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# Schooling Black Males: Hegemonic Discourses, Structural Barriers, and Strategic Resistance

“SCHOOLING” BLACK MALES: HEGEMONIC DISCOURSES, STRUCTURAL  
BARRIERS, and STRATEGIC RESISTANCE

by

Cleotis Wadley, Jr., M.Ed.

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements

For the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

August, 2022

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APPROVED:

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Dr. Freddie Avant, Dissertation Chair

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Dr. Summer Pannell, Committee Member

---

Dr. Emmerentie Oliphant, Committee Member

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Dr. Marc Guidry  
Associate Provost

## **ABSTRACT**

Black males have scored at the lowest levels of academic achievement compared to other racial groups in many Texas school districts. The achievement gap for this population of students has been explained by both material constraints and oppressive hegemonic discourses. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand how such barriers and discourses affected these students and how the students negotiated their experiences in school. This study was designed to describe the problem, its background and to discuss a relevant theoretical framework. This study examined the academic achievement data for Black males and the current literature on adverse effects on Black male students, their schools, communities, and culture. The review of relevant literature included an analysis of the oppressive hegemonic discourses and structural constraints. Interviews were conducted to assess the resiliency and coping methods used by Black males that were successfully navigating the systemic barriers faced in high schools. The study was designed to explore how the students experienced and navigated specific barriers as well as these barriers impacted their families, schools, communities. The study concluded with a discussion results and limitations based on the four interviews with the Black male high school students attending Texas public schools.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

Black male students have scored at lower levels of academic achievement compared to other racial groups in many Texas school districts. The achievement gap for this population of students has been explained by both material constraints and oppressive hegemonic discourses. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand how such barriers and discourses affected these students and how the students negotiated their experiences in school. America has experienced a racial crisis like no other time in recent history. The high-profile murders of unarmed Black males, especially young Black males, caught on video has exposed the ugly face of systemic racism undeniably. In February 2012, Trayvon Martin was killed walking home from a convenience store armed with Skittles and an iced tea in his own neighborhood in Sanford, Florida. In August 2014, Michael Brown was murdered by a police officer for alleged shoplifting in Ferguson, Missouri; the nation watched the city burn amid weeks of protests. The city of Baltimore erupted in similar protests after Freddie Grey's spinal cord was snapped while bound under arrest in a police van. In July 2016, Alton Sterling was shot lying face down on the ground with hands bound by police officers in Baton

Rouge, Louisiana. Also in 2016, Philando Castile was shot during a routine traffic stop by a police officer despite video evidence of compliance in Saint Paul, Minnesota. In 2020, a grainy video showed the murder of jogger Ahmaud Arbery after a manhunt by former police officers in Brunswick, Georgia. The name George Floyd became a catalyst for a nationwide reckoning after millions of Americans watched a viral video of his last breath while a police officer held his knee on Floyd's neck for over seven minutes in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Those responsible for this violence often cited fear when asked about these assaults on unarmed Black men. Past research posited that this fear was based on hegemonic discourses about Black males woven into the fabric of American society, and these discourses have also negatively impacted Black males within the educational system.

Violence against Black males has been a symptom of a greater tragedy facing American society especially within the local educational system. The manifestation of this hegemony in American schools was exemplified in the academic struggles of young Black males and led to disproportionate rates of disciplinary action, behavioral diagnoses, and their placement in special education as compared to other racial groups. Furthermore, Black males have been underrepresented in Gifted and Talented Programs as well as Advanced Placement courses. Black males received more severe consequences for the same infractions as their white counterparts. The soft bigotry of low expectations by schools and teachers has affected Black males in the classroom; additionally, these

teachers were more likely to have less experience and be less prepared to meet the needs of Black male students. Furthermore, these students have been blamed for their lack of success while ignoring the role that systemic racism played within the educational system.

For the purposes of this study, a Black male was defined as a person of African descent who was assigned the sex of male at birth. In this study selected macro trends and improvement strategies for academic achievement of Black male students will be discussed, especially those strategies related to material constraints and oppressive hegemonic discursive structures and practices (Stinson, 2008).

### **Poverty as a Material Constraint**

The following section will examine the discourse of agency, power, and resistance concerning Black males in K-12 schools in the literature. To accomplish this, demographic data on Black males in comparison to other racial groups in the United States is examined. In 2015 and 2016, Black males between the ages of 5 to 17 years made up 19% of the Black population in America. In Texas, the poverty rate for African American adults was 21% despite a national poverty rate of 25% although Blacks made up only 12% of the total American population. In contrast to Whites whose poverty rate was only 9% in Texas and 10% on the national level and while they composed 42% of the American population. Latinos had a poverty rate of 23% in the state of Texas and a national poverty rate of 22%. Asian Americans had a poverty rate of 11% in Texas and a

national rate of 12% while they represented 5% of the population in the state and nation (Welfare info, 2019).

The National Center for Children in Poverty (2018) concurred with these figures. In Texas, 10% of white children lived in poor families in contrast to 32% of Black children. In Texas, 32% of Latino children lived in poverty, and only 10% of Asian American children were living in poverty. For comparison, in 2019 the state of California had poverty rates for Blacks of 19%, Asians 10%, Latinos 17%, Native Americans 15%, and Whites 12%. In 2018, California had a poverty rate of 21% for Blacks, 10% for Asians, 17% for Latinos, 20% for Native Americans, and 12% for Whites. In 2017, the poverty rate was 22% for Blacks, 11% for Asians, 19% for Latinos, and 24% for Native Americans, and 13% for Whites. In Florida, the 2019 poverty rate for Blacks was 21%, 13% for Asians, 17% for Latinos and Native Americans, and 12% for Whites. In 2018, Blacks in Florida had a 22% poverty rate, Asians 13%, Latinos 18%, Native Americans 17%, and 12% White. In 2017, Blacks in Florida had a 23% poverty rate, Asians 12%, Latinos and Native Americans 19%, and Whites 13% (Hanks et al., 2018). These states were selected based on their similarities in population size and ethnic diversity.

In summary, these data revealed that poverty was pervasive and disproportionately impacting people of color and especially Black children. The Center for Public Policy Priorities (2016) further indicated that in Texas the number of children living in poverty continues to rise, and Black and Hispanic students have been disproportionately represented in this number.

### **Academic Achievement Across Demographic Groups**

When examining academic achievement, the gap between students of color and their White counterparts was evident across the nation and in Texas. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (2019) was mandated by Congress and administered by the National Center for Education Statistics within the U.S. Department of Education. The NAEP scores ranged from zero to 500 for all grade levels. From 1992 through 2017, the average reading scores for White fourth-grade and eighth graders were higher than those of their Black and Hispanic peers. In fourth-grade, the 2017 average reading scores for White students was 232, for Black students 206, Hispanic students 209, and Asian/Pacific Islander students 239. In examining eighth-grade reading scores in 2017, White students scored 25 points higher than Black students, 22 points higher than American Indian/Alaska Native students, 20 points higher than Pacific Islander students, and 19 points higher than Hispanic students. For high school seniors, the same pattern emerged with reading scores: Black students scored 266, White students 295, Hispanic students 276, and Asian/Pacific Islander students 297 respectively in reading.

In the NAEP analysis of fourth-grade math scores, the 2017 average math scores for White students were 248; Black students averaged 223; Hispanic students averaged 229, and Asian/Pacific Islander students' scores averaged 258. The trend continued in 2017 for 8th-grade 12 students; White students scored 32 points higher than Black students, 25 points higher than American Indian/Alaska Native students, 24 points higher than Hispanic students, and 18 points higher than Pacific Islander students scored. This

trend was consistent when other large states with diverse populations such as California and Florida were evaluated.

*Assessment of Academic Achievement in Texas.* The NAEP report demonstrated that Texas students' scores led to disturbing trends. In fourth-grade math, Black students scored 229 in 2017 and 233 in 2019. However, the fourth-grade math scores for White students were 254 in 2017 and 253 in 2019; similarly, the scores for Hispanic students in Texas was 236 in 2017 and 238 in 2019. In fourth-grade reading, the student scores in Texas reflected similar trends. Black students in 2017 scored 210, but scores dropped to 205 in 2019. White students in Texas scored 231 for 2017 and then scored 232 in 2019 for fourth-grade reading. Hispanic students scored 206 in 2017 and 208 in 2019.

Further exploration of the Texas assessment data permitted greater insight into the achievement gap. When looking at third-grade reading scores in 2017 for this state assessment, 61% of Black students met the standard, 68% of Hispanic students, and 83% of White students. In 2017, 66% of Black students met the standard; 74% of Hispanics met the standard, and 83% of Whites met the standard. In third-grade math, for the 2017 assessment year, 64% of Black students met the standard, 74% of Hispanic students, and 86% of White students met the standard. In the 2018 assessment year, 66% of Black students met the standard, 76% of Hispanic students, and 86% of White students. In 2017, the eighth-graders' reading assessment revealed that 80% of Black students met the standard in Texas; 82% of Hispanic students met the standard, and 92% of White students met the standard.

In 2019, on the same reading assessment, 79% of Black students met the standard; 82% of Hispanic students and 92% of White students met the standard. In 2017, the eighth-grade math assessment revealed that 77% of Black students met the standard; 84% of the Hispanic students met the standard, and White students met the standard at 91%. For 2019, Black students met the state reading standard at 78%, Hispanic students met it at 85%, and White students met the standard at 91%.

