. J never planned to go into education.

*Education—The Non-Negotiable*

Dr. J is one of 13 children. Her mother, a domestic worker, did not earn her GED until she was in her 20s. Her father, a chef, had acquired only a third-grade education. However, education was a priority in their home because her parents knew the value of an education. Dr. J's mother eventually completed her degree at the age of 60 from a local women's college. Education was non-negotiable in their household. As was the expectation, Dr. J and her siblings had good attendance in school. The expectation was expansive as they were required to develop a plan to acquire as much education as possible.

Dr. J admitted that she struggled in school in the area of reading, but because her family was known in the community, she believes she was given better grades than she deserved, despite her struggles. Dr. J reflects that she was not a below-average achiever in school. She recalls struggling with reading and writing but loved math and science. She and her best girlfriend made a pact—Dr. J would do their math assignments, and her girlfriend would do the English and writing assignments. This pact was how she made it through high school. Together, they went on to Tuskegee Institute, and it was not until she was 22 years old and could not pass the Regent's test that a teacher in reading support

class took time to close her reading and writing gaps. None of the teachers in her K-12 experience recognized or addressed these struggles, probably because she was very good at suppressing them. Negative experiences during her early education have served as her motivation. She stated, “to not do what was done to her.”

Dr. J chose to work in an alternative, nontraditional setting. She described herself as a nontraditional student who was never afforded a nontraditional opportunity. After climbing the ladder of success to becoming a leader of a high school, she wanted her high school to be one that served all students in a nontraditional way. She noted that she began to ask, “Am I reaching everybody? Am I reaching the most wounded students?” Within programs she developed on the high school campus where she served as principal, she handled issues that were typically referred to the district’s alternative school. The data from the alternative schools or nontraditional settings that indicated students were going to jail or being buried disturbed her. She feels her assignment is a divine appointment—a divine assignment; she was driven and had to go deeper. She contended that she does what she does out of commitment and obedience to that divine assignment. It was not logical for her to accept a position at the Academy because she had experienced good success at her old high school, which had grown tremendously under her transformational leadership. It was a financial powerhouse, an athletic powerhouse, programs were added, and enrollment increased. On the contrary, the alternative school was considered an unsuccessful program where students were sent for behavioral issues or lack of credits with ineffective staff and very few resources. The reason she finally accepted the position was based on a conversation she had in January during her sixth year at the high school

she had turned around. She presented an idea with a plan to the superintendent to help the current alternative school leadership operate a more effective program. The superintendent asked her who would implement the plan. Her response was “someone special.” Fast forward to June of that same year when the director of the alternative school resigned from her position.

### *A Divine Appointment*

During the annual district leadership symposium, the superintendent asked if he could speak with her. He asked if she remembered the plan she had shared and if she thought it could happen sooner than later. They had originally discussed her implementing this plan after she had completed her seventh year at her high school. She discussed the proposition with her husband, and he felt the move did not make sense. While she was contemplating what to do, one of her former students requested that she attend his sentencing hearing as a character witness after he was convicted of killing another young man. Because his case kept being pushed back Dr. J. was forced to listen to all the other cases involving young African American men. The judge asked each one if he could read and what their highest level of education was. One after the other, the answer was the same; they all were illiterate, and all had dropped out of school. Tears began to flow, and Dr. J said, “Yes, God!” When she went before the judge, she explained that this young man was a gifted student with a high school diploma, and although he was guilty of this crime, he really should not be in this predicament. This young man had a young child, whose mother had died the month prior, and now the child would grow up without either parent. She shared that she understood that the judge and

the attorneys were only doing their jobs. As an educator this experience taught her that she had to do a better job to prevent this cycle from continuing because this young man and so many others should not be in any courtroom. They need more positive options in life.

Dr. J noted that when she met with the superintendent, her response was “Yes, even though I don’t want to say yes, my answer is Yes!” She said he responded that he was surprised because he expected a conversation revolving around salary negotiation. She knew that as a district director, the move would mean a cut of tens of thousands of dollars. She told him she was confident he would be fair, and he suggested that her salary be frozen at its current level. This move was a major one and a news release had to be done. The members of the BOE would not approve the transfer until they had spoken to her directly and received some assurance that she was making the transition willingly and that the move was not a punishment or a demotion. Dr. J believes her steps have been ordered all along the way.

Dr. J had used nontraditional practices and strategies when she served as principal of the low-performing traditional high school she had turned around. These efforts were based more on trial and error or on what she thought students needed, based on her experience when working with students who learned differently. Her beginning efforts were based more on her instincts than on actual research-based nontraditional educational practices. Nevertheless, students benefitted from them. When she moved from what she described as *nontraditional experimentation* to this actual alternative setting, it was important for her to see what the research was saying about alternative education. The

first thing she did was to become affiliated with the state and national alternative education organizations, i.e., the Georgia Association for Alternative Education (GAEE) and the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA). Taking the initiative to explore on her own, she read the *15 Exemplary Practices for Alternative Education* published by the NAEA. The district had not seen or used these exemplary practices, and, at that time, there was no one in Georgia whose specific duty and responsibility addressed alternative education, although alternative education was listed as an additional duty among a long list of duties. Today, the Georgia Department of Education has such a position. The responsibilities of the employee who holds it are specific to alternative education. Alternative education has changed since Dr. J assumed the role of principal and director of the alternative program. The change signifies the direct focus—alternative schooling—not alternative education. The perception was that students with behavior disorders or discipline issues receive alternative education. Dr. J’s goal is to change this perception by defining and explaining alternative schooling.

#### *Defined Autonomy to Do What’s Right*

Dr. J took the initiative and received district support with defined autonomy. She was trusted and given the authority to turn this alternative program around, based on her experience and track record as a transformational leader. She views defined autonomy as district support in and of itself. She was never micromanaged; however, it took much time and effort to get the right personnel in place because she was directing a program and not a school. Programs do not have the same level of funding as do schools, so the district determined the support and the budget for the program. Her secretary was also the

bookkeeper, the registrar, and the front office clerk. Her budget was really low--\$25,000. She has had to advocate and justify the needs for the Academy, which has evolved since students are referred and many choose not to return to their home schools. Dr. J is adamant in her belief that if students remain in the program all year, the full-time equivalent (FTE) dollars should not be applied to the home school; they should be applied to the Academy because student achievement is tied to the Academy. FTE is based on student enrollment and the education services provided by local systems to students. This data is collected Quality Basic Education (QBE) funding (QBE, 2021). She continues to have these courageous conversations and discussions seeking more district support.

Dr. J is a risk-taker and is always open to trying new things. She writes grants to obtain the resources needed. She has relationships with a wide network of people, and through these relationships, she can obtain what her staff needs to serve their students. The week I interviewed her, she noted that she was offered 300 personal agendas for her kids. Between the grants and relationships, she does not worry about not having the resources needed. She noted that she will quickly write an action memo, solicit assistance from Title I, or work with home school principals to obtain needed materials and resources. She is very resourceful and is never satisfied with not having what is needed to improve outcomes for her students.

#### *An Abrupt Appointment with Obstacles that Confront*

Dr. J discussed her placement in this setting as the number one barrier she faced in the beginning. Her placement was so controversial that there had to be a press release

because the BOE members thought she was being punished by the decision. The superintendent had to convince the BOE members that Dr. J had initiated the move and shared the alternative school plan she had submitted to him months before. Another barrier was financial, which impacted the resources available for the Academy. The transition from the traditional high school where she had earned her *turn around principal* [with emphasis] nickname evoked an emotional barrier as well, due to the relationships that were left behind and the new relationships that had to be formed. This place, now known as *The Academy*, had always been considered the least. It housed the lost, the forgotten, and the discarded.

The financial barrier of having to operate on a \$25,000 budget made Dr. J more determined to grow this program into a million-dollar operation—a million-dollar budget for a million-dollar facility. Ms. D and other leadership team and faculty members looked at her like she was crazy when she announced that this Academy would someday become a million-dollar program. The next year she wrote the grant for YouthBuild and the Academy was awarded one million dollars. YouthBuild partners with programs serving young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor employed and who lack a high school diploma and financial resources. YouthBuild believes these young adults are in the greatest need of support and are our greatest source of untapped potential. YouthBuild provides the opportunity for young people to reclaim their education, gain job skills, and become leaders in their communities. YouthBuild funds programs throughout the United States and across the globe—over 275 YouthBuild programs in 18 countries (YouthBuild, 2022). YouthBuild students at the Academy



participate in a pre-apprenticeship constructions training program facilitated by YouthBuild staff and the local Habitat for humanity and includes job placement opportunities and follow-up. Students split their time between the construction site and the classroom. The following year the YouthBuild program at the Academy was awarded \$1.5 million. The grants continue to flow.

Dr. J appreciates the autonomy to take risks and to do whatever it takes that will be beneficial to students. When the YouthBuild students completed their first house in May 2021, the superintendent shared with Dr. J that he did not know how this plan to build a house was going to come to fruition. He noted that Dr. J was so confident that this was going to happen, he relaxed a bit and amazingly found himself standing in front of a completed house. The district leaders follow the data and results. Dr. J touts, “No one is going to invest in you if you don’t have a track record for making things happen.”

#### *The Academy’s Leadership Team*

The leadership team is responsible for looking at daily and weekly data points. Because the staff make expectations clear to students, behavior is not a data point reviewed. Dr. J is grateful that few discipline referrals are submitted because it takes her an hour to complete a discipline referral in Infinite Campus, the student information system. She chuckles when she tells the story of a new student who was acting out. She asked him, “Who do you see that is behaving like you?” He identified himself as an outlier and was able to begin to monitor and manage himself accordingly. Teacher attendance is another data point about which she does not have to worry. Priority data points at the Academy are literacy and getting students to read on grade level; reviewing

STAR data specifically for growth between the fall, winter, and spring administrations; and student engagement during literacy blocks. Dr. J has an early morning and a mid-morning check-in with the students. The all-hands-on-deck check-in call includes the head custodian. The process involves walking and observing student engagement, using a checklist with defined criteria to examine the degree of engagement at that moment in time. The observers note the number of students with their heads down. If heads are down, the observer asks why and determines if the students are well or need something. It is a collective responsibility for all adults in the building. If there is a communication problem, her duty is to find out why it is happening and to address the root cause so that it does not occur again. Expectations for staff and students are clearly defined at the Academy.

Leadership team meetings function as professional learning opportunities. During their last meeting held before our final interview, Dr. J had the team participate in an interviewing role-play activity. She asked them questions related to processes they had learned and implemented—processes they should know well and be comfortable and fluent enough to speak intelligently about within two minutes. She provided feedback on their responses which had to be provided in their first-person voice. Dr. J feels her staff should be able to verbalize the mission, vision, and expectations of the Academy when asked within two minutes as she sees it is everyone's responsibility to tell the Academy's story in the most accurate and succinct manner.

Four leadership team members are currently enrolled in the Alternative Preparation for Educational Leadership (APEL) program because the Academy does not

earn a personnel allotment for an assistant principal. These candidates, recommended by Dr. J, will earn their leadership certification allowing her to carve out their schedules so they can be assigned and perform leadership responsibilities to assist her daily. She believes in building leaders because she knows she cannot do it all herself. She also knows what she needs. She had her staff complete a talent inventory that provides information about what they like, what they do not like, their expertise, their certifications, and their innovative ideas. The data she gathered supported the strategic placement of staff members to advise the right clubs and to serve on the right committees. Collaborative planning is daily from 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. and is ongoing with the leadership team and at departmental levels. Members of the leadership team and selected faculty members will be working on their Personalized Learning Endorsements this year.

Dr. J described herself as a leader who comes with a school improvement background. She sees herself as an instructional leader with experience as an academic coach and assistant principal of instruction leading an alternative school. Dr. J proclaims, “My eye is going to always be on instruction and school improvement.” Most training provided for alternative school deal with PBIS and socio-emotional learning (SEL) and lean toward improving behavior and engaging families. What is different for Dr. J is her focus on common assessments, benchmark data, and common planning for staff. This year, 18 members of her faculty are engaged as they are part of the first cohort for the Personalized Learning Endorsement through the local Regional Education Service Agency (RESA). The Academy’s staff will be the first faculty to complete this endorsement which addresses the process and the pedagogy of personalized student

learning—differentiation v. individualization v. personalization—to meet the needs of all students. This personalized learning endorsement cohort is for a full year and consists of three courses. The other half of the staff will participate in the second cohort next year.

The personalized learning training prompted Dr. J to do things differently beginning the second semester. She declared if they had received this training before school started in August, they would have changed some things around, such as getting to know the students and learning how they engage. Qualitative data on students would have been used initially to inform planning, scheduling, and interactions. She noted that a school-wide effort to implement this component of personalized learning was set to begin January 2022.

Dr. J proclaims that traditional educational policies and practices do not meet the needs of nontraditional students. The Academy has evolved into a personalized learning center. She boasts that they personalize down to the family, unlike traditional settings, unfortunately. She meets with every child and parent who enters the Academy and engages in a detailed conversation with them. She discusses options to earn their diploma and permits them to select the desired option. She also entertains discussions revolving around classes of interest and postsecondary plans. In this setting, they can be flexible when ordering the classes students will take, determining the methods of instructional delivery and schedules—online or face-to-face, two days per week, or three days per week. The structure is totally opposite of traditional programs, but this is what is needed. Power standards and a tiered approach are used to instruct and support nontraditional students. Data utilization tools are used to review student data from common

assessments, teacher assessment protocols, and common benchmark assessments. Data utilization tools are also used to ensure students are mastering concepts and standards with tiered support. The State curriculum is used and is vertically aligned because the students enter on different performance levels. Literacy is the focus and is embedded in all core areas across the curriculum. Each student has his/her own academic plan with personalized power standards.

*No Excuses Necessary*

Dr. J believes everything she has been through makes her the perfect candidate to lead this alternative nontraditional educational setting. She feels her testimony makes her a good candidate because she never gives up on students with excuses or barriers to graduation, such as domestic abuse, suicidal ideations, addictions, financial issues, and/or a non-supportive pregnancy. Dr. J. noted that these excuses or barriers might possibly make one feel hopeless and think, “I can’t get a diploma. I can’t go to college. I can’t earn a doctorate degree. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t...How in the world?” Dr. J shared that her oldest daughter got pregnant at 15, but it was not used as an excuse to quit. She has recently earned a specialist degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Thus, Dr. J was prepared to always say to her children and the young people she influences, “Yes, you can do it! Yes, you will do it! Yes, you are going to do it because I did it myself!”

Students are sent here because their home schools have given up on them and believe they are not going to make it in life, that they will never graduate because they have (a) been involved in fights, (b) brought a weapon to school, or (c) earned few credits. Dr. J proclaims, “Yes, they will graduate! Yes, they will go to college! Yes, they

will be something in life!” All that negative talk about students made her more determined to change the narrative. Dr. J loves the underdog. She turned around the traditional high school she had been assigned to. It was considered the underdog school with a graduation rate of 46 percent and the highest percentage of known gang participation in the district. She has always had the heart for the underdog. You cannot tell Dr. J that her alternative educational setting is not equal to or not comparable to any traditional educational setting when it comes to preparing her students for postsecondary options. Just as in traditional schools, some students are registered in the dual enrollment program, have high SAT scores, and earn scholarships. There were occasions, according to Dr. J., when she would get angry or agitated when she was asked where she worked. She shared a time at the hair salon when someone asked where she worked. When she mentioned she worked at the Academy, the response was, “Oh, you’re over there with the bad kids.” Her retort was, “I don’t have any bad kids. You need to send your kids to the Academy.” Now that the word is out about the successes at the Academy, the phones are ringing all the time with parents and guardians calling to get their students enrolled. They do not appear to realize or perhaps they have forgotten that the Academy’s focus is on improving student behavior and academic restoration.

Dr. J declares she is not competitive, but she likes the underdog. She enjoys a challenge and likes to change the narrative for things that have been written off. This alternative program had been written off. She says it is apostolic on her part—her faith. She is known for taking bad situations and turning them around. She wants the places that she has been given the opportunity to impact to be a testimony to possibilities. She

contends data, teachers, and students can be moved. She views her role as the leader to make sure her teachers are financially secure and that their careers are thriving. She encourages them to go back to school to open opportunities for promotions, to move up, and to grow. Dr. J writes grants to fund day and afterschool programs that benefit her students and allows her staff to earn extra monies if it is their desire.

When Dr. J first arrived at the Academy, it employed 20 staff members.

However, that number has increased to 50. In the first year, 20 students graduated. In the 2018-2019 school year, 60 students graduated. In the 2019-2020 school year, 70 students graduated. And in the 2020-2021 school year, 81 students graduated. Test scores are improving significantly due to the Academy's positive image and re-branding as source of hope and continue to improve. Dr. J stated, "Parents and students are seeking us out and we are moving in the direction of becoming a full-blown school in and of itself. One day, we will be the VIP Academy." The major challenge for Dr. J revolves around low expectations from students, parents, teachers, and the community.

#### *Accountability Matters*

To ensure faculty and staff hold each other accountable, Dr. J has one conversation at a time, completes one write-up at a time, and holds one leadership team meeting at a time. She admits her leadership style is so different it often scares people. She expects everyone to be professional. She does not ask for lesson plans every Friday. Everyone is aware of the framework and curriculum maps to use for their content areas. All staff have been trained on Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is an approach to teaching and learning that offers flexibility in the ways students access material and

show what they know. UDL gives all students an equal opportunity to succeed. The goal of UDL is to use a variety of teaching methods to remove any barriers to learning and keep students motivated (Understood, 2022).

All staff are expected to have students complete a literacy-based bell ringer, an opening during each instructional block with a work session, and a closing. The bell ringer is an opening activator used to begin each instructional period during the school day. RTI based groups meet on Friday. She noted that a 10- or 30-minute walkthrough will inform her as to whether the framework is in place and is practiced daily. Only one new teacher in the building is currently on a professional development plan. She expects each professional to behave professionally. If they receive an email, they are expected to read it and respond appropriately. She sees her role as a builder of professionals. The expectations are clear, and she expects professionals to act accordingly.

Dr. J feels she needs to do a better job keeping her staff encouraged, but all adults celebrate the children, and they speak affirmations over them daily to build them up, and to keep them encouraged. Dr. J affirmed, “We don’t condemn them. We are fair, firm, and consistent, but they know that we love them, and we communicate that to them daily. We encourage them to never give up.” Relational processes are in place and implemented to keep students connected and willing to persevere. Dr. J interjected, “Of course, we can give certificates as rewards, but “the artifact is not the evidence.” She prefers to articulate the good things that happen—to speak it so the children hear and begin to believe the good in themselves. Her thought is that words echoing in the ears last longer than any piece of paper and are always there waiting to be heard. The Academy’s staff endeavors



to create an atmosphere of hope, an atmosphere of help, an atmosphere of healing for these precious students who have been wounded.

Dr. J lamented that the trust level between students and staff is stronger than the trust level among staff to staff. To address this, they have begun a book study on *The Trust Edge* (Horsager, 2018) that describes how leaders gain faster results, develop deeper relationships, and build a stronger bottom line. When one enters a place that has been written off and contains a known level of toxicity, the environment must be reconstituted. This takes time, according to Dr. J. Another advantage of defined autonomy Dr. J enjoys is the total responsibility for the hiring of faculty and staff. She finally has those on staff who desire to serve the nontraditional students at the Academy. She proudly exclaims, “I have made some great hires.”

#### *Legacies and Dreams*

If the sky were the limit and she could make significant changes, Dr. J indicated she would desire a residential campus. She would like to provide housing for the students she serves who lack stable home environments. Students would wear uniforms with blazers and ties supplied. Having dorms would ensure that what is accomplished daily is not undone when students go home each night, reducing the need to constantly reset and reteach. Training at the Academy would include life skills such as dinner table etiquette and the basics on how to have wholesome clean fun. Students would be allowed to decorate their dorm rooms with their own personal touches to suit their own tastes. Dr. J’s ultimate desire is for the Academy to become a full-fledged school versus only being considered a program right now. She believes if the Academy were able to have its own

school code, it would become the first among high-performing alternative educational settings with top test scores and extracurricular activities, including sports.

Dr. J sees her assignment to serve at the Academy as being more about obedience to her purpose in life—about what she has been called to do in her life—her mission. She feels she was instructed to go into the deep, and in doing so, she would find more fish. In the biblical story, the deep was a place where fish would not normally be caught. The fishermen had already explored the area, had caught no fish, and felt defeated. However, they were advised to go again at a specific time, at an appointed time. Dr. J is a witness that the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. The deep equates to a place of testing. It is in the deep that miracles happen. The Academy represented darkness and the deep, but every day at the Academy, Dr. J witnesses a miracle of some kind. What she has found in the deep has produced an overflow. Enrollment is growing, and this is a good thing. VIP Academy was born out of the Academy when there was a need for enrichment and support for gifted students when the COVID-19 pandemic made virtual instruction a required part of the new normal. VIP Academy is an overflow. Dr. J is just trusting that there will be more overflow resulting from her obedience.

There are those who considered her assignment to the Academy as a demotion, but she knows it was a promotion. Her efforts have earned her power and authority regarding alternative education in this urban district. This power and authority came as a result of her obedience when she accepted the call to serve the discarded students assigned to the Academy. She believes in seasons—in timing. She believes the Academy is a table that is being prepared for something new—for something better to meet the

needs of students who need something different—something more than what traditional education settings has offered them. The pandemic has revealed so many weaknesses in traditional education, and though there are attempts to regress to what we have known as normal, if we are honest, we know that we cannot go back to normal. This new wine cannot be contained in old wineskins, but it is potentially the change Georgia’s and the United States’ educational systems need to prepare all citizens to become productive and to compete in a global economy.

The legacy Dr. J hopes to leave is that love matters. She believes that when people are loved, positive changes can happen in the life of the one loved and in the life of the one expressing love. She repeated, “Love Matters.” Dr. J believes love covers a multitude of faults. She believes love will turn things around, and that we must love one another despite faults. She believes resting on this premise enables her to assist those in her circle of influence. Because of her love for the students, she can open doors and pave the way for them to obtain an education and change their trajectories. Dr. J’s mantra for those in her circle is, “Make things happen. Don’t just watch things happen.” She believes we all have some control of our own purpose and destiny by the reactions we have to our experiences in life. She believes that we do not have to take what others say about us at face value, that we must see past what others think, and live within our own realm of hope. What we see and dream in our realm of hope can come to fruition when we work toward making our dreams happen. Dr. J attested, “Love Matters. Hard work matters. Being different matters. It’s okay to be an individual. It’s okay to be innovative and creative. It’s okay to stay on the balcony when everyone else is on the dance floor.

It's okay to go through the narrow gate when everyone else goes through the wide gate. Being different matters, love matters, hard work matters. Being authentic matters. People are full of talking points and personal narratives but often omit the details. The missing details equal lies. When people know you are real and that you tell the truth, that you believe in collective accountability, you are viewed as credible and can be trusted."

Dr. J shared a story as an example of when a student, a parent, and a teacher were in her office. The student was charged by the teacher with using profanity. The student's response to the accusation was that the teacher also used profanity with him. When the teacher could not deny this fact, Dr. J ended the meeting and apologized to the parent for wasting her time. She assured the parent that she would address the issue with the staff member who had not been a role model for this student. The parent and student were dismissed. However, the conversation with the staff member continued for expectations to be reviewed and made clear. Should another incident occur with this same student, this parent has witnessed that Dr. J is fair, firm, and consistent and will be more likely to accept and support other decisions that impact her student. The parent is also likely to share with others how this encounter was handled. She reiterated, "When you have been real with people, it makes a difference." Dr. J. does not mind sharing her journey or her testimony, as she calls it, because she believes every challenge, struggle, and success she has experienced has prepared her for this time in her life. Dr. J supposes that "When you act as if you have not been through anything or when you act as if you have always been a professional with this master's or doctoral degree, no one will listen to you. People see

fake and pull the shades down on everything you have to say from that point.” Dr. J proclaims, “Being authentic matters. Being real matters.”

### **Portrait #3—Dr. A—Current Situations are Only Temporary**

Dr. A (pseudonym) is beginning her sixth year at the Academy. She started out as a Career Technology and Agricultural Education (CTAE) teacher for grades 9-12 but is now the media/technology/literacy teacher. She continues to facilitate the online courses for students enrolled in the Introduction to Business classes. Students rotate through the media center when they need additional literacy support that she provides. Dr. A is a late 40s African American woman who was born and raised in what she calls “the country” with God-fearing parents who knew that education was important. She proclaims, “Education was it! Education was everything!” Her parents were firm that she and her siblings would get an education. They worked hard because they knew education would be the key to their children’s success in society and their ability to sustain themselves as productive and contributing citizens. Her family did not have a lot of money as she was growing up, but she and her siblings were taught ethics and they were witnesses that hard work paid off.

Dr. A is a youth pastor in her church and has done volunteer work in her community with youth for years. She has a heart for young people and recognizes that young people will need the required education to obtain the quality of life they desire. She affirmed, “If they desire a certain standard of living, a good education is required.” 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills will be required to sustain a certain lifestyle and to be competitive in this global society, according to Dr. A. Working with young people from an early age,

being a youth pastor, and mentoring young people shaped Dr. A's belief that she can have a positive impact on the lives she touches, especially when she sees her students change direction from destructive to positive paths.

Dr. A articulated students just need to be loved and encouraged. She noted that each day she awakes, her purpose is to help young people see that they too have a purpose that can only be fulfilled by setting long- and short-term goals, including intermediate goals along the way. She stated that students must understand that not only must goals be set, but they must also understand that a plan must be developed with incremental steps to achieving those goals. Dr. A expressed that she strongly believes each student can learn when educators personalize their plans which would include establishing goals and acquiring necessary skills. Dr. A is unequivocal in her belief and stated, "We have to meet students where they are and bring them up from there to where they can experience success. We must use baseline data to begin and grow from there."

Her K-12 education experience was filled with teachers she describes as "phenomenal!" Decades later, she fondly remembers lessons she learned, and she teaches her students today many of those same concepts and skills with upgrades and enhancements she has learned along the way. She noted that she remembers her K-12 teachers as being phenomenal and hands-on. Dr. A reflected on the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child" and the book by Hilary Clinton (1996). Her teachers exemplified the village that was touted as a necessity to raise a child during the 70s and 80s. She stated that when a student got in trouble at school, there was double trouble at home. According to Dr. A, educators were esteemed and revered with the utmost respect

in her family. She noted that her grandmother had told her when she was a young girl that she would become a teacher. She rejected and denied the idea and told her grandmother that teaching was not her dream job—becoming a lawyer was her goal.

Dr. A says she never wanted to be a teacher. She exclaimed, “Never!” She received her master’s in business administration and began teaching at a technical college where she fell in love with teaching. From there, she taught at a private career college, then moved on to another private for-profit college. All her experience had been with adult learners in an adult learning environment. While teaching at the private college, she noticed severe academic gaps in students coming from high school to college. She decided then that maybe she could be that bridge to close the gap. As a business teacher, she observed the deficiencies were soft skills, hard skills, technology skills, and communication skills—all the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills she was teaching to adult learners. One of her friends mentioned a 9-12 high school CTAE position advertised at a local Academy and encouraged her to apply. CTAE integrates core academic knowledge with technical and occupational skills to prepare students for post-secondary education and the workforce. The state of Georgia has identified 17 Career Clusters, or career pathways, that are structured to prepare students for Georgia’s workforce after they leave high school. She stated that the name of the school prompted her to apply. She noted that she thought she was applying to a preppy, private school, but little did she know that the Academy was an alternative nontraditional school program. Dr. A was convinced the Academy was an institution with a distinguished group of scholars as in the days of Plato’s school of philosophy.

During the interview with the director/principal and the assistant principal, she noted that the director mentioned they served unique students. She was excited about the idea of working with unique students and shared her excitement throughout the interview. Approximately 40 minutes after her interview, she received a call offering the position and asking for her social security number to finalize the hiring process. She expressed that she was so excited.

The school year had already begun when she started the job in October, and she indicated that her first day at the Academy was a nightmare. After meeting her students, she exclaimed, “Oh My God!” In her mind, she stated that she quit every afternoon when she entered her home because she did not think she was created for that environment. However, she said her husband kept reminding her she was not a quitter, that she was a winner who loved children and that children had always had her heart. He reminded her that she would be able to impact the lives of those students, so she continued on her assignment.

Dr. A was enrolled in the Georgia TAPP (Teacher Alternative Preparation Program) and was learning strategies from classmates and teammates who had worked in alternative education. As she began to implement what she was learning, she found that the strategies worked, and by the end of the first semester, she noted that she was prepared—so prepared that she was soaring! The key to teaching the children at the Academy was building relationships and understanding that at some point, they had been hurt by adults they had encountered in school. Thus, she had to get them to trust her enough to relax and respect the classroom rules so she could teach them. By the second



semester, she knew she was making progress. She recalled saying, “I have got it now!” Her husband and her colleagues, especially Mr. L, the Edgenuity coordinator/Genius software manager, encouraged her.

Since being assigned to the media center, Dr. A has supported teachers as they implement different technological instructional strategies to prepare students with 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills they will need when they enter the workforce or go on to college. She provides professional learning for the teachers, making them aware of the digital, or technology, resources they can access to support the instruction they are providing for their students. The district’s instructional technology department has provided an instructional technology course card with numerous platforms or available resources with instructions on how to use them. They include Canvas, FlipGrid, Safari Montage, SmartNote, Exemplar Lessons, Minecraft, Study Island, USA Test Prep, and an abundant supply of assessment tools. In her role, Dr. A ensures teachers are aware of the countless tools that are available to support their instructional efforts. She shared that she was pushed out of her comfort zone to become the media support for the Academy, working with literacy, technology, and helping teachers integrate technology into their lesson plans and instruction. In addition to these duties, she also facilitates online business education classes.

#### *Real-Life Connections and Obstacles that Confront*

Dr. A noted that she is always looking for ways to relate her students’ needs to real-world applications. She said she stresses to them that they cannot fill out an application correctly unless they are able to read and write. She also said she stresses the

importance of an error-free job application and that errors of any kind could cause the applicant to not be considered. She knows that her students are capable of learning and growing and that they need guidance and mentorship to motivate them to get better every day. When students say they plan to enter the music industry, she noted that she reminds them that there are contracts to be read and signed if their dreams come true. She also noted that she tells them they risk being taken advantage of if they are deficient in reading. She always relates reading to the goals students are setting for themselves so that they understand the importance of being a good reader and writer regardless of the occupation of choice.

Dr. A perceives student reading ability as the major barrier she encounters in this alternative nontraditional educational setting. The baseline data, which includes Lexile scores, indicate students are reading well below grade level—two to three years below grade level, but oftentimes even more than that. This issue is challenging, and it is a huge barrier because reading is required across the curriculum. Dr. A stated that she often asks herself, “How can I get my students to reading on grade level?” When she started teaching at the Academy, it was most difficult because she did not have the needed strategies. For two years now, the district has provided professional learning in Core Six, and her principal, Dr. J, has implemented a schedule that includes reading 40 minutes daily—20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the afternoon. Students who need to learn sight words are required to practice Fry Sight words. Bell ringer activities involve writing constructed responses that build and improve students’ capacity to read. Dr. A noted these reading barriers exist because of socioeconomic reasons that reflect the high

rates of poverty in the community. Students come from single-parent homes with parents or guardians who are most often grandparents working multiple jobs. Reading is not a priority in these households because survival is paramount. Students are often left on their own to take care of themselves. No one is reading to or with them. These barriers motivate Dr. A to keep pushing, to do more to help students improve their reading levels. Core Six strategies incorporate reading and writing in every bellringer or assignment.

According to Dr. A, it is her faith that keeps her moving. She acknowledges that all of us experience life challenges and obstacles, but we should never give up or give in, even though we may want to give up or give in sometimes. She shares with her students that there are challenges and obstacles in her own life, but she chooses not to bring those things to work with her because her purpose is to prepare them so they will have better options. Dr. A noted that she makes learning relevant, at times, by helping the students understand that everything in her life is not always easy. When they realize they have or have had similar struggles, they recognize that their teacher is still functioning despite the difficulties. An affirmation recited daily to begin the school day at the Academy includes a line that says, “My current situation is only temporary.” Situations can and do get better. Dr. A thinks that we must make every single day count. She states none of us can go back to fix yesterday, so we must work to make each day a better day than the day before it. Educators, Dr. A believes, are students’ greatest cheerleaders. She affirmed, “We have the power to shape and mold them since we spend most of their waking hours with them.”

Dr. A constantly reminds her students that their current situations do not define who they are, but their character does. She noted that she stresses to her students that they cannot let others define what they believe about themselves. She said she also tells them it is important to know oneself, to tap into one's own capabilities. The Academy has another daily declaration that keeps the students and adults encouraged when things become challenging academically or otherwise. The daily declaration is, "...I fly like an eagle. I perform above and not beneath...My character defines me. I refuse to be labeled for my past. I was created to be a winner...I see like an eagle and my future is bright..." This entire declaration was videotaped with staff reciting the lines. After it was shared with the students, the students wanted to be videotaped as they recited the lines. These videos are published on the website and shared periodically as a reminder to students and staff that they can fly like an eagle.

The Academy's leadership team has completed a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) analysis as part of their strategic planning process. Dr. A stated that she shares with her students, "All of us have strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and each one of us must work on our weaknesses and turn them into strengths." STAR Assessments were used during the second week of this 2021-2022 school year to determine baseline data since students have been out of school or alternating between virtual and in-person learning due to COVID-19. STAR Assessments are short computer adaptive tests that provide teachers with learning data to drive instruction. Computer adaptive means these tests adjust according to the answers the students provide (Renaissance, 2022). This screener informs the staff where students are

currently performing so they can make the best instructional decisions when developing personalized learning plans. These data points give students' reading and math performance levels allowing the development of a targeted plan to support and personalize student learning in those areas. Dr. A collaborates with staff and students' teachers to ensure technology is included in their lessons and personalized learning plans. She provides professional development for teachers regarding the technology resources available to supplement classroom instruction to ensure the engagement of all learners. Interest inventories are utilized to determine student interests and to learn how students feel they learn best. The students served by Dr. A in the Business Education classes perform mostly project-based activities and assignments.

*Motivation: The Why*

Graduation motivates Dr. A. When students begin with her as ninth graders, and when she sees them through to graduation, Dr. A declared "This is what makes my time here worth it." Students have come back to let her know when they are graduating. She receives requests for job references for former students who have gone through the Academy and have since graduated. She stays connected with her former students to keep abreast of what they are doing. Dr. A repeated, "Graduation is what motivates me!" She shared a story from last year when she worked with fifth-year seniors. Eleven of these 15 fifth-year seniors graduated. One is still working toward completion and has not given up. "Knowing that you have played a part in a student's success means so much!" proclaimed Dr. A. We both agreed that when students come back to say thanks for specific things they learned under your tutelage, it means so much. Dr. A noted that a

student she had in the ninth grade quit school a couple of years ago but returned this past year. He is now a part of the YouthBuild program. When she saw him in the building, he asked her why she was not teaching upstairs anymore. Dr. A shared that her role had changed and that she had been moved to the media center. According to Dr. A, the young man responded, “That’s because you are a great teacher.” These occurrences are enough motivation for Dr. A to keep doing what she does when her former students come back to give a hug, to say thank you, to share that they knew how to dress for an interview that went well.