The Texas state assessment scores for high school students revealed similar trends in academic performance. In 2017, the English I assessment indicated that 53% of Black students met the standard, 58% of Hispanic students met the standard, and 78% of White students met the state standard. In 2019, 53% of Black students met the standard, 58% of Hispanic students, and 78% of White students. In 2017, the English II assessment indicated that 55% of Black students met the standard, 60% of Hispanic students met the standard, and 79% of White students met the standard. In 2019, on the same assessment, only 55% of Black students met the standard; 60% of Hispanic students met the standard, and 79% of White students met the standard. In 2017, the state assessment for Algebra I showed that 74% of Black students met the standard, 81% of Hispanic students, and 89% of White students met the standard. In 2019, 73% of Black students met the standard with Hispanic and White students performing at the same level in 2017 and 2019.

### **Implications for Low Academic Achievement Among Black Males**

Low academic performance of Black males affected all levels of society: national outcomes, statewide assessments, local communities, and school districts. Existing

literature highlighted the struggles of Black males in schools. Henfield (2012) indicated that for some time, a great deal of attention was given to the persistent disconnect between Black students and high academic achievement. In American society, there was little urgency concerning this persistent disconnect, "...the failure of Black males has been pervasive; it appears to be the norm and does not raise alarms," (Noguera, 2008, p. xvii). The lack of urgency to use educational policy to address Black males with lower academic outcomes resulted in historic social suffering.

Historical documents recounted how policy and social norms grounded in white supremacy functioned to maintain systemic oppression of Black folks by denying them of opportunities for health, prosperity, agency, and dignity. Therefore, Black misery became codified as a legitimized facet of American life.

(Pabon, 2017, p. 768)

Educational opportunity also played a role in this type of social suffering.

This veneer of camaraderie belies the pressure that many African American male students feel to conform to a school culture that is often overbearing and that either chases them out of the school or beats them down to a point where they finish the high school program with a less than sterling academic performance often hurting their life chances. (Gunn, 2009, p. 220)

Not only has American history normalized failure in Black males, but this normalization has marginalized a whole class of people. Poor Black males who embody different ideals were perceived as 'social outcasts.' Ultimately these students were excluded from the social rewards of functioning within mainstream public society (Williams, 2002). These material constraints tangibly impacted the lives of many Black male students. Research

by Stinson (2008) further suggested that Black male participants recognized race as a permanent endemic within U.S. society.

The damage to local communities caused by the societal exclusion of Black males was also noted by other scholars. For instance, Black males without education increase the number of unemployable people within the local economy. Unemployable people not only fail to add revenue to the local economy but also have been more likely to draw upon its resources in a myriad of forms. Educated people paid revenue in taxes and required less from social support programs. They were less likely to incur incarceration costs and raising the level of education also yielded net benefits to the public budget (Nelson, 2014). The lack of development of Black males into community leaders poses a concern (Williams 2002); the failure of schools to develop leadership in Black males has affected the current and future economy.

### **Exclusionary Practices, Implicit Bias, and Underachievement**

The analysis of material constraints faced by Black male students in education must also include a discussion of the impact of exclusionary practices faced by this segment of society. “Disproportionate and exclusionary practices result in disengagement and underachievement. Black males experienced a greater representation in in-school suspension” (Hines et al., 2018, p. 1).

Black students as young as age five have been routinely suspended and expelled from schools for minor infractions like talking back to teachers or writing on desks; research from Rudd (2015) showed that these boys do not ‘act out’ any more than their

White peers. Younger Black students received exclusionary discipline unlike their White counterparts whose consequences included calls home, detention, or verbal reprimands.

The racial disproportionality of discipline has been a common discourse in American public schools; these intransigent crises have violated cherished values and legal practices. These practices generated other social problems such as poverty and crime due to the loss of educational opportunity and marginalization of Black people. Black students in American schools remain three times more likely to be suspended than White students (Skiba, 2015). These disparities have been discussed frequently on local and national media outlets. Black students were disciplined more severely and more frequently for the same offenses as their white peers. Exclusionary discipline was common even in cases of pre-K students who were suspended. Specifically, Duncan (2014) reported that 91 pre-K students were suspended or expelled in Maryland during the 2011-12 school year.

During desegregation, the practice of exclusionary disciplinary measures was implemented to control and marginalize certain groups. This was especially true during the implementation of many “zero tolerance” policies. These policies led to Black student suspensions for subjective infractions. “Additionally, students were removed from classes for relatively minor infractions including lateness, noise, and violating the school dress code violations” (Dhami & Fairbanks, 2016, p. 16).

These disproportionately applied disciplinary measures eventually created a de facto Jim Crow segregation in modern times. The most convincing evidence that

discrimination contributed to the academic achievement gap comes from work on implicit bias (Gordon, 2018). Implicit bias was heavily implicated as a contributing factor when Rudd analyzed the causes of racial disproportionality in school discipline. The insidious nature of implicit bias has created a mental framework that these students had deficits; expectations were lowered, and they deserved these negative consequences. Empathy for students from marginalized groups was abandoned and seemed to be reserved for those students deemed more valuable and worthy.

*Negative Effects of Disproportionality.* The negative effect of disproportionality also manifested through the school to prison pipeline. Huzinec (2017) suggested exclusionary discipline also undermines students' academic achievement by weakening their connection with the school and removing them from the classroom. Students who experience multiple suspensions have been disproportionately at risk for academic failure, dropping out, and escalated negative behavior (Huzinec, 2017). Huzinec (2017) further stated that a vicious cycle occurs when students are been removed from the educational setting for subjective reasons. When the student is removed, he lost critical instructional time. Upon their return to the classroom, catching up was difficult and led to additional frustration; the student often engaged in further attention-seeking or acting out which resulted in further disciplinary removal and exacerbated the problem (Huzinec, 2017).

The educational system often blamed students caught up in these types of cycles. Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated that these disparities were not caused

by differences in students but by differences in professional development and campus disciplinary policies. Adult behavior was also problematic (Blad, 2014). As more students were removed from the learning environment for subjective non-criminal behavior, the school to prison pipeline became an increasing reality. As a result, many schools with high populations of poor students became gateways to the school- to- prison pipeline by placing increased reliance on school resource officers rather than administrators to maintain discipline (Rudd, 2015). Former Attorney General Eric Holder spoke to how school systems should vehicles for opportunity instead of the roadway to prison. “Ensuring that our educational system is a doorway to opportunity and not a point of entry to our criminal justice system – is a critical, and achievable goal” (McIntosh et al., 2014, p. 1).

### **Historical Implications of Black Male Education**

There are oppressive hegemonic discursive streams that surround Black people in our society from the beginning of American history. “Racist and stereotyped images have dominated the depictions of Black people for hundreds of years... From minstrel shows and early motion pictures to product advertisements; Black people were portrayed as lazy, stupid, violent, hypersexual sub-humans...” (Gordon, 2016, p. 197). Many of these hegemonic discourses targeted at Black males have dysfunctional duality; “one must unravel the construction of Black men as both dangerous (taboo, forbidden) and sensual. We have no shortage of images of Black men as simultaneously appealing and repulsive”

(Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 9). Also, Black males were frequently presented as amoral beings in the media.

Negative depictions of Black males in television, radio, print, and the internet portray them as gangsters, rapists, womanizers, drug dealers and thugs (Wood & Hilton, 2013). These images present unique challenges in schools across America when it comes to educating Black males. Gunn (2009) suggested that school districts with a significant number of Black students were more likely to emphasize 'proper' behavior and to apply discipline in ways that controlled these students. One Black male shared his frustration dealing with stereotypes of African American males throughout childhood: "I have to work harder to show teachers that I want to get an education" (Willen, 2015, p. 28). Ideally, schools should be places where students are uplifted and encouraged to develop to be their best selves; however, this was not the case in many schools that are predominately Black. "Black youth in majority Black schools may experience racial discrimination, such as through intergroup teacher interactions and treatment based in negative racial stereotypes which can undermine classroom engagement" (Leath et al., 2019, p. 1327).

These discourses have been woven into society, and educational systems were influenced by this hegemony which has impacted academic achievement and the lives of Black male adolescents. These students are jeopardized when they leave their homes either due to violence from law enforcement or those who administer academic policy with disproportional practices (Tyler et al., 2016).

### *Some Strategies for Change*

Despite this bleak picture, the literature also discussed solutions to this intransigent problem of academic achievement among Black males. The most powerful of these solutions surrounded the school culture and adult advocacy needed for Black males to thrive in school. “African American males need to believe that administrators and teachers sincerely care about them and want to help them excel academically. Administrators, counselors, and teachers need to be cognizant of cultural, behavioral, and academic differences across their student populations” (Lowe, 2010, p. 133). Leath (2019) recommended the following set of best practices for adoption by school leaders; these include professional development to address race-related bias, activities to promote students’ critical thinking about race and to improve interracial interactions. School leaders can create climates that teach Black males the skills to negotiate these discursive images; “The participants’ ability to negotiate (consciously or not) this discursive image was instrumental in their pursuit of success” (Stinson, 2008, p. 1002). McGlynn (2014) reported that a diverse staff that is culturally aware staff is critical; he also recommends conducting regular cultural competence training. Faculty and staff from diverse backgrounds should come together to discuss effective strategies for working with colleagues and students from varying ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds (McGlynn, 2014).

One study recommends that this battle must be fought at the policy level. “Also, dissemination of findings must be provided to legislators more concisely to allow them to

form more applicable laws toward improving the achievement gap which takes into account the different cultural values” (Rowley & Wright, 2011, p. 104). “If schools in communities with high poverty were to have success responding to the educational needs of their students, they would also need additional resources and the support of a more integrated, ecological approach to policy that reinforces equity goals,” (Bishop & Noguera, 2019, p. 136).