Dr. A believes she received the support she needed when she transitioned from her technical college position to the alternative nontraditional environment as she was assigned a mentor who guided her through the entire process. However, because she was also going through the TAPP program, she feels as if she was a failure during her first semester because what she needed initially was presented and learned after her first semester. She is grateful she had a mentor who helped her stay on track. Dr. A reasons that had she gone through the TAPP program first, she would have been more successful the first semester when she was learning and implementing strategies while attempting to impact student achievement. She gave a huge sigh, “Whew!!!” She noted that the TAPP program also assigned a mentor who observed, provided feedback, and suggested strong teachers for conducting observations in the building. The support was there; however, in hindsight, Dr. A noted that she would have preferred to have had the support prior to her transition to the Academy rather than concurrently, as she was adjusting to the new teaching environment.

Dr. A touted the countless hours of professional development she has been provided during the past five years at the Academy. She chortled and noted that she cannot count the hours because it seems she is always involved in one professional development or professional learning opportunity. When students have a day off from school, a professional learning day for the staff is scheduled. For the past couple of years, professional learning has focused on literacy and the literacy strategies to be embedded throughout lesson plans across the curriculum. The district continues to offer professional learning opportunities that help to support and engage the students to improve their learning outcomes.

One such opportunity Dr. A expounded upon is The Core Six (Silver et al., 2012). Core Six are essential literacy strategies—reading for meaning, compare and contrast, inductive learning, circle of knowledge, write to learn, and vocabulary’s code. These research-based strategies, according to Dr. A, assist teachers and students with the demands of Common Core standards and represent the professional development opportunity that projects as the most beneficial and valuable academic professional learning she has received thus far. Core Six strategies have helped the educators in this alternative educational setting to understand that literacy instruction must be embedded throughout the curriculum and across the content areas, regardless of the courses in which the students are enrolled. Bell Ringer activities provide opportunities for students to use a Core Six strategy to write constructed responses. The Core Six professional learning provided Dr. A, along with her colleagues, strategies to engage students to read for meaning and understanding.

The principal/director constantly encourages the Academy staff to lead and to step out and try new things. According to Dr. A, “Dr. J believes in us and says her staff can always do more and can always improve when it comes to serving students. She proclaims that leaders step out of their comfort zones to make things happen.” At the Academy, staff members are encouraged to polish their skills daily and prepare to go beyond the textbook. The staff members are supportive of one another and collaborate often. In her new role, as part of the leadership team, Dr. A is expected to hold her colleagues accountable by including literacy strategies and technology resources in their instructional practices. The technological resources allow them to reach and meet the needs of all students.

### *Contradictions*

Dr. A declares that traditional policies and practices do not work in nontraditional settings. An example to which she referred is Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES). Teachers in alternative nontraditional educational settings are held to the same standards as teachers in traditional settings. The teachers in alternative nontraditional educational settings are also held to the same policies and practices that produced failure for the students referred to the Academy. Nontraditional settings need policies and practices that change the trajectory for students. Dr. A stated, “We have to do something different. We must personalize their learning. We must love them and explain expectations and norms, build relationships, and then we can instruct the whole child.”

The Academy uses the exemplary practices rubric from the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA). The NAEA has identified 15 exemplary research-based



and field-tested practices. These practices represent standards and indicators of quality programming that provide educational leaders and practitioners with essential characteristics that are evident in successful nontraditional alternative educational schools and programs. The 15 exemplary practices that are appropriate for all nontraditional and alternative educational settings include the following topics:

1.0 Vision and Mission; 2.0 Leadership; 3.0 Climate and Culture; 4.0 Staffing and Professional Development; 5.0 Curriculum and Instruction; 6.0 Student Assessment; 7.0 Transitional Planning and Support; 8.0 Parent/Guardian Involvement; 9.0 Collaboration; 10.0 Program Evaluation; 11.0 School Counseling; 12.0 School Social Work; 13.0 Digital and Virtual Learning; 14.0 Policies and Procedures; and 15.0 Nontraditional Education Plan (NAEA, 2018, p. 1).

These exemplary practices are designed to (a) ensure high-quality educational services with fidelity and accountability for all students served in nontraditional or alternative settings, (b) develop operational and performance guidelines, (c) promote 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning, (d) evaluate the effectiveness of programs; and (e) create a common framework for the development of nontraditional and alternative education policies (NAEA, 2018). The Academy's leadership team attended the national conference in October 2021 where the principal/director, Dr. J, was honored as Georgia Association for Alternative Education (GAAE) Administrator of the Year.

### *Legacies and Dreams*

The legacy Dr. A would like to leave with her students is one that includes aspiration, inspiration, and motivation. She desires to ensure that students can read. She expects students to leave the Academy with the three E's and options of college and career readiness—Enrollment, Enlistment, or Employment. Dr. A anticipates the days her students would return to share which of the three E's she played a role in developing. Her yearning is that her students are not content just sitting around in the community doing nothing to positively impact their family or the community. This legacy, she contended, “will deter crime, help with the unemployment rate and the feeling/sense of accomplishment when students can support and sustain themselves with a sense of independence, that my students can earn enough to have all the things they need and occasionally the things they want in life.”

The changes Dr. A would like to see are in motion right now under the umbrella of personalized learning. When she first arrived, she unsuccessfully attempted to bring traditional instruction with her. Traditional practices do not work in this alternative nontraditional educational setting. Learning must be personalized, based on students' Lexile and current performance level. All students, especially struggling students, cannot be instructed the same way. Learning must be tailored according to the needs of the student.

## **Portrait #4—Mr. L—My Past Does Not Dictate My Future: The Beginning Does Not Determine the Destiny**

Mr. L (pseudonym) is a 40 something African American who is always dressed professionally and has always wanted to be an educator, specifically a teacher. When he graduated from high school, he enrolled in what was considered to be the best institution nearby for preparing educators—an HBCU. After earning his degree, he was employed at a local elementary school where he worked for a year. Subsequently, he floated between elementary and middle schools in surrounding counties for several years in search of his niche before returning to the site of this study—a local, nontraditional, alternative environment where he has served for the past seven years.

Mr. L noted he has always wanted to become a teacher because he felt he could make the greatest impact on students in the classroom before they entered the real world. Many people enter professions based on the money they might eventually make. However, this was not Mr. L's motive. He wanted to make a difference and impact his community as a teacher.

Mr. L was raised by a single parent. Most of his siblings and relatives only have a high school diploma. Very few people in his immediate circle while growing up achieved beyond high school. He noted he observed that people who went to college made what he considered the big money or decent money. However, he stressed that it was the teachers who made the greatest impact on him. He noted that as he was growing up, he realized that education was important. He grew up in a church where people outside of his family encouraged and pushed him to see beyond his current circumstances. Some people helped

him to see there was more to life and that his current or past situations did not dictate his future. His mother attended high school for a time, but neither his mom nor dad acquired a high school diploma. He understood if he wanted more, he would have to do more with his life.

After working several years in traditional educational settings, he returned home and applied for the alternative, nontraditional program wherein this study is being conducted. The alternative program principal who hired him had a battle getting approval to hire him based on a reference from a previous principal in the district. However, the principal of the alternative program advocated for him and convinced the superintendent to allow him to use his own instincts and judgment and not rely on the opinion of one local principal.

According to Mr. L, the director/principal came to him at midyear to commend him for being one of his best teachers, affirming his decision to hire him from the start. Mr. L stated that because this principal gave him another chance when he needed one, he was more determined to make a positive difference with many students in this alternative educational environment who need another chance. The students need an opportunity to get their lives in order. In the Academy, the students are encouraged to earn their high school diploma, supported to achieve graduation, and provided an opportunity to be successful beyond high school. Mr. L's goal is to continually help students become self-sufficient in this world. During the years he has been employed at the Academy, students have been assigned for various reasons: (a) chronic misbehavior, (b) over age, and (c) credit deficiency. Mr. L noted he has been in contact with students who have no hope,

who have been killed, who have murdered, and who have been involved in robberies. These students have often had to deal with difficulties in their lives, i.e., homelessness, loss of a parent at a young age, a missing father who is not part of their life, or the trauma of poverty. Mr. L stated that students must learn that difficulties are part of the cycle of life and that everyone, regardless of how well one has planned or the degree of one's spirituality, experiences difficulty even when one has attempted to do everything right.

### *In Loco Parentis*

Mr. L views his job as protecting students when they are in his care, helping them to build confidence and to move forward, despite their current circumstances. Mr. L has shared with his students that he grew up in a single-parent home and was molested as a child, but he did not allow these things to deter him from moving forward. He used them as a steppingstone. These were the circumstances that painted Mr. L's past. Every day, he tries to instill in his students that their current situation does not have to be the determining factor in the future that lies ahead. Mr. L states that students must learn to live beyond the four walls of this nontraditional program.

According to Mr. L., the one thing that motivates and encourages him to connect with students is his desire to model and demonstrate for them that teachers are not robots; they are human beings with struggles. Mr. L stated, "To students, it may seem as if teachers and other educators have it all together when they come into the building, but that is not always the case, and it is so far from the truth. I share my struggles to let them know that I am real, that I go through difficult things too." Another thing that keeps Mr. L motivated is when he runs into a former student who may have given him the hardest

time who says, “I appreciate what you did for me” or “Thank you for what you did.” Mr. L noted he is very motivated when that former student is now a teacher or some other productive citizen in the community. He indicated that these experiences keep him pushing, keep him driving, keep him coming back every day because he knows he is making a difference. He affirmed, “Educators may not see results each day, but when we keep pushing, pouring into them, we will see the results after a while.” Mr. L noted that another thing that indicates students have been impacted by his service is when he sees former students he taught as the middle school science teacher at the Academy or as the Edgenuity coordinator in the high school at the Academy. They are still working successfully in the PLC or YouthBuild program and are graduating soon. Edgenuity, formerly known as E2020, is a standards-based online learning resource used for credit recovery as well as to supplement instruction for remediation or acceleration purposes.

Mr. L gets excited when discussing the homeless students who are still working toward graduation. He shares in the pride and confidence they have gained through their perseverance and accomplishments. According to Mr. L, Payton J. (pseudonym), a former student, gave Mr. L a lot of trouble initially, but he has watched her mature and graduate. She actually made it a point to come back to say to him, “Thank you. I appreciate what you have done, and if it had not been for you, I don’t know where I would be now.” These comments from former students let Mr. L know he is making a difference. He admitted, “It’s not about me; it’s about them.” Every day presents a new opportunity to connect with a child, although Mr. L will occasionally refer a student to another adult whom he feels might make a better connection.

### *Needs of the Whole Child*

Mr. L acknowledged that the traditional school setting meets the needs of some students but does not meet the needs of all students. He expressed that if a more personalized approach were taken in traditional educational settings, it would make a positive difference in students' overall performance and behavior. He noted that many students have been referred to the nontraditional alternative setting because their performance adversely affects the school's bottom line—the school's graduation rate. Mr. L also expressed that many students perform below average in the traditional setting for a variety of reasons, and an alternative setting is sometimes needed to address individual needs. Mr. L declared a more personalized learning environment designed to match and meet the needs of children who are not effectively served in the traditional environment is often the solution for their eventual success. Mr. L indicated that nontraditional educational settings have proven to be ideal for students who have struggled to find success in traditional settings. He noted that he does not see students as just a number. He sees each student as a child who may be fatherless or motherless. He expressed that he sees a child who is really trying but has so many other challenges and obstacles that make it difficult for him or her to realize that education is (a) important, (b) should be a priority, and (c) is the key to future success.

Mr. L contended that the needs of the whole child can be met in this nontraditional setting. He noted that a nontraditional setting allows one to exercise flexibility to do what is necessary to reach and teach the students. In that regard, Mr. L is adamant that traditional educational policies and practices must change to prevent

students from being dropped because of being over age or not having enough credits without investigating the [why]. Mr. L expressed that this is especially true when a student has been inspired and is ready to do what is necessary to graduate. Mr. L added that the graduation rate is important, but when students move from doing nothing to working extremely hard to accomplish tasks, teachers must support them and not give up on them as often happens in traditional educational settings. The most important thing, Mr. L declared, should be to meet the individual needs of the students to prepare them for post-secondary options of college or a career.

Mr. L desires to meet the students and their families and get to know them to build strong relationships. Mr. L explained that at times the social-emotional intelligence of students is not really addressed to the level needed. Thus, full disclosure, including family structure and issues in the family is needed to truly assess the situation to determine resources needed to equip the students to function after they have completed their *Road to 23*. Mr. L defined the plan to earn the 23 credits needed for graduation as the Road to 23. When socio-emotional learning needs are not fully addressed and met, students experience failure because the focus is to get them back to their home schools. However, they were not fully prepared to deal with real-world academic and behavioral issues that necessitated their placement in the beginning. These students would leave the alternative setting with the same mindset they entered and end up doing something drastic to warrant their return.

Mr. L admitted he did not love reading or writing when he was in school, but he stated that he loved math! The people who poured into his life helped him to recognize



the value of reading and speaking so that his subjects and verbs agreed. He praised his 10<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts teacher for her support after saying to him, “You write like you talk.” He remarked that he excelled with literature; however, he struggled with grammar and writing. He acknowledged that was offended initially. However, he expressed that she encouraged him and made him aware that his speech was cultural and environmental but noted that he could work on it because there would be times and settings where standard English and subject-verb agreement would be required. “In college, my public speaking professor encouraged me to begin to listen to myself to make sure my subjects and verbs agreed. It was these people who poured into and invested in my life that helped me to get to the place where I am today.

Mr. L noted that a missing element today is the formal and informal register used when speaking. He stated that many students are not made aware of it. The linguist defines register as the way a speaker uses language differently in different circumstances. Registers use a variety of vocabulary, phrases, colloquialisms, and jargon. Linguists consider it an oversimplification when we define only two registers—formal and informal. Those who study language identify five distinct registers—Frozen (historic language); Formal (professional, academic, or legal communication); Consultative (offering specialized knowledge or advice); Casual (among friends, close acquaintances and co-workers, and family); and Intimate (between only two people and often in private). Mr. L added that the cultural and environmental speech that is acceptable with family and close friends is our informal register and would not be appropriate in the classroom setting or in a job interview. I shared with him that as a third-grade teacher, I

worked to instill into my students that the formal register was to be used during classroom interactions and discussions. However, they were free to use their informal register on the playground and at lunch. When I was growing up, this was known as code-switching when we learned to differentiate between African American English and the standard English used in the classroom, however, I have seldom heard it mentioned when conversing with today's English Language Arts teachers. Code-switching also refers to those who alternate between different languages depending on the setting in which they find themselves. Too often, students of today are not taught to code-switch. They are also not corrected in schools. Thus, they do not understand the necessity to code-switch when they are in formal and informal settings.

I shared with Mr. L regarding an experience several years ago when I was assigned to accompany an older White gentleman, a representative from the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), as he conducted a review of high schools in the district. In a high school math class, we observed a young man explaining to his teacher and fellow classmates how he solved an equation. His only register was the informal, or casual, register. He solved the problem correctly, but it was difficult for me to understand what he was saying since his explanation was filled with phrases and jargon with which I was unfamiliar. Once we exited the room, the gentleman from GaDOE shared with me that he did not understand a single word the young man had said. This is evidence that the inability to code-switch has a crippling effect when the informal register is all students know and carry into a job interview.

*Professional Learning and Collaboration*

Mr. L lamented over the fact that most of the professional learning provided by the district thus far has dealt with reading, math, curriculum, and assessment. He noted that it occurs every two weeks and that more than 130 hours of professional learning have been completed in the last three to five years. Mr. L indicated that time to implement is also an issue and points to the importance of requiring standard English in all academic environments—traditional or nontraditional—along with the literacy strategies that are now required.

Mr. L noted that he is always searching for professional learning opportunities for strategies to help him develop the whole child and students' socio-emotional intelligence. He remarked that the strategies should include how to combat academic challenges associated with students stricken with poverty. These students have parents who work two or three jobs for their family's basic survival with little time or inclination to assist with schoolwork. Mr. L reflected that as a child, he was most likely considered poverty-stricken. He expressed thanks for his village which was composed of community residents, the church, Boy Scouts, and teachers. He mentioned that they saw his potential and enabled him to overcome the challenges. Reflecting on this support and encouragement that influenced him as a young man and taught him how to persevere to overcome his beginning and change the trajectory of his own destiny, Mr. L indicated that his desire is to instill the same in the students assigned to him. He stated that his desire is that his students know and understand education and learning are relevant in every aspect of their lives. He proclaimed, "If I can teach a student to fish, he or she can

eat the rest of their lives. If I can prepare them to enter the real world and be successful, that's more than just being able to read and add, more than knowing the scientific method. or identifying the different places on the earth. Students must be able to tie the learning at school to the real-world, real life." This defines the legacy Mr. L would like to leave his students.

Mr. L proclaims to be a science teacher by trade. He explained that he meets with the science department during their collaboration time to ensure the frameworks are being used and followed. During the summer leadership planning days, the power standards were identified, and curriculum maps were developed for the entire year. Professional learning and collaboration are job-embedded and ongoing. After professional learning is provided for the faculty, the leadership team conducts walkthroughs to follow up, monitor, and provide feedback and/or modeling. Mr. L admitted that as he initially entered the nontraditional, alternative environment, he received very little professional development. However, as the years progressed, he noted that he received the professional learning he needed.