*Identity Development.* Another strategy reflected in the literature was to employ a model of Black male development that considers gender role identity, racial identity, and Black morality. This model was useful in the creating programs, activities, and interventions to enhance Black moral development (e.g., rites of passage program) (Wood & Hilton, 2013). Politicians, media conglomerates, and parents must become part of the solution. “Media executives must consider the consequences of the stereotypes. Parents must be more involved in children’s media use; local and national leaders should develop strategies to address the educational crisis in our country” (Gordon, 2016, p.216). Other recommendations required educators to push Black males in schools out of their stereotyped roles; “...educators can encourage students to pursue things that are not traditionally associated with members of their group. If students of color are encouraged by adults to join the debate team or the science club, play music in the band, or enroll in advanced courses, it will be possible for greater numbers to challenge racial norms,” (Noguera, 2008, p. 14).

### *Myths and Tropes*

Another discourse that required further exploration was the trope that Black male students intentionally shunned academic success because they fear reprisal from peers about ‘acting White.’ The empirical evidence to support this trope was absent; nevertheless, it has been widely shared and accepted across political, educational, and social sectors. “Social scientists have produced little empirical evidence to substantiate the claim that an ‘oppositional peer culture’ or a ‘burden of acting white’ was pervasive in the Black community” (Tyson & Darity, 2005, p. 582). This phenomenon of acting white seemed to strike a chord in popular culture. The idea was reinforced in the work of Fordham and Ogbu who attempted to explain poor achievement of Black students by suggesting Black students intentionally performed poorly in school because of “the burden of acting white.” The fear of being ostracized by social peers for doing well in school. The opposition to academic achievement is believed to be driven by the motivation to deter criticism and ridicule for demonstrating behavior associated with mainstream White culture (Durkee & Williams, 2015). This ‘acting White’ trope unfairly burdened students and minimized other mitigating factors within the educational system; the Black-White achievement gap essentially has little to do with a Black culture of poverty, Black oppositional culture, or Black cultural differences. Black underachievement is a structural by-product of the American social structure of capitalist class inequality. This rationale also provided a convenient excuse for educators and administrators who continued to blame the students constrained by other inherent

structural factors within the educational system. Instead of public schools acknowledging a lack of empathy around the educational gap, the "peer pressure" excuse was used to avoid understanding the deeper issues. "Therefore, 'blame' for the lack of Black students' success continued to be placed on the child rather than the structure of US public schooling" (Stinson, 2011, p. 62). Low expectations of adults also played a role in the poor academic achievement of Black males; they experienced lower expectations in classroom and ultimately were robbed of opportunities to learn. Black male students suffered most from the effects of systemic racism as their academic achievement lagged behind other peer groups (Nelson, 2014).

Systemic and hegemonic barriers to the academic success of Black males have been a major source of struggle. Black males have a strong desire to be academically successful; however, the negativity associated with being a Black male from the media also has impeded their success. These students need compassion and empathy to combat the effects of these negative portrayals (Henfield, 2012). Often the trope of 'acting White' was used to describe behaviors and activities associated with White people but is not limited to academic behavior. For example, a person who acts comfortable in environments frequented by White people might be charged with 'acting White' based on the reaction from those who have claimed certain spaces for themselves (Weber, 2016). Dismantling this racist and hegemonic trope will create a paradigm shift in the way educators view Black males by providing relief from stereotypes as well as increasing academic opportunities for these students.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, the literature concerning Black male students was reviewed; special attention was drawn to an examination of the impact of hegemonic discourses through media representation, stereotypes about their intellectual and physical attributes, and the strategies used to manage Black male students within the educational system. These discourses were discussed to expand understanding of the complex ways that these perceptions negatively impacted the educational experience of Black males attending public schools in Texas. The appendix at the end of this work has a detailed guide of definitions to assist the reader with key terms throughout the manuscript.

*Media Representations.* This review of the literature detailed the ways media representations of Black males impact them in society and schools; the next section examines the oppressive hegemonic discourses that surround Black males in schools. The literature review includes an evaluation of how Black male students were managed within the school system and those Black male students coped with their experiences within these schools.

The media played a major role in shaping oppressive hegemonic discourses about Black males in American society. Mass media including TV, movies, and news outlet

presented a deviant image of Black males and utilized language with negative connotations to describe Black males in disparaging ways compared to other ethnic groups. The media described Blacks and Whites differently when they engage in similar behavior. For example, when Blacks protested the murder of Freddie Gray by police in Baltimore, Maryland, they were referred to as “thugs;” when Whites rioted after the University of Kentucky loss in the NCAA tournament, they were referred to as “fans” (Pratt-Harris et al., 2016).

Media's impact on society should not be viewed solely as entertainment because these images were created for specific purposes. Caton (2012) suggested that producers often consciously used media to promote a race-conscious bias to a color-blind society. This thinking was also considered dangerous because it ignored systemic racism in America. Ward (2013) further noted that it was easy to miss the subtle and systemic manifestations of modern racism at a time when the public discourse around race was filled with platitudes such as living in a ‘post-racial’ world, race and racism are past, or pulling the ‘race-card’.

### **Hegemonic Discourses Surrounding Black Males**

Allen (2015a) argues that the adoption of the color-blind trope lets White educators off the hook when it comes to real discussions about racial issues. In adopting ‘colorblind’ approaches, white teachers exonerate themselves in the maintenance of racial hegemony and fail to understand how social and institutional racism pervades the lives of students of color both inside and outside of the classroom (Allen, 2015b).

Stereotypes also had a psychological impact on the Black male's psyche.

“Stereotype threat is the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype and the associated fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Ford et al, 2008, p. 223). These stereotypes created ideas of what it means to be Black. Some examples included ways that “Blackness” was considered ‘cool’ or marked by ‘confidence,’ ‘clowning’ or ‘loud’ talk. Another manifestation of these stereotypes expressed was ‘acting ghetto’ which is a class-based version of talking loud or acting ‘crazy’ or ‘with no sense’ (O’Connor et al., 2011).

*Stereotypes and Gender Roles.* The history of Black male gender roles and their impact on modern-day stereotypes and perceptions were also examined.

The ideological construction of black masculinity in the United States as deviant and different is not new. Historically defined as not human, Blacks were viewed as property to be owned and controlled by white men. Racist imagery took on more gender-specific and sexualized forms. Fear of Black men's sexuality was constantly depicted as a threat to White womanhood if not controlled. This narrative which constructs Black males as hypersexual and animalistic is central to White American identity. (Marsh & Noguera, 2017, p. 451)

Furthermore, researchers suggested that negative stereotypes affect the efficacy of Black males in school. Specifically, internalizing these racial stereotypes has negatively influenced Black male academic self-efficacy. Ellis and colleagues (2018) found this internalization of negative academic stereotypes by Black males was inversely related to their perceived ability to achieve success in school. These negative stereotypes also led to

negative achievement in these students. “Low expectations and negative treatment convey negative messages regarding the usefulness of schooling for boys’ life outcomes. Also, Black boys’ attempts to cope with personal devaluation and negative treatment may relate to their development of educational values” (Butler-Barnes et al., 2012, p. 487).

High school students were questioned about positive and negative associations with being Black or White in America. Albritton (2015) found that most of the students connected the concept of being ‘smart’ to being or acting White. For example, they used such words as ignorant, dumb, and stupid in their discussions of what it means to act Black. In a similar study, the Black students interviewed shared an awareness of the negative impact of stereotypes. In the study by McGee and Pearman (2015), the participants discussed many stereotypes such as ‘All Black people have a link [food stamps] card,’ ‘Black people are lazy,’ ‘Black people are stupid,’ etc. Also, six of the thirteen respondents reported stereotypes about Blacks not achieving in mathematics and science despite being high achieving students themselves. Nevertheless, these stereotypes had a profound impact on the students’ psyches.

The paradox that Black men were both feared and revered through stereotypes was often constructed by the media; for example, a Black male was loathed and applauded in the same environment. “Perhaps no other group of people is emulated yet despised simultaneously so to the extent that Black men are today” (Howard, 2013, p. 55). Students reported awareness of these stereotypes and their negative impact on school experiences. In a study by Grace and Nelson (2019), participants expressed that many

people develop their perceptions of Black males based on the barrage of negative images on the news and different media outlets. The power of stereotypes on Black males has endured even in the minds of stakeholders involved in the education of Black males. “The dominant educational discourse about Black male students is so pervasive that it stains the social and intellectual imagination of students, educators, and researchers” (Johnson, 2017, p. 579). Internalized oppression refers to the psychological impact on individuals within a stereotyped group who internalize these negative perceptions. Internalized oppression also intensified the difficulty that African American males must achieve success in the school setting (Land et al., 2014).

The stereotype that Black males were and are physically aggressive and sexually deviant fortified the concept of hyper-masculinity and damaged their prospects for academic success. According to McGee (2013), these stereotypes further marginalized students by impacting their learning processes, social opportunities, life chances, and educational outcomes. These views of Black masculinity were construct from White supremacy. Within a White hegemonic society, Black masculinities were viewed through the intersection of raced and gendered discursive practices that pathologize Black males as hyper-masculine, deviant, hypersexual, intellectually inferior, and uneducable (Allen, 2017). These stereotypes dictated how Black males experienced school. “The social construction that views Black men as violent, disrespectful, unintelligent, hyper-masculine and anti-social beings is the primary contributing factor that affects how Black males experience school” (Robinson & Werblow 2013, p. 203).