Mr. L expressed that when he first started as a middle school science teacher, the students were just removed from their home schools and placed to the side in the alternative setting without any emphasis on teacher support or instructional resources. In recent years, he stated that he has received a wealth of professional learning as he has transitioned from classroom teacher to coordinator of personalized learning to be effective in his current role. Mr. L noted that he has worked in the alternative setting now

for eight years and has transitioned from middle school science teacher to Edgenuity coordinator and Genius Platform manager.

*Obstacles that Confront*

Mr. L identified the most significant barrier he encountered upon his arrival to the Academy was the lack of resources that were available or provided in the traditional educational setting. He noted that he taught science and facilitated labs so that students were monitored to ensure materials were handled correctly. Lesson planning and curriculum were both impacted by the lack of resources. He stated that when he expressed the need for resources he was told, "Make it on your own." The focus was literacy and math. Also, in his beginning days, he noted that he had 40 plus students in middle school classes and was responsible for teaching science while addressing the multiple grade level gaps. He also noted that few academic and behavioral resources were made available. Resources purchased with Title I funds by home schools did not transfer with the students to the alternative setting, even if they were assigned for the entire year.

Mr. L noted that the barriers have motivated him to work harder to see students succeed with college or career readiness options. He affirmed that some students have used the nontraditional alternative setting as a revolving door through which they have gone back and forth. He indicated it was a routine as there was little opportunity for them to be successful in their home school environment. He observed that they would return within a two-week time frame and would voice that they got in trouble so they would be sent back to the Academy.

### *The Instructional Framework*

In explaining the structure and operations of the Academy, Mr. L explained that as in the traditional setting, openings, activators, work sessions, and closings are used as part of the instructional framework. Curriculum documents and standards are used at the Academy. They are used in an individualized, personalized manner to meet the needs of the students. Frameworks, such as Marzano and other strategic instructional models used in traditional settings are used, but they look different because they are personalized around the goal to meet the individual needs of students. Because Dr. J, the principal and director of the Academy, is an instructional leader and coach, she makes it easier for the staff to take risks and try new things without fear of backlash or criticism. The staff is encouraged to be innovative and to do whatever it takes to guide students toward success. Innovation is viewed as a learning experience.

Mr. L expressed that he feels encouraged to try new things and is given the latitude to create, mold, and shape programs under his charge to benefit the students. He stated that his philosophy is, "I treat people the way I want to be treated." He helps and supports his colleagues because he realizes there is always a flipside, and there are times when he needs help and support. He proclaims, "At the end of the day, it is about the kids. Our goal is to merge our ideas and goals and do what is best for all the students. At the end of the day, I can only answer for myself, and I have to depend on my colleagues and all of the teachers to help students on the Road to 23." Students are required to earn 23 credits to graduate. Mr. L said his job and mission is to determine the issue, and once this is done, each student must know that they are loved because until then, students will

not listen to anything one has to say. He stated that he sits down with students to help them determine their path and navigate the roadmap to 23 credits.

### *Legacies and Dreams*

As for changes, Mr. L noted that he would like to see Title 1 monies follow students to the nontraditional setting and more funds allocated to ensure the necessary resources are available to meet the needs of students. It would reduce the burden on the Academy's staff who go to great lengths to obtain funds to support the needs of the students served. Mr. L believes this should be the policy, especially when a student is assigned for the full year. Mr. L mentioned that personalized learning plans are unique as they are designed for each student, based on individual needs. He noted that the more resources educators have at their disposal, the more able they are to meet the needs of individual learners. He added that personalized learning recognizes that every child learns differently, and when educators are able to tap into how a child learns and provide the resources accordingly, they create an environment that ensures success. Mr. L acknowledged that some students are intrinsically motivated learners and expressed that when teachers are knowledgeable and let these types of learners keep moving, amazing gains can be made. He also expressed that there are also those who need to be motivated to learn. He believes that having all the resources needed to personalize learning for students allows educators to create a space for each child to succeed. He declared, "There is no limit to what a child can become in this world when you can personalize and individualize their learning needs."

Mr. L shared that he is somewhat familiar with nontraditional educational guidelines, but he is keenly aware that Dr. J operates the Academy around the 15 Exemplary Practices defined by the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA, 2018). Mr. L is proud to serve on this team helping students to avoid dropping out when they have had little success in traditional educational settings. He views it as his privilege to serve students so that they benefit from innovative approaches and practices that position them to become contributing and productive citizens in the community and for brighter futures for themselves and their families.

**Portrait #5—Mr. G—No Productive Teaching or Learning Occurs Without Discipline**

Mr. G (pseudonym) is the tenth of 10 children. His mother was born in 1932 in Devereaux, Georgia, and his father was born in 1927 in Eatonton, Georgia. He was born in 1971 and attended public schools in Hancock County—one of the smallest, poorest counties in Georgia and the United States. It has a high population of African American residents. According to Mr. G, education was important in his family, and he was constantly pushed to exceed and excel. He was reminded often that education was the only way to see his way out to succeed and to have a level playing field with the rest of America. The same lady who instructed his mother in the 1940s taught him algebra when he was in high school in the 1980s. She made an indelible mark on his life when he made a D in her class. He went to her and asked her why she failed him. Her response was, “Young man, I didn’t fail you, you failed yourself.” That was the motivation he needed to become a National Honor Society student for the remainder of high school.



Mr. G was an athlete and explained that when he tried out for basketball, the 7<sup>th</sup>- and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade coach made a deal with his mother to pick him up from basketball practice because he saw the potential for him to get out of rural Hancock County to see what the world had to offer. He noted that he played junior varsity basketball his first year of high school and was a starter on the varsity team during his 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup>-grade years. He made All-Region first team, the All-County Area team, and was awarded a basketball scholarship to the Alive Word College, a catholic college in San Antonio, Texas. He chortled and stated, “This was a wonderful experience.” However, the alumni boosters wanted to see more players who looked like them and not him, back in the 1980s. It was, according to Mr. G, during his second year of college that he returned home. He eventually completed college his degree at Georgia College and State University after serving in the Marine Corp for approximately eight years.

Mr. G began his Marine Corps journey at Parris Island, South Carolina. His experience taught him that there was nothing he could not do so long as he put his mind to it while he was becoming one of the *few, the proud, the Marines*. It was not an easy feat. Twenty-one recruits fell by the wayside—they started out with 63 recruits but ended with only 42. Mr. G acknowledged that was the toughest mental and physical challenge he has ever experienced in his life. Regarding his Marine Corps experience, he affirmed, “It shaped me and made me a better person.” He indicated that he had always been a good student, and as a result, his position in the Marine Corps was administrative clerk, and he sat behind a desk all day. He said he was constantly thinking about what he would do when he left the Marine Corps if he left in good health. He also served as personnel

chief. His duty stations included Marine Security Guard Battalion in Quantico, Virginia; Marine All-Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 224 in Beaufort, South Carolina where he was deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Aviano, Italy; Twenty-nine Palms, California; Fort Bliss, Texas; and finally New Orleans, Louisiana, where he was honorably discharged.

Mr. G originally entered college in 1989 on a basketball scholarship and completed the first full year of college without a problem. The second full year was not as smooth. He was a little homesick and his mother wanted him closer to home, so he honored his mother's wishes and moved back from Texas to Georgia. Once he returned home, his intention was to sit out one semester. However, his mom needed him to work to contribute to the household, so he ended up joining the Marine Corps and served seven and a half years of active duty. Upon returning home from the Marine Corps, his first move was to finish his college education. By this time, he was a parent and knew he was able to juggle work and school with no problem. Mr. G discovered that the more education he acquired, the more he wanted to acquire. He stated that going to school was intoxicating for him, and he eventually found himself in school and working with adolescent offenders for the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ).

Because he had always loved learning, Mr. G said he thought he could connect with the children at the Academy and spread his love for learning. He noted that he felt he has always had a magnetic aura and could easily relate and connect with children. As he progressed with his education, he stated that he began to work in the classroom where he spent two and a half years in a traditional school setting before transitioning back into

the DJJ as a classroom teacher where he served for 13 years. Mr. G has spent the last five years in this urban public school district at the Academy, an alternative educational setting where he has chosen to work to have a positive influence. He refers to these students as the forgotten children in our society and expressed that as long as these forgotten children remain quiet, unheard of, and not in the news, people tend to forget about them.

Although he was not encouraged by anyone to become a teacher, it was through his military experience that he grew accustomed to having his weekends off. He was looking for an occupation that would give him weekends off and allow him to give something back to his community. Teaching fit all those criteria. He started teaching when he was about 27 years old, and found teaching was a career that he actually enjoyed. Teaching would allow him to have weekends and holidays off, and at the same time give something back to society. This is his fifth year serving as a math teacher at the Academy.

Mr. G described himself as a poor Black boy from the country. He feels this makes him a perfect fit to work in this nontraditional setting. He chuckled while saying if Hancock County was not an alternative setting when he was growing up, he does not know what was. He mentions as a point of concern that the graduation rate in his home county is lower now than it was when he graduated. He declares, "I came from nothing and have learned that it is not where you come from but where you are going. I see too many kids come into this alternative setting with a sense of hopelessness. They don't seem to care about learning; they just want the credits needed to graduate. He has

observed on this journey that students have sometimes been allowed to earn the credits without learning anything. He sees this as a major problem that will only become a black eye on society. He believes anything in life worth having is worth working for. If one is not willing to put in the hard work to attain goals or to get something in life, he or she is only fooling himself/herself. His mother instilled in her children, “If you are going to do anything, do it right or don’t do it at all.”

### *Shaped by Military Service*

Mr. G contends that his military background makes him more of a disciplinarian. He believes discipline helps establish order in the classroom. He jovially stated that once he has established order, the students will “see the light.” He remarked that he understands that math can be a stressful type of class for students because it is developmental, and when foundational concepts and elements are missing, it can create undue stress. He stated his belief is that when order has been established, an environment is created where learning can occur without any additional stress added in his math classes. He added that when there is order and clear expectations, the students can relax and learn, and together, he and his students can move mountains—one piece at a time. He indicated that creating and maintaining order allows him to connect, encourage, and engage students.

Every now and then Mr. G finds “*a shining star in a sea of darkness*” that brings him the motivation to keep encouraging his students to persevere. He stated with confidence that these shining stars “will lead me home.” He noted that they reveal themselves when his students display their skills and have a genuine love for learning. He

shared that, before the pandemic hit, one of his students was gunned down and killed. After this incident, he and his students discussed the fragility of life during class. After this discussion, a student informed him that he was the only teacher he had who shared lessons about life.

### *Traditional and Nontraditional Contradictions*

Mr. G expressed that traditional policies and practices—the one-size pacing guides and curriculum maps, zero-tolerance policies—contradict what is needed in alternative school settings. and sometimes nontraditional policies and practices are detrimental to what is needed in traditional settings. He stated he feels as if “it’s a double-edged sword.” Nontraditional educational settings, according to Mr. G, are confined by traditional norms, including evaluation instruments and attendance policies, and are imposed on students who are nontraditional. He also noted that traditional policies and practices tie educators’ hands and obstruct, making it difficult to effectively meet the students’ needs. Sometimes the things adults see as important student outcomes—the gains and increased graduation rates—are not as important to the students we serve. He added that students need choice and voice in their educational outcomes.

Mr. G admits he still has problems sometimes managing the facilitation of multiple concepts for multiple subjects, since math involves proficiency in certain developmental skills to ensure proficiency and success in the more complex courses. He stated he would like for schedules to be more teacher-friendly than student-friendly. He indicated that this might allow him the time needed to teach math courses to an elevated level of proficiency. He shared his schedule and said, “It is not a pretty thing.” For one

50-minute period, he facilitates instruction for 89 students who are studying eight different math concepts. With a minimal number of staff, it is difficult to juggle in-person and virtual instruction. He equated it to the expression, “You can’t rob Peter to pay Paul.” In full disclosure, Mr. G shared that he has 120 kids on his class rosters. These 120 kids have 120 different performance and ability levels in math and are sometimes enrolled in multiple math courses at one time. He has encountered students who have math credits of which they are unaware. In one of his 50-minute classes today, he had students who were enrolled in Algebra, Algebra II, Foundations of Algebra, and Geometry, all in one class. He shared how difficult it is to use a general framework to teach subject matter or facilitate learning for students with varying performance and ability levels who are enrolled in different courses.

Mr. G has attended the Georgia Council of Teachers of Mathematics conference twice in the past four years. He affirmed that strategies provided at the conference were very beneficial as they help to support students struggling in math. However, because students have so many gaps and so much to be implemented, he expressed that it is difficult to fit it all in. District professional learning sessions have been conducted for the more difficult courses—Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry. However, for the last two years, the professional learning focus for secondary math has been the Foundations of Algebra course because the students did not have the background knowledge from previous years of math instruction. He noted that specific strategies were needed to address the gaps, and because of the gaps and because math is developmental, students have struggled tremendously. For those students enrolled in two math courses (i.e.,

Algebra and Geometry), this creates stress and an almost impossible situation when there are huge gaps in their math concepts and knowledge. Mr. G shared that he has had a student enrolled in Algebra, Geometry, and College Readiness at the same time. Because of the enormous gaps in developmental math concepts and skills, this student finished neither course successfully. Mr. G acknowledged that if there were gaps in conceptual knowledge for the least of the three courses in which the student was enrolled, this learning plan creates a recipe for failure because of the addition of the other two more complex courses.

Mr. G tries to use more technology-based resources such as SMART Notebook and Desmo, but, as he so eloquently stated, “At the end of the day, math is not a spectator sport. You must put pencil to the paper to solve problems, and it takes practice for those skills to become automatic. Otherwise, nothing sticks, and you are having to reteach the same concepts every day.” Mr. G seeks evidence- and research-based strategies that have proven effective with students from low socio-economic backgrounds or students of poverty. When the data indicate strategies work, he willingly implements them. He explained two effective programs: (a) SMART Notebook and Desmos Math Curriculum. SMART Notebook, according to Mr. G, allows him to create and deliver interactive lessons on his interactive whiteboard to enrich the learning atmosphere, leading to better and increased student outcomes. SMART Notebook provides games, activities, and lessons specific to grade-level, subject, or standards and can be accessed from home. He noted that students enjoy math more when the Desmos Math Curriculum is used to pose problems that allow a variety of approaches to solving problems. It, according to Mr. G,

operates on equity principles that acknowledge past and present injustices and support the development of a more equitable math education system. It intentionally works to disrupt systemic inequities and conditions of marginalization that have occurred in education.

Additionally, Mr. G stated that the Desmos Math Curriculum offers interactive computer learning experiences that blend paper with technological experiences, and teachers can observe student learning and guide productive discussions using the facilitation tools.

Mr. G is concerned when he observes too many students focused on the credits whether they have legitimately earned them or not. He expressed that should not be the goal. He noted that he uses SMART Notebook to provide step-by-step instructions to support his students, and these instructions are readily available when needed by his students for practice or remediation. His own notebook of sample equations is shared as a model so students can see the importance of notetaking and practicing the steps or processes and having these example steps, processes, and notes available to refer to as needed. Students often lack the “mental dexterity and fortitude” necessary to see the importance of taking notes and practicing the steps and processes demonstrated in his math classes. Mr. G constantly reminds students to maintain their own notebooks with completed sample equations and encourages them to see math as a puzzle to be solved with multiple ways to solve them. He reminds students often that with math, and other puzzles that can be solved, you may get frustrated, but when you understand that you may need to take a step back sometimes to reassess and to regroup your own processes before moving forward, you are less likely to give up when you “hit a wall.” He noted



that everyone does this when problem-solving, but you cannot give up. He reminds them that in life we all must learn to “improvise, adapt and adjust.”

Mr. G uses additional instructional materials and resources to assist his students with credit recovery or acceleration as needed. Mr. G asserted that a poverty-level student and an affluent student have different mindsets. It is concerning to him when students google, use photo math, or other shortcuts to get to the answers versus following and practicing the problem-solving processes they are learning. It disturbs him when students have not yet figured out that they cannot google or cheat their way through math. He is adamant that students cannot be allowed to “scam their way through school.”

Mr. G stated that because he is the math teacher, the times he gets to plan and collaborate with his students’ other teachers are “few and far between.” He noted that he does collaborate with others in his department on rare occasions. Administrators observe his classes, but he has not had someone come to model lessons for him at the Academy. Academic coaches are available for support, but their instructional or coaching expertise is not specific to mathematics. Mr. G laments that there is not enough time for the math department to meet and collaborate effectively. He stated that departmental collaboration is rare.

### *Obstacles the Confront*

The biggest challenge Mr. G said he has encountered at the Academy was instilling “discipline, discipline, discipline.” As aforementioned, Mr. G. noted that order and discipline are the traits that were instilled in him during his Marine Corps service, and he requires order in his classroom. He is firm in his belief and stated, “No productive

teaching or learning occurs if there is no discipline.” He expressed that the students are already behind when they arrive at the Academy. Mr. G believes one reason students are behind is because there has been no discipline in their lives. No one has instilled in them the need for boundaries. He establishes boundaries with his students and reckons that if he does not establish boundaries for and with them, they will continue to just be wanderers. Mr. G finds it unfortunate that the most structure his students have ever experienced is here at the Academy.

### *Legacies and Dreams*

The legacy Mr. G would like to leave his students is the personal desire to be a better person. He noted that he feels this is a more important legacy, even if he cannot influence them to become better math students. He expressed that it is his desire that every student he teaches does better in math than he ever has, and his desire is for them to reach or to surpass his own level of performance when doing math. He exclaimed he wants them to be and do the best they can be and do. He wants this not for himself, but for students. His ultimate desire is that every student becomes a better person each day.