Another discourse used to explain the failure of some Black males in school stems from the stories of Horatio Alger, a late 19th-century writer. These “rags to riches” stories described how orphaned teen males managed to gain wealth through hard work and good moral behavior, and their impact remains imprinted on American society even today. Most schools embraced the neoliberal discourse of individualism and merit; however, Black male educational achievements depend on a more complex set of factors beyond hard work, commitment, and persistence (James, 2019). These narratives shaped how Black males were perceived in math classes. For example, Davis (2019) suggested Black male students were perceived as lacking the natural ability, capacity, or interest in order to perform at the same level as White male students in mathematics.

*Stereotypes on Physical attributes of Black Males.* Hegemonic discourses about the physical prowess of Black males also detracted from their intellectual ability. Turner (2018) reported that the message is for Black males was that they can excel in sports, but not in math or history, and they were more likely than other racial groups to be subjected to negative forms of treatment. This paradox between the Black athlete in school has deep roots in the American slave trade. According to Morris and Adeyemo (2012), the athletic/academic paradox began with the notion that either intelligence or athleticism existed but not both. Historically, Western European society held the view that African people were subhuman and better suited for physical labor (Morris & Adeyemo, 2012). James indicated that good athletes were generally perceived as underperforming students. Black students were not expected to do well in the classroom, but on the basketball court,

and this was also reflected in the messages they received from their teachers, coaches, and the hidden curriculum pertaining to racial stereotypes (Morris & Adeyemo, 2012).

There were counter-narratives to resist within this discourse as well. “In a world of racist narratives, the church can be the source of a potent counter-narrative. Consequently, where the schools may fail, the Black churches can have eminent success” (McEwan, 2019, p. 115). Albritton (2015) found in his study that negative behavior was associated with Blacks and positive behavior with Whites. While students in the study could name the negative associations with Blackness, they did not readily accept those negative associations of Blackness for their own lives.

### **The Burden of Acting White**

This phenomenon of acting white strikes a chord in popular culture and was reinforced in the work of Fordham and Ogbu in 1986. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) attempted to explain the poor achievement of Black students stating that these students do not perform well in school because of “the burden of acting White” which manifests in social ostracization from their peers for doing well in school. “The opposition to academic achievement is believed to be driven by the motivation to deter criticisms and ridicule from peers for demonstrating behaviors associated with mainstream White culture” (Durkee & Williams, 2015, p. 27). Some studies have debunked Fordham and Ogbu’s work and uncovered methodological errors. There has also been a push to understand the behaviors that the researchers defined as oppositional culture activities. “The theoretical assertion that a positive achievement orientation as held by African

American youths is associated with a white cultural identity is challenged by empirical findings" (Spencer et al., 2001, p. 22).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argue that Black Americans are a caste minority. "Ogbu suggested that all caste-like minorities throughout the world developed an oppositional identity to the cultural practices of their oppressors to shield and protect their cultural identity" (Mocombe, 2011, p. 88). Fordham and Ogbu (1986), posit the "raceless persona theory" which states that academically successful Black students are internally conflicted because they feel they are betraying their race by accepting White school norms. In addition, there was pressure from school officials placed on Black children that discouraged them from showing strong Black identity in school. Fordham coupled this with the anthropological concept of fictive kinships which connects with others not based on marriage or genetics but was just as powerful socially. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) also noted that Black students who assimilate to the White norms seem to had better academic success; these students either consciously or unconsciously distanced themselves from the Black collective, developing a raceless persona that resulted in internalized conflict and anxiety as they juggled both their school and community personas (Stinson, 2011). Another behavior Fordham and Ogbu (1986) associated with the 'acting White' phenomenon was camouflaging behavior which downplayed academic success.

*Theory of 'Acting White.'* This theory was also problematic because it assumed that Black children were a homogeneous monolithic block lacking the diversity that other

groups of children have. “Another pressing criticism of the ‘acting white’ hypothesis stems from the assumption that involuntary minority students have similar experiences with schooling” (Olitsky, 2015). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) also suggested this hypothesis was oversimplified and neglected the complexity of the problem. “Many overlook the collaboration and culmination of multiple forces on the educational outcomes of the Black students” (Horvat & Lewis, 2003, p. 266). The empirical foundation underlying the burden of acting White thesis is fragile at best (Tyson et al., 2003).

The burden of acting White is not exclusively attributed to Black culture. Although the phrase is used in Black discourse, research shows that it is not generally used in an academic context. The phrase often referred to White cultural norms such as language and activities. “The issues pertaining to acting white that they dwelled on in the interviews included dialect, hanging out with white students, acting stuck up, and style of dress. Being in an honors class was not necessarily a problem” (Bergin & Cooks, 2002, p. 132). In this setting, academic achievement was not a marker for acting White. Therefore, Black youth are likely to be accused of acting White for behaviors and spaces outside of the realm of academic achievement (Durkee & Williams, 2015).

The most pernicious and insidious problem with ‘acting White’ was that this phenomenon blamed Black children for a problem situated in hegemonic ideology. “We must refuse the oversimplified act of focusing the spotlight (or blame) on the child rather than on the alienating hegemonic discourse of Whiteness- and maleness, middle-

classiness, Christianness, heterosexuality and so on-that are (unjustly) the very foundation of the structure of US public schools” (Stinson, 2011, p. 63). There are institutional and systemic issues that impair the achievement of Black students. “Given the initial inequalities and racial segregation of both the school district and the greater metropolitan area, this categorization process serves as a racist institutional structure, which keeps some Black children with high academic potential, from occupying the most coveted spots” (Olitsky, 2015, p. 966). In another study, a student reported that his principal created a separation between him and other Black students by referring to him as “one of the good ones,” indicating that other children that look like him are not good ones. “When the young man behaves in ways that seem right to him, that pursue the development of his abilities and potential, a white authority figure tells him that he is unlike other people of his kind” (Weber, 2016, p. 58). This ideology highlights the problem of acting White as an important phenomenon reflected in authority figures and not Black children themselves.

### **Structural Barriers Faced by Black Male Students**

The original system of oppression and marginalization for Black males in American society was slavery, and the legacy of slavery continues today. The concept of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) suggests that centuries of bondage in addition to generations of persistent racial oppression have altered the behavior and psychological make-up of Black people, especially males. Murry (2018) suggested that the harm of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome was passed down through multiple generations. These

experiences were traumatic and have ultimately impacted the modern-day behavior of Black people. Some behaviors are resilient; some others are self-destructive and self-sabotaging. This form of “trauma is multidimensional, layered, complex, and embedded in the psyche of the members of the group” (Murray, 2018, p. 109).

American society and its educational system have been layered with structural constraints that Black males must navigate. Some structural barriers contributing to the overall ‘failure’ of Black males included placement in remedial courses and biased disciplinary practices due in part to teachers’ low expectations leading to exclusion (Johnson, 2017). Orrock and Clark (2018) also concluded that Black males are facing huge obstacles to academic success based on the widening achievement gap and dropout rates. These structural barriers have been wide-ranging even beyond education. Examples of the impacts of the achievement gap included limited career options, family stability, and the economic impact and vitality of the Black community.

Rowley and Bowman (2009) concluded that these structural barriers are significant when this is coupled with disturbing trends on the high rates of incarceration affecting these communities. Additionally, their research indicated that state-level spending trends for higher education versus corrections negatively impact are lower employment rates for Black adolescents (Rowley & Bowman, 2009). For these reasons some argue that Black males were considered an “endangered species.” Their struggles within oppressive American institutions and the cultural values in the social, political, and economic institutions have resulted in Black men becoming virtually extinct. “The

endangered status of Black males results from a combination of institutional racism, the inertia of intergenerational poverty, and an inability to execute and sustain meaningful educational reform and community development” (Jordan & Cooper, 2003, p. 200). The cyclical nature of these structural barriers and how they negatively impact Black males have been increasingly apparent. “On average, no other group in the U.S. has been as entrapped by the vicious cycle leading to abysmal life outcomes (achievement gap, expectation gap, opportunity gap, and so on) than Black males” (Henfield, 2013, p. 395). The state of Black males in America has been a continued threat to this democracy due to extreme marginalization. “There is a national crisis in American education. Low test scores, inadequate schools, poverty, and disenfranchisement have relegated Black male students to the margins of this democratic republic” (Dyce, 2013, p. 165).

Swanson (2003) warned against the notion that tolerance in society would eliminate racism, because evidence of structural racism in American society existed despite an increase in tolerance. For example, the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States did not eliminate racism in American society. In fact, “odds remain stacked against millions of Black males struggling to make their way in an otherwise complex society” (Robinson & Werblow, 2013, p. 202). The intense and persistent effects of racism extend into adulthood for many Black boys; these social ills continue to have a deleterious effect on Black males well into adulthood in ways that it does not affect other populations (Howard, 2013). Howard (2013) also connected the history of our current political climate and the need to resist these barriers. “This distant and

immediate history of oppression in the United States seems obvious and uncontested to me, especially given the current political climate, yet there is resistance to combat the policies, procedures, and beliefs that often cause this oppression,” (Carter, 2019, p.12).

*Parental Involvement.* There have also been structural constraints that mitigate the family’s ability to support Black males and their education. Parental involvement in schools has been an important protective factor; the parents of Black male students were willing to engage but were often unable to for reasons such as poverty.

For many reasons, many families are unable to be involved in their children’s education, which can serve to hinder their access to important educational opportunities. In an analysis of research evaluating parental partnerships with schools, for example, it was found that most families care about their children’s academic success but factors such as family and community socioeconomic status, number of parents in the household, and students’ ages were found to hinder families’ involvement level. For example, parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to work longer hours or more jobs and therefore place more value on providing for the family monetarily. (Henfield, et al., 2014, p. 148)

These factors significantly affect Black males in high school and their quest for college attainment as compared to their counterparts.

The persistent gap between black and white male college attainment is particularly disconcerting. The gaps have continued to expand over time, even during periods when the high school graduation gap was closing. This high school to college pipeline has been unreliable for Black male students and often leads to apathy toward education. (Toldson, et al., 2009, p. 200)

According to Jenkins (2006), the hypocrisy of American rhetoric when it comes to Black males reverberates through oppression, prejudice, and disregard. Therefore, Black males at the lower rungs of society expect underachievement in almost all aspects of life.

*Family Structural Impacts.* This is further compounded by the perception of the black family. The number of Black single-parent, female-headed households has a tremendous impact on how Black fathers are viewed. As a result, these fathers are believed to be disengaged from their families and deserters of their children. In understanding and confronting these perceptions, our must examine the causes of this phenomenon, so that we can explore the structural changes in society and the impact they have had on Black children (Hucks, 2011).

*The impact of Policing.* The nature of policing in the lives of Black males by law enforcement and vigilantes is another example of widespread structural barriers to achievement. “The increasing visual documentation of the treatment of Black males by law enforcement and civilians has captured public attention by graphically exposing the endemic regulation and disregard of Black masculinities” (Allen, 2017, p. 269). Pratt-Harris also cautioned that this is not just a theoretical discussion. “Victimization of Black males by police extends beyond the scope of scholarly discourse; it is a personal reality for Black scholars. Black scholars do not exist in a vacuum” (Pratt-Harris et al., 2016, p. 377). The policing and breaking of Black male bodies have its origins in slavery and persists even today. “From the period of enslavement down to the purported post-racial and digital age, the use of police and extra-judicial violence has continued to be a

significant feature in the lived experiences of Black Americans, particularly males” (Pratt-Harris et al., 2016, p. 379). The over-representation of Black males in the prison system is cause for concern. “The alarming over-representation of Black males in the prison industrial complex fuels a greater sense of urgency to the Black male educational crisis. The problems outlined above reflect broad and dire structural and institutional problems” (Milner et al., 2013, p. 243).

It is important to acknowledge the constraints of evidence-based accountability systems in public education that remove Black males from schools because they are unable to be educated. The current culture of accountability in which educators are expected to increase academic as measured by scores on standardized tests is problematic. This may seem wise in order to close the achievement gap; however, in actuality, marginalized students are not receiving the education they deserve due to increased pressures placed on teachers to use practices designed to prepare students to achieve minimum passing scores on standardized assessments (Henfield, 2013). There is an overemphasis on high stakes testing and dependence on testing as a measure of accountability. This practice has impeded many school districts' ability to educate their students. Student outcomes have been sacrificed for educational outcomes (Caldwell et al., 2009). Black males are particularly vulnerable to this cascade resulting from high stakes testing.

These outcomes have negative educational implications wherein poor academic proficiency leads to grade retention and grade retention can lead to high dropout

rates; and high dropout rates lead to low college enrollment, and low college enrollment can lead to low paying jobs, underemployment or unemployment, unemployment increased crime rates. Throughout Black males' educational careers, this domino effect can lead Black males on a trajectory towards prison; this trajectory is aptly named the 'school to prison pipeline. (Halfkenny, 2017, p. 27)

Access to equitable schools was another barrier that impacted Black male achievement in schools.

Limited access to equitable schools and a high incidence of encounters with school discipline exemplify how schools construct Black masculinities and negatively impact the academic achievement of Black males. The mystic of Black males that produces fear and intimidation many teachers use to justify excessive discipline also produces similar racist assumptions about Black male intelligence and academic capability. (Allen, 2015, p. 211)

National reports also delineate the constraints Black males face; they reinforce the reality that Black males face incredible barriers as they strive to achieve in school and social settings. Whiting (2009) further suggests that one of the most potent and pervasive barriers is a social injustice that “undermines their potential, self-perception, and opportunity to achieve in academic settings” (Whiting, 2009, p. 224). Black male students may also have difficulty engaging in school. “In the current educational system, Black male students have had multiple negative encounters, which have created an environment of alienation, isolation, avoidance and negative judgment of abilities” (Turner, 2018, p. 18).

Secondary schools exacerbate this reality. The racialized experiences of Black male adolescents lead us to question where the school structure, policies, and processes are even marginally effective when applied to Black male adolescents in high school (Ellis et al., 2018). One study identifies these structural constraints emanating from the school system itself. “The leaders in this study described educational concerns stemming from inside public education, such as diminished resources, the white-washing of curriculum, lack of emotional support, low expectations, and negative stereotyping” (McEwan, 2019, p. 113). These constraints kept Black males from maximizing their potential. Most policymakers, administrators, and teachers in advanced mathematics have been White. They created and administered policies, programs, and standardized tests, as well as serving as gatekeepers in many other programs such as gifted education, honors, programs, and courses. In a study by Albritton (2015), students articulated how unjust their experiences in school were; they connected these negative perceptions to the fact that the large majority of the school’s student population is Black, Brown, and poor. Since many of these students lived in lower-income communities, they recognized the privileges and advantages White students received who lived in middle- and upper-income communities (Albritton, 2015).

### **Managing Black Male Students**

Educational institutions use specific methods to manage Black male students based on certain assumptions related to hegemonic discourses and structural constraints. “Schools are powerful institutions for the maintenance of class, racial, gender

stratification. Through school resegregation, academic, and ability tracking, differential learning expectations, and raced- gendered discipline disparities, schools participate in the process of social and cultural reproduction for Black males” (Allen, 2015, p. 71). One example of a systemic response to Black male students is the disparate application of disciplinary policies, biased standardized testing practices. Other examples of this include lower teacher expectations and over-representation in special education. “Academic stratification in teacher quality, curriculum inequalities, and ability tracing intersect to produce an ineffective educational experience for many Black males” (Grace & Nelson, 2019, p. 665).

In a study by Roderick (2003) examining Black males transition from middle grades to high school, he reported that the increase in tracking also increased the likelihood that African American males would be placed on tracks that led to further declines in academic opportunity. The literature also suggested the existence of a school to prison pipeline which refers to a national trend in which children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice system (Dancy, 2014). Schools using police officers as disciplinarians in schools create a prison climate. “The notion that urban schools have become the microcosms of the penal system is illuminated in the ways school personnel manage the problem of student discipline through a prism of crime control” (Caton, 2012, p. 1057).

Many schools had insufficient support for advising and counseling according to participants in a particular study. “The students in the study believed their counselors

provided insufficient or very minimal support in guiding students toward college readiness...counselors are unable to spend more than 10-15 minutes per student as their caseloads” (Huerta et al., 2018, p. 716). Tracking has been closely partnered with labeling, and research on these practices suggested a negative effect on Black males. “The practice of labeling has been associated with the development of low expectations of teachers toward stigmatized students...literature demonstrates Black male students have been stigmatized and perceived to be less competent than their White peers” (Marsh & Noguera, 2018, p. 454). Even gifted Black males were bound by these institutional constraints; Black males in general and gifted Black males have both been at higher risk for failing to reach their academic potential (Whiting, 2009).

How success was defined for Black males has also been problematic. Definitions of success for Black students were based on test performance and grade point averages. Davis and colleagues (2019) reported that the use of these static data points were based on using White students’ scores as the standard for the evaluation of Black students (Davis et al., 2019).

Educational institutions require greater monitoring for bias in these practices for Black males to engage and benefit from schooling. Educators must recognize how “...the hegemonic schooling policies, programs, and practices perpetuate stereotyping that is oppressive to racialized students, who seek to register their needs, concerns, and interests so that their schooling experiences can be meaningful, self-validating, relevant, safe, and empowering” (James, 2012, p. 485). It is important to remember that education

institutions have been contested spaces. Just as they had deleterious effects on Black males, some good partnerships among school leaders, teachers, and parents created healthy environments. “School leaders may consider extending the shared leadership structure...give the parents and school community members a voice in the values the school promotes” (Allen, 2017, p. 243).

Another study examined the role of the principal in creating healthy schools for Black males; Ulrich discovered that tolerance and support were keys to success. “The modeling of love and compassion in relationships and the establishment of high expectations resulted in a culture of tolerance and support in the school...The atmosphere of tolerance and support was especially significant for Black male students” (Ulrich, 2017, p. 164).

*Afrocentric curriculum.* In a study examining the use of an Afrocentric curriculum, it is recommended that schools can improve Black male engagement. “Afrocentricity can be a critical component to helping frame this conversation in ways that offer Black students’ opportunities to move beyond Eurocentric models of teaching and learning” (Albritton, 2015, p. 194). Afrocentricity can be a powerful socialization tool to meet the needs of Black males. “The African concept of education was to socialize children into the community and learn to function within a group instead of standing alone” (Turner, 2018, p. 1). Racial pride can be a strong factor in the academic success of Black males. “Despite the historically stigmatized status of African Americans, there is more research evidence from the literature suggesting the promotive effects of racial

pride concerning African American adolescent achievement” (Butler-Barnes et al., 2012, p. 489).

The importance of after school programs cannot be overlooked for the most marginalized students. “For urban Black males who as a group face considerable difficulties in the urban public school system, ‘a revolution’ and ‘reimagining’ of the traditional school day may be exactly what is needed” (Woodland, 2008, p. 537). Racial pride can be a powerful weapon against the negative stereotypes pushed by the media. “Promoting racial centrality can potentially prevent internalization of negative racial stereotypes and negative effects on developmental and academic outcomes among Black male adolescents” (Ellis et al., 2018, p. 916).