Mr. G is knowledgeable that nontraditional guidelines exist but is not very familiar with putting them into practice. He is aware that Dr. J employs the 15 exemplary practices defined by the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA) and that Dr. J was honored at the NAEA conference as the Georgia Association for Alternative Education Administrator of the Year for 2021. He believes that if this nontraditional, alternative setting is to make a real difference in preparing students for the world, students must be held accountable as he and his colleagues are. He stated that students

cannot be permitted to simply go through the motions or to google their way out of school. They, in his opinion, must understand their responsibilities in the educational process, be able to demonstrate their learning, and be proctored during exams and assessments. He added that reported data must be valid and dependable and monitored closely. He concluded by expressing that the students must see the Academy not as a graduation factory, but as the place that prepares them for brighter futures that include college or career options that position them to become contributing and productive citizens.

#### **Portrait #6-Ms. S—Paying it Forward**

Ms. S (pseudonym) entered the Academy by default. She is not a teacher, but a social worker by profession. Her previous role in public education as a parent-teacher resource coordinator at the Parent Resource Center was eliminated when the center was closed. Due to her displacement, she was looking for a new position. During that time, a part-time education support coordinator position was created for the alternative school program to specifically deal with parents who had filed Office of Civil Rights (OCR) complaints against the district. With her background of having worked for the Department of Family and Children Services (DFACS) in investigations for more than 15 years, she was hired. The district was getting numerous OCR complaints, and Ms. S was hired because mediation with the parents was required to reach conciliatory agreements. Some situations revolved around the allotted time students were assigned to the Academy. If their parents felt the length of time assigned was inappropriate or for a longer period than they were originally told, they would file a complaint, which would

require mediation. The original position for which Ms. S was hired has evolved over the years and has become full-time with more duties and responsibilities. She now collaborates with a team in Student Support. With a smile and a twinkle in her eye, she suggested that the Academy actually needs two of her.

Ms. S noted that when she entered public education in the position of family engagement coordinator two years before she was displaced, her daughter was a toddler. She expressed that she did not want to go back to DFACS because of the work hours. She reasoned that working for the school system would allow her and her daughter to have similar schedules once she started school. At DFACS, Ms. S was the supervisor of Investigations. She started to work at DFACS directly out of college as a clerk and worked her way up the institutional ladder. She worked in all areas of DFACS and earned certification in every area except adoption and foster care. Her background is quite extensive. She served as a child death investigator, a drug investigator, and a forensics investigator. She served as an investigator for DFACS with the police department's Juvenile Division. She ended her career at DFACS as supervisor of Investigations.

#### *Job Embedded Learning*

The training Ms. S received related to her current position was job embedded. She stated that training opportunities when she was employed in the family engagement position and the district training in her current role have proven to be valuable. In her present role, she has received hearings and legal training, McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance training, and has attended alternative education conferences. She noted that she has also received training in school counseling. She is adamant in her belief that

without training, one tends to stagnate. She stated that training provides new, different, and better ways to do the work to improve student outcomes. Although Ms. S feels she does not participate in specific professional development classes on a consistent basis, she noted that she benefits when she does. She expressed that she has had approximately 45 hours of professional development during the past three to five years. She stated that she feels alternative education training is necessary and that it should occur every year. However, it does not.

Ms. S stated that the practices and strategies learned and shared during professional learning sessions or conferences are eagerly implemented with students. She expressed that she is especially fond of the current Personalized Learning Endorsement training. She noted that she is also happy that students have more choice and a voice in their educational process and the rules made for them. She explained that the personalized learning instructional plans this year are more appropriate for the students because teachers are focused on providing instruction 80% of the time with 20% computer-based support. She said that she is comfortable trying new and different things. During this year's alternative education conference, she is looking forward to learning more about how to keep parents abreast and involved regarding the alternative education policies so they can better advocate for their students.

#### *Childhood Perspectives*

Ms. S considers her own public-school experience as one of the best experiences for a child growing up in her era. She stated she was a participant in the majority to minority (M-to-M) transfer program. When districts use M-to-M student transfer school

choice model, students are eligible if: (1) they are in the majority (more than 50 percent) race at their zoned school; (2) their race is not in the majority at the desired school; and (3) there is space at the student's desired school. Ms. S was one of the first 10 African American students bused to Northside Elementary (pseudonym) in the 1970s. She rode the bus for three hours to get to school. She reflected, "That is something I shall never forget. It was like attending a private school. There were only ten of us in the building. My experience was undoubtedly better than any African American child in the city" due to the fieldtrips and other enriching opportunities that were not offered at her zoned school. She graduated from Northside Elementary and was off to middle and high school.

Ms. S reveals that the 10 African American students at Northside were treated well. She was invited to and went to sleepovers with classmates whose parents were doctors and lawyers. She went on a field trip for the first time to Washington, DC. They went to Florida for their graduation trip. These experiences were unheard of in her neighborhood. She feels that she and the other nine students were treated like royalty. This experience was the highlight of her education. Because she lived in the Midtown High School (pseudonym) zone of the school district, she attended Midtown Middle School (pseudonym) upon graduating from Northside. During that time, Midtown High School and Midtown Middle School's reputation surpassed all other schools in the district academically, and they had the best band director who exposed them to contemporary music and classical orchestras. Ms. S declares she did not mind the bus ride to Springdale because she loved school. She laments that unfortunately kids do not love school anymore. However, she brightened and noted that her daughter does, and she

tells her she loves school regularly. Ms. S noted that her daughter is excited on the first day of school each year, and she is constantly on her to rush so she can get to school on time because she hates to be late. “Kids don’t love school anymore” repeated Ms. S. She believes it is the adult mindset at school that makes kids not love school.

Ms. S’s mother offered her private school for high school, but Ms. S chose Midtown HS to be with her neighborhood friends, and she was well prepared for her college days. On reflection, Ms. S stated that had she stayed at her zoned school, she would have done just as well as her older brother. Ms. S correlates the diverse opportunities and exposures she had were due to her attending Northside as part of the majority to minority program. Her brother attended their zoned schools, and the University of Georgia, where he played on the football team, and graduated on time. Back then in the 1970s and 1980s, Ms. S contended teachers taught their content and did their best to prepare their students for the future.

*Once an Investigator, Always an Investigator*

Ms. S considers herself an overthinker who is always wearing her investigator’s hat due to the amount of training she has acquired in that area. She noted that she feels her investigative skills help to ensure more successful outcomes with the students at the Academy. She serves as the students’ number one advocate, but she also participates in the hearings that could remove them from the program. Referencing when she conducts orientation with students and families during the intake process, she indicated that it is important that the information provided is clear and correct and that signatures are recorded accurately. She stated she never wants anyone to say he or she did not know or

was not informed about something. When a difficulty arises, students and their families can be reminded of the information they were provided and the signatures on documents that were signed during the orientation process.

Ms. S shared that occasionally, students assigned to her are the children or grandchildren of her former DFACS clients. She stated that those DFACS relationships have often made it easier for her to reach the families and to encourage them to do what is needed to get the students on track to accomplish their goals. She noted that those prior relationships generated a level of respect and a little healthy fear within them because they know she is serious. However, they also know she cares about them and has their best interests at heart. Ms. S shared a recent event when a student came in with his mother, who looked familiar. She stated that when she saw the last name, she asked if the young woman knew a lady who was a former client when she worked at DFACS. The young woman stated that the lady was her mother. She immediately made a facetime call and allowed Ms. S to speak with her mother. There were tearful moments as the former DFACS client thanked Ms. S and shared that she was doing well now, was working, and had a stable home. Ms. S affirmed that to work in this environment, one must have a passion for it.

Ms. S stated that she shares her cell number and encourages families to call her if they need anything. She indicated that she does her best to remove barriers or obstacles preventing students from working toward the goals that have been set as it is too easy for them to say they are going to quit. The situations students experience outside of school are difficult, and quitting would be an easy solution. She is presently working diligently



to encourage one of her students, a 17-year-old mother whose own mother has been incarcerated all year. She has moved from place to place with different family and friends because of this. Ms. S was able to help her obtain public assistance, and she is meeting her responsibilities. Ms. S supported her during the summer session along with other members of the 8.5 group of over-aged eighth and ninth graders. She was successful in the program and was promoted from eighth grade to 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The current plan is for her to complete her credits to graduate.

Ms. S asserted, “If we are only concerned and work with students Monday through Friday, we will never get it done for students. We worry about the graduation rate at the Academy, but what is alarming is that so many students get here and cannot read or do math on grade level. It is hurtful.” To hear students described as bad when they are acting out only because they cannot read well enough to do the work required of them is alarming. Ms. S works well with her team, and there is good rapport among her student support team. Occasionally, she must work alone; however, she and her team members hold each other accountable for making the best decisions for their students. Dr. J, the Academy’s director and principal is most helpful and instrumental while providing ideas to improve student outcomes.

#### *The Student Support Team*

As for graduation, Ms. S and the student support team meet with the students every six weeks to help keep them on track and to set goals for the following six weeks. Ms. S stated that these meetings ensure students are reminded of and understand what their responsibilities are to get through their personalized learning plans on their road to

23. She asked, “When graduation rates are increasing and students are still not able to read and do math (not college or career ready), what is the point?” The young mother mentioned above needed additional support with her literacy skills and reading, but she is able to listen and use her auditory skills to get her work done. These students often come from homes where parents cannot help them because they are not good readers themselves. To keep students encouraged, Ms. S gives her cell phone number and assigns the students adult mentors for support. She holds students accountable when it comes to them doing their part, but she goes the extra mile to encourage them and to keep them encouraged to persevere. She expressed that the students must make progress toward their goals and be held accountable to complete the academic milestones within set timeframes.

#### *Obstacles that Confront*

The district has had a history of placing adults in the Academy to motivate them to resign as they had been unsuccessful in other positions. Ms. S is proud to say she was not one of those adults. She noted that she was selected for the position at the Academy and believes it is not a good fit for individuals who do not have the passion to work with low-income, impoverished, struggling students who have suffered varied abuse and trauma. She also noted her belief that if adults the district wishes to resign are reassigned and employed, they will only add to the trauma and abuse students have already experienced. She declared that one must be willing and able to show compassion. The Academy’s leader, Dr. J, has been intentional about telling the story and changing the perception of the Academy. Since they are now receiving more positive attention, the

perception is changing, and more resources are being allocated to the Academy. The needs of the students are now and should always be the first priority, Ms. S proclaimed.

The lack of resources and the inability to obtain materials and services for students have been barriers at the Academy. According to Ms. S, they have had to have art supplies donated in the past. According to Ms. S, Dr. J has had to barter with principals to trade resources when they have wanted to refer certain students to the Academy. She expressed that fieldtrips and other enriching experiences for these students are needed but are often not considered due to poor perceptions. Reflecting on the term *alternative*, Ms. S expressed that when people think alternative, they usually think jail. This jail mindset, in the opinion of Ms. S, has prevented the inclusion of nontraditional students in decisions made for them. Still, there remain people who think jail and that mindset determines and impacts expectations for these students. For this reason, everyone is not always helpful and responsive to providing resources, tips, and strategies to improve student outcomes. The students at the Academy would benefit from trips to museums, college tours, the World of Coca Cola, and the 100 Black Men College Fair events, but poor community or staff perceptions and negative mindsets have prevented these opportunities from being offered and occurring, especially when there have been those staff members who have been placed here to work because the district wanted to punish them to get them to leave. On the contrary, Ms. S proclaimed there are staff members who serve proudly and who would rather not be anywhere else on earth because they love these nontraditional students and desire to improve their outcomes and futures.

The barriers have made Ms. S more determined to do whatever it takes to ensure students experience a measure of success while at the Academy. She proclaimed, “If I have to beg, borrow or steal, buy things they need, provide transportation, I am the auntie, so I will do it.” Ms. S believes that students’ families are doing the best they can. She stated that behavior issues often result from basic needs not being met. Just recently, she encouraged one student to focus on himself and his own success, and together they would pray that his mom will come around to provide the nurturing and support that he craves.

### *Legacies and Dreams*

Ms. S noted that the goal of the Academy is improving outcomes for students and exclaimed that she is proud to have been able to support the graduation of 81 students during the 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic school year. She stated that she is grateful that she did not catch the virus in the process and has confidence that her contributions made a difference regarding student outcomes. She expressed that the building became a haven for students during the pandemic. The students, according to Ms. S, wanted to be in the building to work toward established goals. As part of student support, Ms. S helps to create the plans for students and collaborates with teachers to ensure the plans are implemented. She noted that everyone has a role to play. Even Dr. J teaches a class of young men who are self-proclaimed gang bangers. She is innovative and uses any means necessary to help students find success. Each of these students has been assigned his or her own private space to work near Dr. J’s office suite—their own private offices. Ms. S chuckled when she said, “People have no idea what we go through here.”

The legacy Ms. S would like to leave her students is the desire to help others as they have been helped along the way, for them to do likewise. When they have been fortunate enough to have been recipients of random acts of kindness, having benefited from them, they should, in turn, provide random acts of kindness for someone else when they see the opportunity. Ms. S noted that she would like her students to share the love and concern she has shown to them with others who need love and concern. She reflected on one student who had a long history of misbehavior and recently had a baby. She stated that seeing this formerly disruptive student with her new baby amazed her because with motherhood this student has become a nurturer and has amazed everyone who sees how she loves and protects that baby. This young lady misses and loves her own mother who has been incarcerated for more than a year. She tells Ms. S that she is anxious for her mom to be released. Ms. S notes, "Blood is thicker than water," indicating that the love children have for their parents is not impacted by the distance resulting from incarceration.

The changes Ms. S would like to see at the Academy are varied. She mentioned that she would like to see all the staff in this alternative setting be hand-picked and selected because they have the heart and desire to want to make a difference. She stated that she would like to see staff members present each day because their mission in life is to serve these nontraditional students and therefore leave the world a better place than they found it, not just for the check or the compensation received, but because it is the right thing to do. She noted that no one enters the education profession because they hope to become rich. She expressed that she would also like to make sure every necessary

opportunity and resource is made available for the nontraditional student to experience success. The students who need resources the most are sent to the Academy without the adequate resources to meet their needs. Ms. S excitedly announced, “The Academy expects to become its own district charter school next year, which will increase resources necessary to meet every student’s needs.”

Ms. S has worked in this alternative setting for seven years and is currently serving as Student Transition Specialist. She is aware that Dr. J relies on the National Alternative Education Association’s (NAEA) 15 Exemplary Practices and is part of the team that accompanied Dr. J to the national conference when she was honored as the 2021 Georgia Association for Alternative Education (GAAE) Administrator of the Year. Dr. J is the fourth director of the alternative setting in seven years. It was Dr. J’s suggestion to name the alternative program *The Academy*. Referring to Dr. J, Ms. S noted that she has a servant’s heart for children. Ms. S contended that to be a successful leader of this nontraditional environment requires a servant’s heart for the students who are served at the Academy. Ms. S credits the success the Academy has experienced to the current leadership, and she is proud of her contributions while serving on this leadership team.

## Chapter 5

### COLLECTIVE PORTRAITURE: INTRODUCTION OF THEMES

The Academy's vision is that each student will demonstrate leadership, scholarship, and citizenship while thriving in a 21<sup>st</sup> century global society. The faculty and staff believe all children can learn and achieve. They endeavor to ensure every child grows holistically and achieves their maximum potential. They encourage parents' assistance and cooperation to ensure The Academy's goals, and much more, are achieved.

To ensure the vision becomes reality, The Academy seeks to create and provide personalized learning experiences dedicated to the development of the whole child. Throughout the building there are bulletin boards and posters with positive affirmations and reminders for students to persevere until the goal of graduation is achieved and for staff to develop and nurture healthy and productive relationships with the students they serve. Relationships formed are founded on the acknowledgement of students' humanity and mutual respect.

The Academy focuses on the whole child who is fully human. The whole child approach requires modifying the educational experience and the classroom environment so that the social emotional learning and academics are addressed and enhanced to create confident and holistically developed students. Educators at the Academy understand that students' humanity must be acknowledged, and every effort is made to ensure students are healthy, safe, supported, engaged, and challenged to reach their full potential (ASCD, n.d.). The whole child approach implemented at the Academy embraces each student in

an environment that promotes strong relationships between and among the staff, students, and families creating an atmosphere that encourages learning. Because students trust the adults in their learning environment, they are more apt to remain connected and engaged to reach the goal—graduation.

Dr. J has been given the autonomy over the years to ensure that her faculty and staff are representative of educators who believe in their students and possess the self-efficacy that their efforts can and will make a difference for nontraditional students who need nontraditional support to reach their full potential. The adults at The Academy hold each other accountable to do their part to ensure the atmosphere and learning environment is conducive to learning for the students they serve. Everyone plays a role in the success of the Academy's students, and everyone understands that their students' successes require collective responsibility and collective accountability.

Hope sets the tone and lays the foundation for the vision and mission at The Academy to improve the graduation rate for students requiring nontraditional educational opportunities. The hope that is generated when students complete their entrance interviews at The Academy is predicated on the following themes: (1) humanity-informed relationships for the whole child; (2) personalized learning strategies; (3) collective responsibility; and (4) barriers to nontraditional implementation. Beginning with the evolution to hopeful from hopelessness, the following section will address these themes.



### *From Hopeless to Hopeful*

Hope implies little certainty but suggests confidence in the possibility that for what one desires or longs for will eventually happen (Merriam, 2022). Students have often arrived at the Academy feeling hopeless because they have suffered failure and experienced little success in their traditional home school setting. These students are often overaged, have repeated grades, have numerous office discipline referrals, and have reached the point when dropping out of school seems to be their next, best, or only other option. Hopelessness results when students have found no place, no acceptance, and no support for their nontraditional needs that might change their trajectory and potential for success after high school in their traditional home school environment.