*Quality Teachers.* The research has been clear that the quality and experience of the teachers have made a large difference when it comes to success or failure for students, and this was acutely true for Black male students. “...studies indicate that teachers working in urban, high minority schools often have low attendance rates and high turnover rates which results in classes being taught by less prepared (and ill-qualified) substitute teachers” (Ford & Moore, 2013, p. 406). The research suggests there is a struggle to prepare preservice teachers to effectively work with some students. “Reasons for this ongoing struggle include, ...growing disjunction between the experiences of teachers and their P-12 students; rapidly changing socio-cultural landscapes in P-12 public schools; and instructional practices and experiences teachers encounter in their preparation programs” (Milner et al., 2013, p.236). Low expectations from teachers have

a powerful negative impact on Black male students, which contributes to the low number of Black males in advanced classrooms. “According to the research, teachers’ and counselors’ low expectations and lack of support are known contributors to the lack of enrollment and success of high ability Black male students in AP courses” (Hunter, 2016, p. 76). One researcher admits subconscious bias regarding Black males in her classroom. “Before my awareness of Black males’ educational crisis, I subconsciously lowered my expectations for the Black males that I taught by engaging in curricula, policies, and practices that continue to serve the inequities that Black males experience” (Halfkenny, 2017, p. 15). The literature supports this supposition, “When educators internalize these negative depictions of Black male students, there is a great potential for them to operate according to their low expectations for these students” (McGee, 2013, p. 452).

*White Privilege.* The literature validates the role of White privilege in society. “Many Caucasian educators often are not aware of their White privilege. White privilege is defined as implicit and explicit advantages that White people accrue from society creating an unequal balance of power and position when compared with minority races” (Orrock & Clark, 2015, p. 1019). This speaks directly to implicit bias and its connection to exclusionary practices, “Educators’ implicit biases may also contribute to discipline disparities” (Cook et al., 2018, p. 136). Black male students also recognize when they are being treated unfairly. Research by James (2019) found that difficult teacher-student relationships and differential treatment was reported by participants. These students complained of teachers refusing to provide academic assistance when requested.

“Surveillance of the students who exhibited similar or worse behavior went unpunished or received lighter punishment” (James, 2019, p. 393). Experiencing microaggressions has often been a daily experience for Black males in American schools. “In each case, they described their interactions in the school and the daily experience of racial microaggression. They shared concerns about being misunderstood by teachers who relied on racial stereotypes to inform their interpretations of black male behaviors” (Allen, 2017, p. 273). Just as poor teacher quality can have a negative impact on Black male student achievement, one study shows how Black males with disabilities can benefit from quality teachers and a supportive environment. Hill-Ford (2015) found that implementing teaching strategies in the inclusion classroom would be beneficial to the learning potential of the participants. They also found that through a collaborative learning environment, the participants could experience academic success and positive self-esteem.

*Black teachers.* Another study by McEwan (2019) determined that Black students perceived Black teachers as more beneficial to them. “Their perceptions suggested that Black teachers are inherently more beneficial to Black students based on their increased level of caring and commitment to their educational needs and mutual cultural identification and understanding” (McEwan, 2019, p. 115). The effects of having Black male teachers as role models can have a significant impact on student achievement for this group. “More efforts to increase the presence of Black male teachers in the schools, specifically in the classroom, may provide Black males with positive role models and

support systems that might be lacking within their families and communities” (Dyce, 2013, p. 167). “Parents also share the perceptions that some white teachers had negative views of black boys especially if they represented a lower income group” (L’Heureux, 2016, p. 323). Black males like all students benefit from positive relationships with their teachers. “When it comes to the relationship between culture and care for Black male youth, we believe a caring teacher-student relationship must be preceded or at a minimum developed in conjunction with a cultural understanding of them” (Hunter & Stinson, 2019, p. 22). School leaders should recruit teachers who specifically are interested in working with Black males. Black male students need teachers who desire to teach Black male students and affirm their identities as Black males thereby preparing them to navigate the discourses and constraints surrounding them (Morris & Adeyemo, 2012). Professional school counselors must also be trained to provide personal/social and career services to meet the needs of students from all demographic backgrounds (Henfield, 2013).

### **Black Male Students’ Experiences in School**

Although much of the literature on how Black males’ experiences in the educational system comes from a deficit lens, a few studies outline strategies for their success. Specifically, McGhee (2013) found that the father’s presence, father’s education, parental expectations, and homework assistance were factors leading with a positive influence on Black male academic achievement and that students felt safe and nurtured (McGee, 2013). Black students are aware of stereotypes about them, and they actively

resist them. James (2019) found that Black students often resisted stereotypes by working to disprove these narratives. These students may also expect teachers to respond to their requests for support in school (James, 2019). Studies also show that Black males with a strong racial identity fared better. Black males who saw their race as a positive, integrated aspect of identity also had higher perceived efficacy in school (Ellis et al., 2018).

Resistance can reveal itself in inconsistent ways; students may harness personal agency through resistance to structure or avoid displays of the agency to accommodate ideology that reproduces social and cultural inequalities (Allen, 2013). Some Black male students are convinced that this form of personal resistance benefits them. In a study by Grace and Nelson (2019) participants who indicated a desire to address the myth that Black males lack motivation towards academic achievement also reported the importance of maintaining a positive self-image despite both subtle and blatant attacks on them.

*Parental and Familial Support.* Another study identified the role of the family in negating the influence of these oppressive beliefs for Black male students. These participants each had a family member who was a motivating force for success in school and who provided guidance and understanding (Land et al., 2014). Family is also an important protective factor as it shields young people from violence (Patton et al., 2012). Therefore, the power of parents in assisting Black male students navigate oppressive discourses and barriers must be highlighted here. Furthermore, strengthening parental engagement in the educational process is likely to lead to a substantive improvement in the overall academic performance of Black male students both in school and beyond

(Robinson & Werblow, 2013). Family income was another important factor in a study on math and reading achievement. Family income was mediated by both social connections and cultural capital for these students (Dixon-Roman, 2012). When parents are not present, Black male students are likely to seek connection with their peers which may have unfavorable outcomes. Though adolescents experience needed refuge within their peer groups, this can be problematic for Black male students living in high risk and urban areas (Piazza & Duncan, 2012).

*Communication strategies.* Research also indicates that parents effectively disrupt the impact of some barriers by teaching students to navigate these oppressive discourses. This technique is called racial barrier messaging. Smalls and Cooper (2012) investigated the concept of barrier socialization among parents as a strategy to engage Black children. Barrier socialization was linked to both academic grades and the student's motivation in school (Smalls & Cooper, 2012). However, some researchers insist that Black male academic achievement is influenced by more than family connections and socialization. Some researchers are now examining broader environmental influences such as peer groups and neighborhoods (Gonzales et al., 1996). Despite the discourse that many Black parents were disengaged from their sons' education, the research demonstrated otherwise. According to Ford and Moore (2013), these families were also disenfranchised and discounted by the same educational institutions and policies that impacted their students. Low participation rates have provided insufficient evidence of lack of care or desire for their students' best interest (Ford & Moore, 2013).

*Strategies for survival.* According to the literature, Black males also engaged in positioning behavior which is a way of responding to the hegemonic discourses and stereotypes surrounding them. A Black male who encounters an assumption about his identity may choose to reposition himself to resist the stereotype (Allen, 2017). However, situations, where a student might reposition himself, depends on the context, and this decision also demonstrates the agency of Black male students interacting within their educational system (Allen, 2017).

Another false notion within educational institutions was that Black males connected popularity with oppositional behavior; however, there was evidence to the contrary from Darensbourg and Blake (2014). Their research on Black students in middle school suggests similarities to children from other ethnic groups. Popularity among their peers was associated with higher academic performance and prosocial behavior (Darensbourg & Blake, 2014). Furthermore, Black males seemed to be adept at managing adult relationships within schools as a means of survival. “Participants suggested that at an early age, boys have a systematic way in which they identify and connect to the adults who support them and have a clear sense of those who do not through ‘reading’ their behaviors” (Hucks, 2011, p. 346). This claim spoke directly to the resiliency of Black males which was a racial and political act of resistance according to Thompson and Davis (2013). Their examination of the motivations, expectations, and intent behind Black male behaviors highlighted the agency of Black males in managing their academic identity

proactively as well as the ways the students performed masculinity (Thompson & Davis, 2013).

Unfortunately, these hegemonic discourses often led Black males to emphasize their brawn at the expense of their brains. “Too often, young black males envision athletics as the only pathway to success. Black males disproportionately underperform in U.S. public schools but are overwhelmingly represented in college and professional spectator and revenue-generating sports such as basketball and football” (Morris & Adeyemo, 2012, p. 30). One study discussed the continuum between two phenomena: effortless achievement and self-handicapping. Adolescent males may exhibit these negative strategies at different levels based on the level of support for their academic success. “Adolescent males may reject school and coursework due to messages of traditional perceptions of masculinity and ‘being cool’... adolescent males may appear to disregard schoolwork while they work privately on assignments, desire to do well, and achieve effortlessly” (Orrock & Clark, 2018, p. 1018).

In addition to the discourse on cool culture for Black males, L'Heureux (2016) suggested that Black males engage in ‘cool culture’ to emulate dominant cultural norms. “The dominant cultural form perceived as cool among boys, both black and nonblack, was a hip-hop cultural form that is often linked to its rebellious social roots” (L'Heureux, 2016, p. 320). Many unfounded discussions in schools suggest Black males were abandoning academics for cool masculinities. L'Heureux (2016) also found that students engage in these scripts to protect their perceived normative masculinity beyond the

school day. These students reported using a ‘protective stance’ so that their masculinities were not impacted as a result of school affiliation (Brooms, 2015). Some researchers warned against this as there may be danger in Black males internalizing these negative beliefs. “Black males who adopt traditional ideas of what it means to be ‘masculine’ increase the risk that they will develop poor coping mechanisms that have a negative impact on their mental health and consequently, their academic achievement” (Henfield, 2013, p. 60). When Black males were asked about their academic performance, they reported a complex myriad of factors impacting them: priorities, laziness, depression, overconfidence, lack of academic confidence, problems at home, and a dislike for their teachers (Ford et al., 2008). Black males struggle because of these oppressive discourses; even if with similar skills and supports, these students are at risk. They are more likely to adopt negative coping mechanisms and to choose avoidance or withdrawal as a coping strategy. “Managing the stresses and demands of transitions requires that students have coping resources that provide both motivation and strategies for working through problems” (Roderick, 2003, p. 545-546).

Researchers have examined the correlation between religious practice and racial pride in Black males and their impact on academics. One study found that racial pride and religiosity were cultural assets that directly improved achievement and beliefs about the usefulness of education. (Butler-Barnes et al., 2012). Some researchers point to the Black church as a protective factor for Black males, “Black church leaders possess the potential for substantive action to address the systemic educational concerns of Black

male students...they also offered their churches as an extension of the family whenever necessary” (McEwan, 2019, p. 112).

### **Summary**

This literature covered the representations of Black males in this society and the adverse effects that were derived from such depictions. It also reviewed the oppressive hegemonic discourses surrounding Black males and the structural and material constraints this population has faced. Finally, the review of literature concluded by analyzing how schools managed the behavior of Black male students and how the students have coped with their negative experiences in schools.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction to Research Methodology**

Based on the prior review of literature, there was limited research to address a counter-narrative concerning Black male student achievement. While some examples did portray Black males as exceptional individuals, the concept of them as outliers reinforced the prevailing negative stereotypes. The portrayal of successful Black males as exceptions to the norm continues the oppressive hegemonic discourse which has been problematic. Although the literature was replete concerning the phenomenon of ‘acting White,’ it failed to discuss the trope of ‘acting Black’ and its implications. Another conceptualization that was limited in the literature was the role of Black fatherhood as a protective factor helping Black males navigate the hegemonic discourses in schools. Research on the role of Black fathers as advocates to protect and advise their sons has been needed for some time. Similarly, limited studies have examined the impact of Black male Principals and school administrators on the educational success of Black males in navigating these hegemonic discourses.

Based on these documented gaps, the researcher analyzed how these oppressive and hegemonic discourses followed Black male students into schools based on their self-

reported experiences. Specifically, the study aimed to assess the role of these stereotypes (i.e., Black males as thugs, hoodlums, hyper-masculine, anti-intellectual, or cool) and their capacity to impact the students through their interactions with teachers and administrators. This study analyzed the impact of these discourses by asking students about current and past experiences. Through this historical lens, the study ascertained the schools' effectiveness in managing the care and educating the selected Black male student participants. This study examined how barriers to education may push Black male students out of school due to disproportionality, overrepresentation in special education, and low expectations. Most importantly, this study examined the use of positive and negative coping to survive and excel in school settings among the selected Black male students. This research study hypothesized the following three concepts. First, Black males are impacted by the negative effects of these stereotypes; second, some Black males internalize these beliefs. Third, Black male students often mitigated the harmful effects of these beliefs with their agency as they interact within the school system. This study concluded by highlighting strategies used by successful Black males to navigate these hegemonic discourses as they achieve academic success.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research study utilized a critical race theory framework (Taylor et al., 2009) because it is an important analytic tool in the field of education, offering critical perspectives on race, and the identifying causes, consequences, and manifestations of race, racism, inequity, and the dynamics of power and privilege in schooling. Also, Urie

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013) was used; it consists of four environmental levels--the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem--with each level impacting differently the development of each person (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013).

### ***Critical Race Theory***

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an analytical analytic tool offering critical perspectives on race, and identifying the causes, consequences and manifestations of race, racism, inequity, and the dynamics of power and privilege in society (Taylor et al., 2009). CRT was appropriate for this study because the nature of hegemony is oppressive and based on White supremacist power dynamics.

### ***Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems***

Bronfenbrenner defined ecological systems as a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in each setting with physical and material characteristics (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013) was also an appropriate framework for this study. The issue surrounding Black male academic achievement has been and continues to be the result of a complex set of factors. Specifically, the model addressed the tendency to blame individuals (i.e., lack of effort, laziness, etc.) as opposed to deeper examination of the interrelated effects of society, systems, geography, and public policy, and how these factors have impacted the individual student's capacity for success.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Compared to other racial and ethnic groups, Black male students faced numerous barriers due to inequities within the Texas public school system. (Allen, 2015). The problem of how to support the academic achievement of Black male students from rural and urban schools was the focus of this research study. One underlying assumption of this study was that understanding the power of these hegemonic discourses in the lives of four Black male participants provided new opportunities to improve the academic outcomes for other Black males attending Texas schools. Understanding how these constraints and oppressive hegemonic discourses were mitigated was another goal of this study.

The academic achievement of Black males in Texas schools was lower compared to other racial groups in the same socio-economic status level. The problem examined in this study may be explained by the systemic race-based power structures inherent in school administration and policies created to manage the behavior of Black males in schools. Such an approach was justified based on the review of literature highlighting the ways that power was used to control and manage Black students disproportionately (Nelson, 2018). There were specific examples which include zero-tolerance policies, academic tracking, and their invisibility in the curriculum. One visible example of this was the application of zero-tolerance policies for subjective behaviors such as insubordination and disrespect leading to removal from class (Fissel et al., 2018). Many of these removals were disproportionate in length and harshness compared to their White

counterparts. Tracking was problematic because it was unidirectional (Curran, 2019). Black males have also been disproportionately referred to special education programs, instead of Gifted & Talented (GT) programs (Okilwa et al., 2017).

The mandated standardized curriculum in public schools have been culturally irrelevant for Black students, and this curriculum led to student disengagement and disinterest. Understanding these race-based power structures and stereotypes were critical to disrupting their impact on student achievement. This approach was justified by prior literature as other scholars have used Critical Race Theory and Social-Ecological Theory to explain why these oppressive structures exist, their impact, and their complexity. These historical oppressive systems in American history including our educational system have and are active in the CRT theoretical framework. This research study utilized a critical race theory framework because it was an important analytic tool that offered critical perspectives on race, and the causes, consequences, and manifestations of race, racism, inequity, as well as power and privilege within education (Taylor et al., 2009). Since their establishment, many institutional systems such as schools have relied on a racist narrative and targeted legislation to oppress marginalized groups. Also, the Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem consists of four environmental levels that impact the education and development of the Black males in Texas public schools (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013).

The organizing questions for this study included the following: How can Black males successfully navigate these oppressive structures and stereotypes in the education

system? How can schools be transformed into contested sites where educators push back on these structures? What role do family and community play in creating protective factors for Black males? These questions expanded the current literature and led to a deeper understanding of the complexity of the issues affecting the relationship between the students and the educational system. This line of research questions led to identifying new approaches to improve the educational system for all students and especially the Black male students attending public schools in Texas.

In this section, this study reviewed anti-foundationalism as an appropriate philosophy for this line of research. Anti-foundationalism asserted that knowledge was not absolute or certain (Bevir, 2009). The anti-foundationalism movement was also based on a collection of social theorists unified by a common critique (Baranov, 2016). More broadly, this application of the concept of anti-foundationalism refers to any “epistemology that rejects appeals to a basic ground or foundation of knowledge in either pure experience or pure reason” (Bevir, 2009, p. 11).

The will-to-power concept devised by Nietzsche was of particular interest in this research study. This concept is a nihilist in nature and delineates the struggle between those in power who create truth and the powerless. “The will-to-power represents the struggle between social groups to have their trusts recognized and validated” (Baranov, 2016, p. 171). Additionally, holism was useful because it aligns with the anti-foundationalist theme of beliefs or truths that were not derived from one grand truth but are holistic. “Holism implies that our concepts are not simply given to us by the world as

it is; rather, we build them in by drawing on our prior theories in an attempt to categorize, explain, and narrative our experiences” (Bevir, 2009, p. 118). The literature asserts that much of anti-foundationalism was centered around language and how it was used to construct reality. For example, the post-structuralists “maintain that the dynamic nature of society was precisely attributable to the contributions of subjective human thoughts and actions” (Baranov, 2016, p. 176). In this study, the discourses surrounding Black males in schools and how those discourses affected student achievement can be applied to anti-foundationalism and specifically to critical race theory as a critique. This philosophy advocated for a “deconstruction of everything” especially language (Baranov, 2016, p. 167).

One discourse surrounding Black males was the stereotype. Authors contended throughout American history and in mass media Black males were reduced to stereotypes such as “thugs”, “gangsta”, “cool pose”, and “anti-intellectual”, or “the athlete”. These grand narratives about Black males were based on a society’s desire to maintain power and through justifying this oppressive behavior by designing, retelling, and packaging the stereotypes. This study aimed to show that the previous anti-foundationalists believed it was imperative to “...dedicate their energies to exposing the tyranny of human reason to the modern world” (Baranov, 2016, p. 173). Counter-narratives to these stereotypes were developed to elucidate the state of Black males in America. Similarly, Foucault (1980) believed that there was more than one grand schema to describe Black males in American society.