Educators are agents of hope when they understand one's beginning in life does not determine one's final destiny in life. The educators at The Academy recognize their roles as agents of hope, and they realize their efforts will directly impact their communities for the greater good when they have done their part to prepare the students who cross their paths to become contributing and productive citizens who will be leaders in their communities when some of these educators have reached retirement.

### *Mutual Respect, Humanity-Informed Relationships, and the Whole Child*

The Academy focuses on the whole child. As mentioned earlier, the educational experience is catered toward the child to improve every aspect of his or her being. When this approach is taken in the classroom, students' self-efficacy improves, and they are more developed as a whole. Educators recognize the importance of authenticating students' value and make every effort to support them in all of their needs so that they

may reach their full potential (ASCD, n.d.). The whole child approach used at the Academy embraces each student's humanity in a supportive environment that promotes strong relationships between and among staff, students, and families creating an atmosphere that encourages learning. When students come to understand that they can rely on the adults in their learning environment, they are more willing to remain involved in the learning process.

When mutual respect and empathy are present, all parties can reach agreements about intervention strategies that promote educational outcomes that are compatible with culturally different worldviews, beliefs, and values (Day-Vines et al., 2007; Ivey et al., 2007). Nontraditional educators at The Academy are committed to treating their students with respect and providing a fresh start, regardless of their past experiences in traditional schools. Ms. D was adamant that students' prior experiences must be acknowledged and empathized. She has observed students who have finally experienced being treated with respect and reflecting that respect in their treatment of others. The resulting mind shift demonstrated students could and would seek a different and better way to respond in social settings when mutual empathy and respect are the norms in the school environment. Thus, it is at school where children first encounter society and learn how to be citizens (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). The ability to treat students humanely and express love for them does not rely on race (Jackson, 2017), but it is necessary for encouraging growth-fostering relationships (Letora et al., 2019).

Dr. J's goal continues to be to change the narrative as she leads her team to prepare their nontraditional students who have been written off by their traditional home

schools for positive postsecondary options. She sees the need to encourage her students with affirmations of what they can accomplish in life. She believes they can and will graduate. She believes they can and will go to college. She believes they can make positive contributions in life, and because she focuses on human empathy and respect, her students begin to believe these things themselves. The students at the academy are never condemned for their past actions, however, these nontraditional educators are firm in their expectations. They are fair in their treatment, and it is communicated to students that they are loved, respected, and fully human. Relational processes are in place to keep students connected to school and willing to persevere. Dr. J's students know her to be authentic and compassionate as the principal and director of The Academy.

Dr. A has worked with and mentored young people from an early age as a youth pastor in her church. She has witnessed her positive impact on youth as she has sought to help them change their trajectories from destructive to productive paths. She helps her students see the value in setting long- and short-term goals and to recognize that intermediate goals and adjustments may be necessary at times. She seeks to relate her students' needs to real-world situations that help them recognize the relevance of learning and the importance of becoming proficient in reading and writing. She encourages her students, and as cheerleader, she helps them see that struggles are only temporary and that difficult situations do not define a person but can only help him or her grow. She stressed that situations can and do get better.

Mr. L has always felt that becoming an educator was where he could have the greatest impact on the students in his community. Having benefited from second chances,

he believes it is in the school classroom where students experience nurturing and support, despite their current life circumstances or the traumas of poverty they may have experienced. Mr. L understands his role *in loco parentis* and sees himself as a protector of the students in his care. He shares instances from his youth with students demonstrating and explaining how he used certain obstacles or struggles as steppingstones to overcome and move toward his destiny. Mr. L intentionally engages with students and their families to get to know them and to build strong relationships that last beyond the completion of the Road to 23.

Mr. G sees himself as more of a disciplinarian because of his military background and experience. His goals are to instill discipline and to promote accountability for his students. He believes that the most structure many of his students have experienced has been within the walls of The Academy. Mr. G knows that to be successful in life, his students must learn to operate within certain boundaries and norms. His is a tough love, and he is unyielding in his conviction that teaching, and learning, is impossible without discipline. Thus, his focus is on helping students become more disciplined as they improve their mathematics skills. When students are treated with the respect every human being deserves, behavior in nontraditional educational settings becomes minor issues (Ferris-Berg & Schroeder, 2003).

Ms. S considers herself as the auntie to her students at The Academy. She desires that her students begin to love school. She realizes that in most instances, parents are doing their best. She shares her cell number and encourages families to call her if they need anything or assistance when the work becomes challenging. Ms. S also assigns

adult mentors to support students through the process on the Road to 23. She realizes that concern for her students extends beyond Monday through Friday. Her longing and reward in establishing these strong relationships is that her students develop the desire to help others as they have been recipients of random acts of kindness.

### *Personalized Learning Strategies*

The personalized learning strategy at The Academy guarantees that all students enrolled at the academy have a learning plan based on their knowledge base and learning style, and power standards for which they are expected to demonstrate proficiency. They are constantly encouraged to persevere, despite the excuses they may desire to use to give up, or the barriers and challenges they have faced or are facing on their road to graduation. The culture there is not one of condemnation. It is one that is fair, firm, and consistent. This purposeful design of instruction is blended and consists of a combination of in-person teaching, technology-assisted instruction, and student-to-student collaboration to ensure a higher depth of learning. Students own their learning and have a voice in the learning process. Personalized learning is based on the premise that one size does not fit all, but one size fits one. Learning modules are customized accordingly to address the specific needs of the individual learner.

Ms. D is currently working on a Personalized Learning Endorsement (PLE) and eagerly described the three types of personalized learning she is studying: differentiation, individualization, and personalization. Although the three types are valid instructional strategies, the learner is only actively involved and drives the learning during personalization. Ms. D is convinced personalized learning will contribute to the

development of students' executive functioning skills when they participate in planning, prioritizing, scheduling, and navigating their own learning. She also sees how personalization will keep educators in a constant state of innovation as they identify the best ways to support students.

Dr. J is proud to have 18 members of her staff participating in the first cohort for the PLE. The other half of the staff will be part of the second cohort during the next school year. She admits participation has prompted changes that were implemented at the beginning the spring semester of 2022. Dr. J chuckled that they would personalize learning all the way down to the family if that is what it takes for students to be successful. Her dream, and her goal, is for The Academy to become the leading model for nontraditional education and personalized learning in the state.

Dr. A recognizes that learning must be personalized, and because her focus is student literacy, she knows personalized learning plans must be based on students' Lexile range and current performance level. She realizes that learning must be tailored to the needs of the individual student. She also knows that when students know that they are loved, have expectations and norms explained and taught, strong relationships can be built that allow for instruction of the whole child.

Mr. L proclaimed that a personalized learning environment is a requirement for the nontraditional student because it is designed to match and meet the needs of students who have not been effectively served in traditional one size fits all learning environments. Having worked closely with fifth-year seniors, personalized learning allows a focus on grade-level reading which ultimately increases student performance

levels on EOC assessments moving students closer to their pursuit of the three E's—Employment, Enrollment, or Enlistment—and their high school diplomas. He understands that personalized learning plans are unique and designed for the individual and specific needs of students.

Mr. G discusses being assigned 120 students with 120 different ability and performance levels who are sometimes enrolled in multiple math courses. Without personalizing instruction, it would be impossible to facilitate instruction and meet the needs of so many students.

Ms. S is especially fond of the personalized learning initiative and is excited about earning the PLE. She understands that students are more likely to own the learning when they are given voice and choice in their learning plans and their entire educational process. Personalized learning plans are more appropriate for students, and teachers are better able to facilitate instruction needed at the students' appropriate instructional level. Ms. S recognizes how personalized learning plans simplify the meetings held every six weeks when students set goals and understand their responsibility to stay on track on their Road to 23.

### *Collective Accountability*

Collective accountability refers to when members in an organization are personally accountable for the actions of all others within the organization (crossknowledge.org). Collective accountability is important because it brings teams together, allows each member to discuss what accountability means for them, and then the team establishes a shared meaning of what accountability means for the organization.

This shared meaning lets everyone know what to expect from others on the team and how they can work together more effectively and productively. Everyone within the organization takes responsibility for the results that are attained. Collective accountability is proactive rather than reactive. Collective accountability requires team members to speak up when there is an issue or a problem that would impede the agreed upon desired results and address the issue or problem before it gets out of hand. If a team member sees something, they are obligated to say something. When there is collective accountability, team members must admit errors and accept responsibility; listen and gracefully accept criticism when it impacts the greater good and remain focused on achieving goals; communicate clearly, calmly, and patiently, especially when disagreements arise; and offer support to team members when it is needed.

Ms. D, Dr. J, Dr. A, Mr. L, Mr. G, and Ms. S shared diverse life and career experiences in their professional journeys that led them to serve in this nontraditional educational high school reform model. All are life-long learners who serve their nontraditional students with an unquenchable desire to improve their college and career readiness outcomes and postsecondary options. These educators believe they can and do make a difference, and they are determined to change trajectories, one student at a time. Ms. D stresses the importance of self- advocacy to her students. She feels it is important for students to not be afraid to ask for help when help is available. Her students know that their success is important to her and that she is there to lead, guide, and direct them, but the work is their responsibility to prioritize and to complete.



Dr. J believes that love matters, and with love, there is respect despite the multitude of faults every human possesses. She also believes hard work matters. Because she loves her students, she sees her role as one that opens doors and paves the way for them to attain that high school diploma that will not only change their trajectories but put them on a path to become productive citizens. When students accept their responsibility and do their part, they can make positive things happen to fulfill their purpose and destiny in life.

Dr. A inspires and motivates her students to achieve the three E's and options of college and career readiness—enrollment, enlistment, or employment—to ensure they can positively impact their families and their communities. Her expectations are made clear, and she does her part to support them in their goals, which she feels will provide them a sense of accomplishment and independence as well as deter and decrease crime in the community.

Mr. L reflects upon his childhood and how people in his “village” recognized his potential and supported him through the challenges and obstacles of poverty and encouraged him to persevere, changing the course of his destiny. In turn, Mr. L makes learning relevant by connecting the students' education to their real-life experiences, which will help them be successful in life.

Mr. G desires that his students will become better mathematicians than he. His ultimate desire is to have them be the best they can be. He also wants them to do the best they possibly can in life.

Ms. S wants her students to reciprocate the love and concern she has shown them on their journey to graduation and beyond. She and her team hold each other accountable for making the best decisions for their students. They support students as they set goals and work to stay on track during each grading period. Because multiple processes and programs are in place to meet the varied personalized needs of individual students, they enter the building one way and leave a different way, with improved postsecondary options.

Dr. J engages in detailed conversation around classes of interest and post-secondary plans with students, and their parents who enter The Academy when traditional educational policies and practices have not met the needs of nontraditional students. The discussions include the options available for them to earn their diploma and the opportunity to select their desired option. They can be flexible when ordering classes, determining the methods of instructional delivery, and scheduling—a structure totally opposite of traditional programs.

Nontraditional students must have learning made relevant and applicable to their daily lives. Dr. A instills hope in her students by sharing some of her own struggles and challenges, helping them to understand that as humans, we all experience struggles, but situations can and do get better and do not define one's destiny. Educators, however, must do whatever it takes to prepare all students to be college or career ready. This is the only way they will be able to contribute positively to their communities and be productive citizens.

### *Barriers to Nontraditional Implementation*

Once upon a time, urban described a school or district in the city. Today, urban does not always designate a school in the city unless it is in the inner city. An urban school is currently any public school within the inner city that serves mostly students of color. Many urban schools are low-performing and typically do not prepare its students for college or a career, limiting their postsecondary options in this global economy. Policymakers with the authority to address, correct, and change the course, seem content to watch what is happening and simply pretend that it is acceptable because it is either an urban student, an urban school, or an urban district. These policymakers appear to be content with the level of performance or underachievement of urban students and schools that would never be acceptable in a traditional school serving the majority population. Have they been prepared to contribute in a positive way? Traditional educational settings, where the mindset is one size fits all, may be the biggest obstacle that confronts the trajectories in the lives of nontraditional students today.

The playing field must be leveled by removing the barriers that confront many nontraditional students. Excessive punishment is one barrier, and it begins in public schools where students of color exhibit issues that reflect the trauma of poverty they have endured. They are suspended and expelled at rates that greatly exceed the penalty their White peers receive for identical behaviors (USDOE OCR, 2014). Many have been allowed to fail within the walls of traditional schools due to the lack of providing personalized instruction and low, or no, expectations. Mental health issues, especially those that result from the trauma of poverty, are also a barrier to academic success.

Nontraditional educational settings choose to adopt strategies that eliminate or lessen the impact of barriers that impede high school completion by addressing empathic relational and instructional needs of students of color. Awareness and understanding of these strategies used and barriers encountered by administrators and teachers in nontraditional school settings could help to improve nationwide graduation rates (USDOE, 2021) for students of color who live in poverty.

Ms. D considers some traditional instructional policies and practices that contradict and appear to be counterproductive for the nontraditional students served at the Academy. Specifically, she points to Standard 4 of TKES, which requires teachers to differentiate instruction and assess students according to their learning styles. However, at the end of the year, course mastery is determined by one standardized assessment measurement. Instead of one standard assessment at the end of the year, multiple measures should be triangulated and used since some students experience test anxiety and are not good test-takers. Thus, one measure may not actually reflect what students have learned and know.

Ms. D discussed the awful cycle of pervasive violence impacting her students in the community. Violence is often a result of the trauma of poverty and the lack of social-emotional intelligence, according to Ms. D. She also sees parents who have not had a great experience regarding school have few tools to help their children navigate the educational process. Ms. D recognized that parents want their children to be successful, but often they do not possess the necessary skills or awareness of resources to assist them

in navigating the school process. Mutual empathy and strong relationships with families are required in the nontraditional environment.

Another concern or barrier Ms. D has encountered is funding. The Academy operates on a miniscule budget, and occasionally, staff members have personally funded celebrations for students. Books and resources are expensive, but books and other resources used by the students and/or teachers at the traditional school are not transferred when students are assigned to The Academy. Students often arrive there with only hopelessness and feelings of being unwanted in their home school setting. Ms. D believes that perceptions of nontraditional students must change, and stakeholders' mindsets must become more humane as students are nurtured into adulthood where they desire and strive to become contributing and productive citizens.

Dr. A views illiteracy—reading below grade level—as a major barrier as so many students arriving at The Academy read two to three or more years below grade level. Reading ability compounds the situation since reading is required across the curriculum in every content area. It is embedded in all core content areas across the curriculum. The level of students' literacy impacts college and career readiness and is reflected in the 2019 CCRPI data that documented a graduation rate of 79.37% in the school district where this study is being conducted. However, the Literacy Readiness Indicator for its economically disadvantaged students was 49.97%. The Literacy Readiness Indicator for African American students was 41.14%. Instruction must be tailored to address the needs of these struggling students (GaDOE, 2019). Dr. A is motivated to do all she can to assist students as they work to improve their reading and Lexile levels. Dr. A sees the value of

every teacher in the building using Core Six strategies to incorporate reading and writing in every daily bellringer assignment.

When Dr. J was assigned to The Academy, many assumed by many that the assignment was a demotion and a punishment rather than a move she had initiated when she presented a plan to the superintendent months earlier to improve the alternative program. Additionally, the \$25,000 budget presented a financial barrier to implementing the improvement plan she envisioned. The autonomy to take risks and to do whatever it takes to benefit students prompted Dr. J to apply for grants and take advantage of relationships with her wide network of people and organizations to obtain materials and resources necessary to improve outcomes for her students.

Dr. J is a proponent of nontraditional approaches and strategies in lieu of traditional policies and practices that have produced the failure and hopelessness students bring when they have been referred to The Academy. Teachers in the nontraditional educational settings are held to the same standards as those in traditional settings, which she views as a barrier. Nontraditional educators and students need policies and practices that change students' paths.

## Chapter 6

### CONCLUSIONS

#### *Overview*

Answers to the research questions posed in this study are presented in this chapter. The answers are based on interview responses from six portraits of educators employed in a nontraditional educational setting, serving students of color who are of low economic status. All participants shared life and career experiences that led them to serve in the nontraditional high school reform model selected for this study. They also shared strategies they used to improve graduation rates and the barriers they encountered during the process. The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of educators regarding the use of a nontraditional school reform model to improve graduation rates in an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students of low socioeconomic status. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ 1. What are the life and career experiences of educators who implemented a nontraditional high school reform model to improve graduation rates at an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students from low-income families?

RQ 2. What strategies did educators use to implement a nontraditional high school reform model to improve graduation rates at an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students from low-income families?

RQ 3. What were the barriers, if any, when educators implemented a nontraditional high school reform model to improve graduation rates at an identified urban school district serving predominantly African American and Hispanic students from low-income families?

The participants in this portraiture study bring varied and diverse life experiences as they serve in this nontraditional educational setting, however, a commonality of experience was encouragement to get the best possible education. Ms. D was the child of an educator. She grew up in an environment where education was important and where her mother modeled caring for her students so much so that she would request to have students placed in her class when others on staff were reluctant to have them on their rosters. Ms. D's mother served as teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, college professor, and educational consultant during her 45-year career.

When faced with the decision to allow Ms. D to be the only student of color in her kindergarten class in a state-of-the-art magnet school in the 1970s, Ms. D's mother was hesitant at first but embraced the *opportunity* for her child to reach her full potential after the kindergarten teacher, Ms. Walker, convinced her that this *opportunity* would afford Ms. D exposure to hands-on, innovative, project-based learning as well as the performing arts. The alternative was a traditional elementary school in rural Southwest Georgia where her trajectory would have been fine because she had an educated mother and had demonstrated her ability with high test scores, but the experiences offered at the magnet school would not likely be part of her history today. Once Ms. D's parents divorced and they moved to another rural Southwest Georgia County, Ms. D finished her K-12 public



school as one of the two or three students of color in her classes. This status opened her up to verbal abuse from both sides. Students of color accused her of thinking she was “better” than they were. The White kids felt like she did not belong in their classes.

Ms. S’s public-school experience included the years when she was afforded the *opportunity* to participate in the minority to majority transfer (M2M) program which involved a three-hour bus ride to and from school to attend a higher performing school than the one she was zoned to attend because of her street address. The M2M program exposed Ms. S to sleepovers at the homes of doctors and lawyers, field trips to Washington, DC and to Florida, and classical and contemporary orchestra performances as one of ten students of color enrolled in this elementary school that was located in a zone occupied by more affluent families.

Scholars in education use CRT to explore the role of race and racism in the production of inequality (Bell, 1987; n.d.a; Lawrence, 1993; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994; Tate, 1997). Dixson et al. (2006) indicated that race remained a powerful symbol of difference, inequity, and oppression and noted that CRT could be used to understand persistent inequity, injustice, and oppression (Dixson et al., 2006). The property function of Whiteness includes the rights of disposition; rights to use and enjoyment, reputation, and status; and the absolute right to exclude (Lac, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). A central feature of Whiteness, or power in America, is the unlimited ability to define what property is, and to possess and own property without any restraint. Ms. D was made to feel that she had no right to the classes to which she was assigned, and the White students felt it was well within their rights to exclude her.

Property owners in affluent communities continue to seek property tax relief and resent paying for a public-school system that serves a majority of non-White and poor students (Houston, 1993; Lac, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Wainer, 1993). Property values influence not only the quality but the quantity of curriculum that is offered. Kozol (1991) detailed that schools serving poor students of color are more likely to not have access to science labs, computers, and other state-of-the-art technologies. These schools are also not likely to have appropriately certified and prepared teachers. The lack of both human and instructional resources limits the opportunity for students to reach their full potential despite the same mandated educational standards for all students (Kozol, 1991).

Putnam (2015) asserted that a well-established cause of the opportunity gap is the extreme isolation of poor students of color in poor schools, depriving too many of experiencing the American Dream. The opportunity gap continues, driven by the fact that poor students have no other option than to attend schools lacking a robust academic culture or schools staffed by less experienced teachers attempting to teach students needing the most support to learn and grow. According to the Saguaro Seminar (2016), the phrase, *our kids*, tends to refer only to the dominant culture's children and excludes increasing numbers of economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged students. The failure to invest in today's poor children in Pre-K through Grade 12 will result in costs for criminal justice that exceed \$5 trillion in their lifetime for healthcare expenses and the opportunity costs of wasting the talents of poor gifted children (Saguaro Seminar).

After graduating from college with a degree in criminal justice and political science, Ms. D went to work for the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) for two years serving several small counties in Southwest Georgia. Her caseload was 90 percent or more African American males, aged 13-17, most of which were functionally illiterate and had been found eligible for special education. Ms. D submitted her resignation after a day in court when one of her 15-year-old African American male charges was sentenced for one year for stealing food, underwear, and deodorant from a local resident he had done some yardwork for. One of her White charges that same day was sentenced to therapy for leaving dead cats at his girlfriend's door and threatening to kill everyone in the house.

Incarceration over education is favored under America's criminal justice system and disproportionality forces minority students and students with disabilities out of schools and into jails or prisons (Elias, 2013). In a nation-wide study, the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2014) found that African American students are 3.5 times more likely than their White classmates or peers to be suspended or expelled. African American children account for 18% of students in public schools. However, African American children constitute 46% of students suspended more than one time. Students with disabilities account for 8.6% of public-school children, yet they represent 32% of youth in juvenile detention centers (USDOE OCR, 2014). Zero tolerance policies criminalize minor infractions and contribute to schools where minority children with learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect are isolated, punished, and pushed into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. These students

deserve schools that provide a supportive environment conducive for learning, including additional educational support and counseling services (ACLU, n.d.).

From DJJ, Ms. D entered traditional public education as an EBD teacher where she served for ten years before transitioning to this nontraditional educational setting where she has served for more than six years. Dr. J left nursing school and was working as an assistant manager at a local grocery store when a college professor of education observed her instructing a worker on how to measure dimensions and build a box cart. It was this moment that presented the opportunity for Dr. J to enter public school education where she has served as a math teacher, assistant principal, district coordinator, principal, and now principal/director of personalized learning at the Academy. Dr. A entered public school education after discovering her technical college students were lacking 21<sup>st</sup> century skills—soft skills, hard skills, technology skills, communication skills and thought she could make a difference. Mr. L always wanted to be an educator because of the educators he encountered along the way that impacted him the most. Mr. G worked for DJJ for 15 years before entering public school education and always felt he could connect to adolescents, including juvenile delinquents. Ms. S entered public school education after 15 years with DFACS and now serves as an advocate for students working with student support teams to encourage more successful outcomes for the nontraditional students at the Academy.

The staff believes it is important to exercise empathy and to dig deeper than what appears on the surface to determine the root causes of students' academic and behavioral deficiencies. To assist in the development of empathic relationships, during one of their

professional learning community sessions, the staff completed a survey to ascertain if there were common experiences they share with their nontraditional students, such as if they grew up in single parent households, had failed one or more classes, had experienced retention; have siblings with different or multiple fathers, etc. When it comes to building relationships with students, students are encouraged to become advocates for themselves, to ensure their needs are known and to define how they can be met.

At the Academy, students are loved, taught school norms and expectations, learn to build relationships as the staff seeks to address the needs of the whole child. The staff at the Academy understands that students bring the norms and the language of home to school with them and must be taught and learn the norms and the language of school, instead of being punished for not knowing. Understanding that students react based on their social emotional intelligence, the five competencies of social emotional learning are taught to help students learn to self-manage as they work through issues of abandonment, neglect, poverty, etc. Staff members serve at the Academy because they choose not to be anywhere else because they love and care for their students.

Though researchers mainly use RCT in therapeutic settings, culturally competent and responsive educators employ many of the same strategies and techniques in their interactions with students to build connectedness and to focus on preparing students for post-secondary outcomes. RCT involves anticipatory empathy, anticipating how the student will be impacted or affected by the way the educator chooses to respond. The anticipatory empathy steers the educational relationship into a deeper mutual connection (Comstock et al., 2008). According to Kress et al. (2018), counselors [educators] can

establish this alliance using principles of RCT when there is a focus on mutuality, shared power, and authenticity to provide clients/students with a safe relational context within which to explore their connections and disconnections. They also asserted that counselors empower their clients/students to foster self-empathy and to examine their own relational strategies. Therefore, principles of RCT can be used to repair problematic relational images that were influenced by traumatic experiences and begin building new, healthy connections. School connectedness refers to a youths' perception of safety, support, and sense of investment in school (McNeeley & Falci, 2004). School connectedness has been linked to better emotional health and a reduction in adolescent risky behavior (Brooks et al., 2012; Kidger et al., 2012). McNeeley and Falci (2004) noted that school connectedness involving connections to peers and teachers who participate in prosocial behaviors serve as a protective factor.

Multiple nontraditional options and strategies are available at the Academy. The Opportunity Achievement Center (OAC) serves middle and high school students referred as a consequence of the disposition after an evidentiary hearing due to chronic behavior issues. The Personalized Learning Center (PLC) is available for overaged 8<sup>th</sup> graders allowing them to recover and earn enough credits to gain 10<sup>th</sup> grade status within one year and ultimately graduate. The YouthBuild program, for students aged 16-24 years, provides overaged students an opportunity to earn their GED and at the same time acquire a skill in the construction industry. The Virtual Instructional Program (VIP) emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic and is a completely online option for students in grades K-12.

At the Academy, a student support team works to ensure students develop executive functioning skills as they are included in creating their own schedules, prioritizing their own classes and daily to-do-lists. Building their own daily schedules, including when they take their breaks allows these nontraditional students the opportunity to assume and accept responsibility for how their day at school is spent and builds intrinsic motivation to persevere and achieve the long- and short-term goals agreed upon. When students or parents request additional tutoring support, parents are expected to attend the sessions in order to be equipped and able to support their students at home. The staff understands one size does not fit all and recognizes the role that one size fits all curricula plays in developing students' defense mechanisms that mimic apathy when their instructional needs are ignored and not met. The focus is on improving student literacy skills, instruction, and overall school improvement with student achievement front of mind. Dr. J, the principal/director, is the lead learner stressing the 15 exemplary practices promoted by the National Alternative Education Association for developing the whole child.

All staff are expected to incorporate literacy strategies, constructed writing responses, and technology resources into their daily instructional practice. Teachers are encouraged to experiment and try innovative ways to meet the needs of students without fear of reprimand. They are not confined to one size fits all or one size fits most, but one size fits one. Dr. J, the principal/director of the Academy, has a plan in place for the entire staff to earn their personalized learning endorsement by the end of the 2022-2023 school year. The Academy is a safe space for educators to grow professionally as well as

for students to engage in discussions about life and other issues they experience. The student-teacher ratio is kept at 15:1, allowing students to receive the attention they need to persevere and to be successful.

Nontraditional reform models can provide strong educational support by offering smaller class sizes with culturally responsive, personalized learning as an alternative to the traditional high school model. An additional provision of nontraditional reform models is that of student-focused support with flexible schedules in the late afternoon or early evening for students requiring such a schedule (Nassau BOCES, 2021).

Personalized learning ensures that each student is provided a learning plan that is specific to what they know and need to master, and how they learn best (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). A purposeful design of blended instruction, personalized learning consists of a combination of in-person teaching, technology-assisted instruction, and student-to-student collaboration for deeper learning (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). Students work with their teachers or instructional teams to establish both short-term and long-term goals. This process gives students a voice and choice to encourage ownership of their learning. The teachers ensure learning plans are aligned with academic standards.

Barriers encountered when implementing this nontraditional reform model have been many including fixed mindsets and beliefs that stereotypical ideations about students of color are the determinants of nontraditional students' achievement and performance. A disproportionate number of students of color are found to be eligible for behavioral special education categories. Too often alternative educational settings have been a place holder until many nontraditional students enter the adult penal system. The



American criminal system appears to be better prepared to incarcerate students of color than it is to educate them to become contributing citizens with productive outcomes.

People of color continue to receive harsher punishment for similar or the same infractions or crimes. Dr. J makes every effort to address behavioral issues in-house first rather than making an immediate referral to the district for an evidentiary hearing. Suspension is never the first response when Academy expectations and norms are violated. The nontraditional students are often baffled and confused by this response when they are shown love and compassion versus being suspended or expelled as punishment.

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to discipline policies used in school districts across the country that push students into the criminal justice system when students are suspended or expelled at alarming rates. Incarceration over education is favored under this system and disproportionality forces minority students and students with disabilities out of schools and into jails or prisons (Elias, 2013). These students deserve schools that provide a supportive environment conducive for learning, including additional educational support and counseling services (ACLU, n.d.).

Research related to people of color and their representation in American jurisprudence has been dominated by theories and belief systems attached to political, scientific, and religious theories that rely on stereotypes and characterizations that reinforce the inferiority paradigm and the resulting political action (Allport, 1954; Bullock, 1967; Cone, 1970; Marable, 1983; Takaki, 1993; Tate, 1997). The inferiority paradigm is fostered on the belief that people of color are biologically and genetically inferior to Whites (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Gould, 1981; Selden, 1994). In the United

States, the criminal justice system, as well as economic, education, housing, and other systems are set up in ways that privilege some and underserve others. Neither equity nor justice can exist until bias, racism, and oppression are dismantled. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1994) asserted race remains a salient factor in U.S. society in general and particularly in education. According to Omi and Winant (1994, p. 56) “race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation.”

Historically, racial, cultural, and social identities of groups in the United States are socially structured in schools to create a line of dominance between non-White and Eurocentric identities (Roediger, 2005; Wells, 2018). Students of color are often marginalized, blamed, and ignored, creating racial traumas when they cannot immediately conform to and engage in a system that was not initially designed to benefit them (McGee & Stovall, 2015; Wells, 2018, Williams, 2016). Systemic racism operates within schools to oppress students of color (Fernando, 2012; Wells, 2018). The implicit bias of administrators and teachers often results in low expectations and oppressive stereotypes, especially when responding to student behavior and performance (Hill et al, 2014; Wells, 2018).

Nontraditional education programs are becoming agents of hope for students who have been marginalized, blamed, and ignored in traditional education settings. Nontraditional students who experience mutual respect and empathy within humanity-informed relationships that address the needs of the whole child can overcome the hopelessness they have experienced in traditional education environments. Nontraditional students who are provided personalized learning opportunities specific to their needs can

see their trajectories change as they begin to experience success and see that they have untapped potential to explore. Nontraditional students who are part of an organization that operates with collective accountability for all can demonstrate leadership, scholarship, and citizenship that positions them to thrive in a 21<sup>st</sup> century global society. Despite the systemic societal barriers, the obstacles that confront and prevent the accomplishment of much that has too often remained unfulfilled, nontraditional education has the potential to right the many wrongs and create a more level playing field for students needing more than traditional educational environments have to offer.

### *Implications for Future Research*

Why do these portraits matter? How can this research inform educational policy and practice to engender more equitable educational access for nontraditional students of color? Beyond bringing decision and policymakers of a fixed mindset to possibly reconsider their positions, these stories reveal quite common discussions among those who recognize that exposure and equitable opportunities open doors that have been shut for so long. At the very least, my prayer is that these six stories serve as a counternarrative for those whose ideas of privilege and supremacy have led them to believe that what is occurring in too many urban educational settings is simply good enough for the already marginalized students of color who are most likely being served using a one size fits all approach. These six portraits will lead policymakers to see that what is occurring is not good enough when large sectors of our citizens are not being prepared to assume contributing and productive roles in our communities. These six portraits will help policymakers to see that the role of our schools is to prepare all its

citizens to live and exist at a standard where they can stand on their own two feet and where their basic needs can be met and sustained. This would, thereby, diminish the need for the school-to-prison pipeline, reduce the incidence of crime, and eliminate the burden of non-productive citizens—the public charge—on society as a whole.

Policymakers should strive to ensure that those who serve in every schoolhouse perform their duties as if it were their moral and professional responsibility to do whatever it takes to provide what all traditional and nontraditional students need to become contributing and productive citizens in our communities—rural, suburban, and urban. Nontraditional options should be made to existing policies and practices to ensure equitable access and opportunity is available for all students. These adjustments should be made to ensure that the students receive empathic, relational, and instructional support to ensure access to a productive future in the various communities that are part of our nation’s global economy. In essence, these adjustments would ensure that the students will not experience a diminished future as they would if only traditional educational settings were provided.

### *Final Reflections*

The very idea that poor students who have experienced varied traumas of poverty cannot rise above their current circumstances and meet high expectations is a farce. These students demonstrate their capacity to perform when they are fully valued as worthy humans and provided with the tools necessary to be all they can be. This can be done without lowered expectations. It can also be done without the accepted reliance on

stereotypes that embrace racial inferiority and without established lowered expectations for students or individuals of color.

It was difficult to not write myself into these six portraits to affirm my own beliefs and convictions. Those convictions are that traditional educational policies and practices have missed the mark and have left so many students of color behind, simply because of established majority norms, implicit biases, and generalized stereotypes. These norms and stereotypes have made it impossible for students of color to meet expectations and experience success under a one size fits all approach. My hope is that these stories will serve to counter the stereotypical beliefs and narrative that a somewhat low-level of education is good enough for students of color enrolled in rural, suburban, and/or urban schools across the country.

#### *Future Research*

In hindsight, it would have been interesting to have completed a focus group interview with all participants after their draft portraits had been reviewed. It would have allowed them to share additional details beyond the initial questions used for the three interviews. This would have been especially valuable because after the interviews were conducted, the Critical Race Theory (CRT) surfaced as a politically charged issue, resulting in legislation in Georgia—HB 1084—Protect Students First Act, which includes the following key components:

1. Each school and local school system may provide curricula or training programs that foster learning and workplace environments where all students, employees, and school community members are respected; provided, however, that any

curriculum, classroom instruction, or mandatory training program, whether delivered or facilitated by school personnel or a third party engaged by a school or local school system, shall not advocate for divisive concepts (e.g., one race is inherently superior to another race; the United States is fundamentally racist; an individual, by virtue of his or her race, is inherently or consciously racist or oppressive toward individuals of other races; an individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any form of psychological distress because of his or her race, etc.). (Georgia State Legislature, 2022)

2. Allows the inclusion of divisive concepts, as part of a larger course of instruction, in a professionally and academically appropriate manner and without espousing personal political beliefs.
3. Allows curricula that addresses the topics of slavery, racial oppression, racial segregation, or racial discrimination, including the enactment and enforcement of laws resulting in racial oppression, segregation, and discrimination in a professionally and academically appropriate manner and without espousing personal political beliefs.
4. Allows a school administrator, teacher, or other school personnel to respond in a professionally and academically appropriate manner and without espousing personal political beliefs to questions about divisive concepts raised by students, school community members, or participants in a training program. (Georgia State Legislature, 2022)

This piece of legislation, along with SB 449—Parent’s Bill of Rights—which specifies parental rights to review all instructional materials intended for classroom use, was included among the legislative priorities during the 2022 legislative session. Additionally, the Index of School Book Bans (PEN America, 2022) ranks Georgia number 12 among states that are currently banning books because of CRT and LGBTQ concerns in politically polarized states.

### *Conclusion*

Creating these six portraits helped me to develop some insight into how these nontraditional educators’ life and career experiences helped them to make sense of the important work they do daily. They each have a sense of who they are as educators and who their students are as learners. They are committed to seeing nontraditional students evolve from feeling hopeless to feeling fully hopeful. Students become hopeless when they are constantly suspended or expelled and sent out into the world with few tools to become productively self-sufficient. Nontraditional educational models have proven to be ideal for students who have found little success in traditional settings. Opportunities are provided for students who need a second chance to align their lives for success. The educators interviewed in this study identified several barriers to academic success. Mr. L identified the lack of resources as a major barrier because resources impact curriculum and lesson planning. Mr. L expressed that Title-I resources remain at the home schools, even when students are assigned to the Academy for the entire school year. Having to operate on a small budget to meet the needs of the students most in need of services was the norm until stakeholders began to see the great need for proper instructional

resources—to meet the needs of the *whole child* in the nontraditional setting. Ms. D recognized the need for personalized learning, which is designed to match and meet the needs of students who have not been effectively served in the traditional environment where one size fits all or where common curriculum maps and pacing guides are used as the instructional model.

Even though traditional educational practices and processes are grounded in White privilege and superiority, these portraits demonstrate how students of color can be positively impacted when they are not further marginalized in schools. They also demonstrate that students of color can navigate and attain a high school diploma when educators who serve them seek to eliminate or lessen the barriers that have prevented their school success. Additionally, the portraits document how nontraditional educators continually seek to develop authentic, connected, and empathic relationships with students who have been cast aside without a path, with little hope for a bright and productive future. These educators have helped nontraditional students transform their hopelessness into hopefulness with a desire to persevere and dream beyond their current circumstances.

Mr. G noted nontraditional educational settings are confined by traditional norms, including evaluation instruments and attendance policies imposed on nontraditional students. These policies and practices also tie the hands of educators, making it difficult to effectively meet the needs of students requiring the most support. Mr. G lamented that schedules are more student-friendly than teacher friendly, and they often cause difficulty with 120 students on 120 different performance and ability levels, enrolled in multiple



math classes simultaneously, or studying eight different math concepts, and have huge gaps in background, previous, or conceptual knowledge.

Some students focus on credits, regardless of how they acquire them. Access to technology allows them to illegitimately Google their way through at times. Mr. G stressed that he views this use of technology as a barrier, as it results in unlearned math concepts or math illiteracy. Lack of discipline is also a barrier in the eyes of Mr. G. He works to instill discipline by stressing the need for orderliness. He noted that he believes productive teaching and learning cannot occur without discipline. He also indicated that he finds that some of his students have only experienced discipline in his classroom and within the walls of the academy.

Ms. S concurred with Mr. L in citing the lack of resources and inability to obtain instructional materials and wraparound services for students as major barriers. Additionally, she expressed perceptions, or the mindset that nontraditional or alternative educational settings are as jails or prisons, tend to result in lowered expectations for these students and in their ultimate place in society. Another barrier Ms. S identified is the placement of adults at the Academy who have not been successful in other positions. She noted that she feels these adults only undermine what nontraditional students need and add to the trauma of poverty and abuse they have already experienced in school and are likely experiencing outside of school.

These nontraditional educators serve as advocates for their students. However, they intentionally help students see the importance of self-advocacy and personal accountability in the accomplishment of long- and short-term goals. They focus on

building resilience—encouraging students to see how hard work and determination can change their trajectories and how their beginning does not determine their destiny in life.

So many systems in our great nation—economic, educational, social—have been built on a foundation of privilege and racial superiority that continue to be perpetuated in the current politically polarized environment. This polarization trickles down into schools, and these ideas of privilege and superiority marginalize nontraditional students who do not look like, act like, or sound like traditional students or White students. The ideas of privilege and superiority generally apply to students who fail to meet the standards or expectations of those in the majority who have the power to adjust systems to be more inclusive. The onus cannot be on the students, especially nontraditional students, to exhibit resilience, despite the challenges and obstacles they face, or the hurdles they must overcome to achieve some semblance of an equitable educational access when a one size fits all is the approach used.

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**APPENDIX A:**  
**BOARD OF EDUCATION APPROVAL**



December 7, 2020

Joan Whitehead  
Valdosta State University  
Valdosta, GA

Dear Ms. Whitehead,

Thank you for your request to conduct research in the Bibb County School District. Your request has been approved. Our committee reviewed your proposal and you can move forward with next steps at this time. Once you have completed your research, we ask you share your findings with my department so we can add to our body of knowledge.

Sincerely,



KEVIN ADAMS

Kevin Adams  
Director, Research, Evaluation, Assessment and Accountability  
Bibb County School District

**APPENDIX B:**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocol**

The first interview will involve having the participants discuss their life and career experiences that led them to implement or to teach in this nontraditional high school reform model. The second interview would involve the participants describing in detail the strategies used while implementing a nontraditional high school reform model. The third interview will involve having the participants describe the barriers, if any, encountered when implementing or teaching in the nontraditional high school reform model.

## Interview 1 Protocol

In this interview, you will be discussing your life and career experiences that led you to implementing or to teaching in this nontraditional high school reform model.

1. How did you end up in the traditional teacher certification program? If a TAPP teacher: How did you end up in the alternative teacher education program?
2. Why did you enter the field of education? Were you encouraged by others to enter the profession and to become a teacher?
3. Describe your upbringing and your own K-12 education experience?
4. At what point in your life did you decide you wanted to be a teacher? What caused you to choose teaching at this point in your life?
5. Did you choose or were you assigned to work in this nontraditional setting?
6. What things in your life and career experiences make you the perfect candidate to serve in this nontraditional educational setting? How did these things impact your desire to prepare your students for graduation and post-secondary options of a career or college attendance?
7. How have your experiences impacted your ability to connect and encourage, and engage the students you serve here? What motivates you to encourage your students to persevere when the work gets challenging?
8. What is your level of confidence that you are improving outcomes for your students? Provide examples that support this confidence.
9. Do you feel traditional instructional policies and practices contradict or seem inconsistent when meeting the needs of the students you serve? Why or why not?
10. How do you use curriculum frameworks/standards documents, assessments, or screeners, if available, to drive instruction in your classroom?
11. Do you collaborate with your students' other teachers to plan and coordinate instruction?

## Interview 2 Protocol

This interview will involve you describing in detail the strategies used while implementing a nontraditional high school reform model.

1. Did you receive the professional development and support needed when transitioning from the traditional educational setting to this nontraditional environment? If yes, explain the type of support received. If no, explain what support you needed but did not receive.
2. How many hours of PD have you had in the past 3-5 years that directly address curriculum, assessment, instructional best practices, and ways students learn Reading/ELA? Math?
3. How did the PD provided lead you to think about new and different ways to facilitate learning in your classroom?
4. Are you comfortable trying new or different instructional methods that promise to significantly impact your students' performance or achievement level? Is the instructional material provided sufficient to meet your students' needs? Do you use other resources to supplement?
5. Are you encouraged to take risks to improve your teaching to meet the needs of your students? Can you site examples?
6. Do the instructional leaders in your building model instructional best practices, observe and provide feedback, or assist in analyzing student work and suggest ways to improve teaching/learning processes?
7. Discuss your relationship with your colleagues and the support you receive from them while collaborating in this nontraditional setting. Do you and your colleagues hold each other accountable and assume responsibility for all students' success?
8. How do you keep your students encouraged when they encounter academic challenges?



### **Interview 3 Protocol**

This interview will involve you describing the barriers, if any, encountered when implementing or teaching in the nontraditional high school reform model.

1. What were the barriers you encountered in the nontraditional setting that had not experienced in the traditional setting?
2. Why do you think these barriers exist?
3. Have these barriers made you determined to see your students graduate with career or college education options? How? Explain why.
4. What legacy would you like to leave your students to have once they have graduated? Explain why.
5. What changes would you make to improve the nontraditional setting and the support your students receive?

**APPENDIX C:  
IRB APPROVAL**



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
For the Protection of Human Research Participants**

**PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT**

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Protocol Number: 04185-2021

Responsible Researcher(s): Joan Whitehead

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Rudo Tsemunhu

Project Title: Educator's Impact on Graduation Rate in a Non-Traditional Setting.

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**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](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu)) before continuing your research.

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**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:**

- Upon completion of the research study all collected data must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed. Pseudonym lists must be kept in a separate secure file from corresponding name lists, email addresses, etc.
  - Exempt protocol guidelines permit the recording of interviews provided the recording is made for the sole purpose of creating an accurate transcript. Upon creation of the transcript the recorded interview must be deleted from all devices. Recordings are not to be shared or stored.
  - Prior to the start of recording, it is recommended that the researcher answer participant questions, confirm participant understanding, and establish willingness to participate.
  - As part of the informed consent process, recorded interview sessions must include the researcher voice reading aloud the consent statement, confirming understanding, and establishing their willingness to participate. Participants must be provided a copy of the research statement.
- If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) to ensure an updated record of your exemption.
- 

*Elizabeth Ann Ophie*

06.08.2021

Elizabeth Ann Ophie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) or 229-253-2947.

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Revised: 06.02.19

**APPENDIX D:**

**ARTIFACTS**

LKES and TKES Summary

Georgia Department of Education

Leader Keys Effectiveness System (LKES) Summary Data for Portrait #2

PERFORMANCE STANDARD	PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL FY19				PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL FY21				PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL FY22			
	Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I	Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I	Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I
<b>SCHOOL LEADERSHIP</b>												
1. Instructional Leadership		III			IV				IV			
2. School Climate	IV				IV				IV			
<b>ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP</b>												
3. Planning and Assessment		III				III			IV			
4. Organizational Management		III				III				III		
<b>HUMAN RESOURCES LEADERSHIP</b>												
5. Human Resources Management		III				III				III		
6. Teacher/Staff Evaluation		III				III				III		
<b>PROFESSIONALISM &amp; COMMUNICATION</b>												
7. Professionalism	IV					III			IV			
8. Communication & Community Relations	IV				IV	III			IV			
<b>OVERALL RATING</b>		III				III				III		

**Level IV:** In addition to meeting the requirements for Level III.

**Level III:** Level III is the expected level of performance.

**Level II:** Inconsistently meets expectations.

**Level I:** Does not meet expectations

**\*\*FY20—Data not available due to COVID-19**

# Georgia Department of Education

## Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) Summary Data

\*\*FY20—Data not available due to COVID-19

PORTRAIT/FY	PLANNING		INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY		ASSESSMENT OF AND FOR LEARNING		LEARNING ENVIRONMENT		PROFESSIONALISM & COMMUNICATION	
	TAPS 1 Professional Knowledge	TAPS 2 Instructional Planning	TAPS 3 Instructional Strategies	TAPS 4 Differentiated Instruction	TAPS 5 Assessment Strategies	TAPS 6 Assessment Uses	TAPS 7 Positive Learning Environment	TAPS 8 Academically Challenging Environment	TAPS 9 Professionalism	TAPS 10 Communication
<b>FY19</b>										
Portrait #1	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	IV	IV
Portrait #3	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	IV	IV
Portrait #4	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III
Portrait #5	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III
<b>FY21</b>										
Portrait #1	III	III	III	III	III	III	IV	III	IV	IV
Portrait #3	III	IV	III	III	III	III	III	III	IV	IV
Portrait #4	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	IV	III
Portrait #5	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III
<b>FY 22</b>										
Portrait #1	III	IV	III	III	III	III	IV	III	IV	IV
Portrait #3	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	IV	IV
Portrait #4	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	IV	IV
Portrait #5	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III
<b>Level IV = EXEMPLARY</b> – In addition to meeting requirement for PROFICIENT <b>Level III = PROFICIENT</b> – The expected level of performance <b>Level II = NEEDS DEVELOPMENT</b> <b>Level I = INEFFECTIVE</b>										

## School District

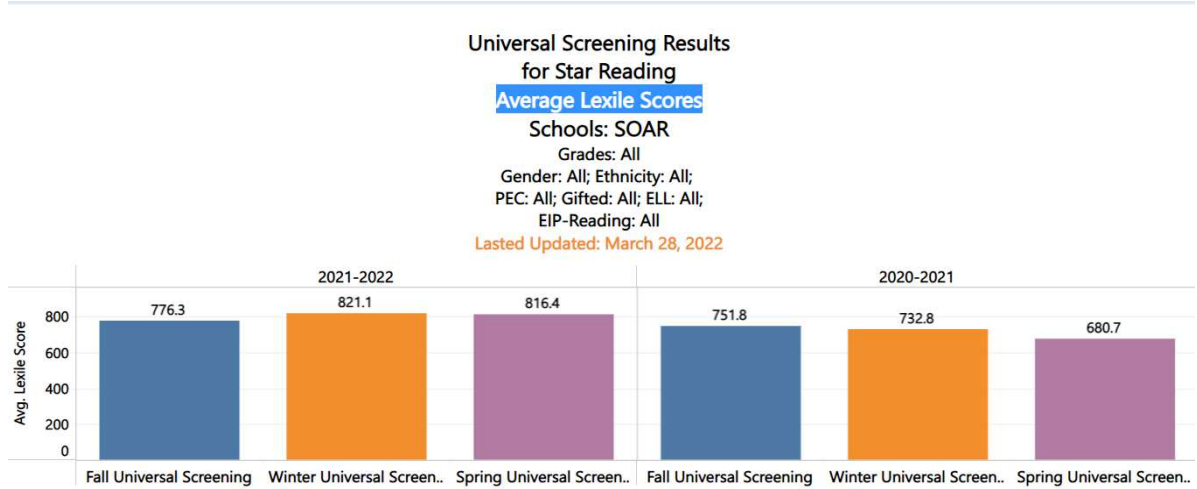
### General Evaluation Instrument

PORTRAIT/FY	Quality of Work/Work Performed	Quantity of Work/Productivity	Job Knowledge	Reliability	Attendance/Punctuality	Dependability	Cooperation/Attitude	Judgment	Initiative	Adaptability
	Work is accurate, thorough, neat	High volume of work performed	Information necessary to perform job	Employee exhibits task completion and follow-thru	Employee is timely and punctual	Employee can be counted on for results	Employee promotes harmony and cooperation; effective communicator	Employee exhibits appropriate decision-making	Employee seeks out new assignments	Employee conforms to work requirements
<b>Portrait #6/ FY19</b>										
<b>Portrait #6/ FY21</b>										
<b>Portrait #6/ FY22</b>										
<p><b>Exemplary</b> – Requires little or no supervision or guidance. The employee is highly self-motivated, displays consistent initiative and supports total school concept.</p> <p><b>Proficient</b> – Accomplishes assigned tasks satisfactorily with minimal supervision and is self-directed.</p> <p><b>Needs Development</b> – Requires concrete examples and additional supervision. The employee meets minimal standards in job related expectations. A growth plan should be put in place.</p> <p><b>Ineffective</b> – The employee does not meet minimal standards in job related expectations. The employee has not followed/met the planned program of improvement.</p> <p><b>Rating Guide:</b> Six or more needs development and/or ineffective ratings will give the employee an overall ineffective evaluation. Four or more ineffective ratings will give the employee an overall ineffective evaluation. Documentation supporting the evaluation is maintained by the supervisor.</p>										

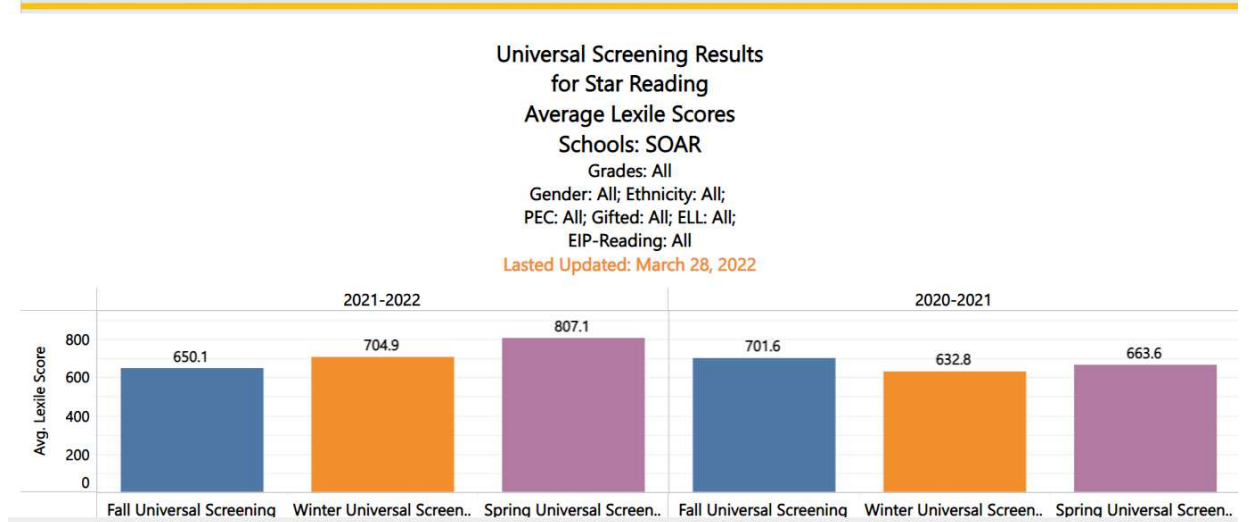
\*\*FY20—Data not available due to COVID-19

# Student Average Lexile Visualization

## HS PLC Data



## HS Academy Data





### Graduation Data

<b>FY</b>	<b>NUMBER OF ACADEMY GRADUATES</b>	<b>ACADEMY GRADUATION RATE</b>	<b>DISTRICT GRADUATION RATE</b>	<b>GEORGIA GRADUATION RATE</b>
<b>2020</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>76.06%</b>	<b>83.8%</b>
<b>2021</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>80.7%</b>	<b>83.7%</b>
<b>2022</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>88.4</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>84.1%</b>

(GaDOE, 2022)

Beginning in the 2022-2023 school year, The Academy is no longer a program but has attained the status of school within the district with a baseline graduation rate of 88.4 percent.