Despite perceived objective data like test scores and FBI crime reports, Black males refuted the assertion that they have been menaces to society, and they operated from an anti-foundationalist perspective and have resisted these grand schemas. “Objective truth is a myth that served the narrow interests of those proclaiming it. Second, there is no one reality. We are always operating within a mix of realities for the simple reason that we are always exposed to contending perspectives” (Baranov, 2016, p. 185).

### **Qualitative Research Methodology**

*Research Design.* In this section, the rationale for the use of a qualitative design was discussed as well as the procedure for the structured interviews. One primary function of qualitative research was to explore the social actors’ point of view. Qualitative research designs share the characteristic of viewing the social world, social events, and actions from the perspective of people being studied. This design examined a myriad phenomenon and addressed different types of research questions in various contexts (Köhler et al., 2021). Also, qualitative designs involve “discovering their socially constructed reality and penetrating the frames of meaning within which they conduct their activities” (Blaikie, 2005, p. 251). Therefore, the researcher was a voice for the voiceless. “Qualitative researchers can speak with a unified voice while simultaneously celebrating the complex differences within our community” (Tracy, 2010, p. 838).

Qualitative methods establish a platform where the diversity of voices can be recognized and revered; “qualitative researchers accept the possibility of, and search for, multiple realities or worldviews” (Blaikie, 2005, p. 251). The unique power of the qualitative paradigm laid in its ability to explicate the voices of the participants using both what was said and what was not said. Furthermore, researchers accessed tacit knowledge not only by taking note of who is talking, and what is said and not said. “Good qualitative research delves beneath the surface to explore issues that are assumed, implicit, and have become part of participants’ common sense. Noticing, analyzing, and unpacking this knowledge is key to understanding interaction and behavior” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843).

Benefits of qualitative research designed in this study included opportunity for rigorous exploration, reflection of authentic students’ voices, and a vehicle for an original and significant contribution. In summary, qualitative research established credibility with rigorous attention to detail.

*Data Collection.* The data collection method included interviews. Researchers on qualitative data collection advised “When considering their analytical approach, scholars might ask how well the data lend themselves to the approach being used” (Howard-Grenville, et al., 2021, p. 1319). Interviews allowed for face-to-face dialogue. Thick description was another useful aspect of this methodology according to Tracy (2010). These ‘thick’ descriptions of the social settings assist the researcher to provide a thorough

understanding of the participant's social life and account for the complex nature of their experience (Blaikie, 2005).

Qualitative researchers provide stakeholders with compelling rationale for depth in exploring the needs of the participants and for examining their processes with a self-critical lens. Tracy (2010) suggested that “resilience and energy though acute sensitivity to their wellbeing” (Tracy, 2010, p. 849). In exploring the effect of hegemonic discourses on Black male student achievement, the qualitative paradigm was useful because it provided the ability to hear the voices of those who were directly affected by these discourses. These students were most knowledgeable about their experiences as subjects, and they were able to serve as their own representatives.

*Sampling.* The research sample included four Black males who were juniors and seniors in high school with a 3.0 GPA or higher. Two of the participants were from an urban school and the other two were from a rural school. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain the participant's own experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The semi-structured format provided the opportunity to ask clarifying questions, dig deeper to obtain elaborations or question unspoken assumptions that make the project worthwhile. Some questions were asked to check assumptions, or the questions challenged accepted ideas of what was valued (Tracy, 2010). Investigation of their realities intertwined with their common experiences and origins.

The process of engaging in multivocality provided an opportunity to authentically discover how Black males navigated these hegemonic discourses in the public education

system. “Multivocality emerges, in part, from the verstehen practice of analyzing social action from the participants’ point of view” (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). These protective factors have enabled successful Black males to navigate barriers, and when these factors are better understood, they can be replicated. Also, achieving these outcomes will expand the dialogue within the educational system about how to eliminate the barriers faced by this population of students. Case study research also allows the investigation of real-life phenomena within its environmental context (Ridder, 2017). This qualitative case study focused on the exploration of barriers faced by Black male students who represent a diverse set of lenses (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Another challenge was the broad nature of qualitative design. “Once you have determined what your case will be, you will have to consider what your case will NOT be” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 546). Although there is a tendency for researchers to use the case study to answer broad questions, the scope of this project is limited to understanding material barriers and hegemonic discourses and their impact on Black male students.

The qualitative case study design was suitable and appropriate for the investigation of the hegemonic discourses surrounding Black males and how they affected their academic achievement. In this study, data sources included direct observations with the students during the interviews. These sources provided a framework to understand the students’ perspective and met the goal of highlighting the students’ voices so that educational practitioners can better serve this marginalized group of students within the public education system.

## **The Interview Research Method**

This section examined the rationale for the interview research method including its strengths, limitations, and ethical considerations. The interview method was an efficient way to discover information in a personal setting; interviews were verbal exchanges where the participant provided information to the interviewer about their experiences (Rowley, 2012). As the researcher was removed from the participant's natural environment, behavior and social interactions are described and reported rather than observed. The interviewer had the opportunity to disclose to the participants' meanings and to interpret the social interactions as they are described (Blaikie, 2010).

The interview method also encouraged free expression to share without intervention or interruption (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). This process also revealed the history of an individual and their emotions about the topic for analysis. "Qualitative interviews provide rich and multi-sided data for sociological analysis," (Mikene et al., 2013, p. 51). "Qualitative interviewing is close contact to the life story of an informant, a certain type of intrusion into his or her natural context, and necessity to inquire the story from a variety of types of people..." (Mikene et al., 2013, p. 58). The interview data was based on perceptions that are compelling and that generate useful insights for the researcher (Gillam, 2005, p. 8; Rowley, 2012). A skilled researcher mines the interview for significant insights after an open-ended process of inquiry, and the potential for meaningful responses emerge when the researcher has been attentive to the process (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

A few practical constraints included limited time, difficulty finding a quiet setting that is free from political, legal, or ethical constraints for the topics being discussed.” (Gillam, 2005, p. 4). Because of the inherently smaller sample size, these studies may have issues of validity and therefore, some researchers underestimate the value of case study research (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). In qualitative research the purpose was not to generalize, and therefore, the small sample size was acceptable. Another unique consideration for this study was that conducting interviews with minors required special permission from parents or guardians. Some minors may be more likely to hide information perceived as problematic and to save face by avoiding any perceived failings observed by others especially those in authority (Morison et al, 2000). This knowledge may include better insight into the social conditions of their lives (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

There are three formats for interviews known as structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. This study will use a semi-structured approach because this format allowed for a set of questions recommended for advanced research. The process of asking questions allowed the research to incorporate clarifying questions when it seemed warranted. Based on the recommendation from similar studies the interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length (Mikene et al., 2013). The constructionist concept was adopted for this study; data was co-constructed with the student participants. After the initial interview, there were several follow up conversations with the participants where the researcher clarified statements to ensure the voice of the participant was

captured accurately. This was especially relevant because one purpose of this study was to develop counter narratives from the participants as members of historically marginalized and voiceless groups. Since the interviewees were high school Juniors and Seniors, the following recommended practices were used in conversations: being attentive to the pace, observing non-verbal clues, personalizing the process, using humor as appropriate, avoiding judgement, and ensuring consistency in verbal and non-verbal language (Morison et al., 2000). The following IRB approved research instrument is adopted from a previous study examining the state of Black males in K-12 schools.

### **Research Instrument**

1. What is your definition of “smart”?
2. Do you consider yourself to be smart? Tell me why you feel that way?
3. How does the school environment influence the way you think about being smart?
4. What are some of the things that you like about your school environment?
5. What does it mean “to be Black”?
6. What is it like to be a Black male in this school?
7. Have you heard the phrase “acting White”? What does this phrase mean to you?
8. If you had to tell your non-Black teachers and/or non-Black peers about what it is like to live as a Black male, what are some of the things that you would tell them? Why?
9. What are your career goals after you graduate from high school?
10. Are you familiar with any negative stereotypes of Black males?

- a. If so, how do you craft productive responses to these stereotypes?
11. Have you had an opportunity to learn to diminish the negative stereotypes?
12. Given this study is about understanding how Black males' concept of being "smart" what else would you like for me to know about this topic?

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis method for this project was thematic coding. A computer program called Dedoose was used in this process. The initial analysis of the interview data was reflective based on the goals of this study. After a preliminary review of the data, the research questions were broken down and reframed to further clarify the following: What exact questions would I like to understand? Which research questions am I most interested in focusing on? Which concepts and constructs are most important to the goals of this study? What are the key relationships would I like to explore further? What sorts of preliminary assumptions do I hold? (Kuckartz, 2013). The qualitative interviews were coded and re-coded based on categories that seem most relevant during the initial analysis and then again after the core themes begin to emerge and further construction and development of the categories, clusters, and themes (Blaikie, 2010).

The literature indicates that there are six stages a researcher can take in regard to coding data, and they include developing a code manual, testing the reliability of codes, summarizing data and identifying unified themes, applying templates of codes and additional coding, connecting the codes and identifying themes, and collaborating and legitimizing coded themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Coding was critical to prioritize the categories and themes. “Coding along themes and topics can help to highlight priorities and provide focus to the process of analyzing qualitative data” (Vaughn & Turner, 2015, p. 50). Codes or categories can be separated into special classes such as factual, thematic, evaluative, formal, or analytical (Kuckartz, 2013). Exploring the data from the structured interviews required reflecting on how to use the data meaningfully (Vaughn & Turner, 2015). The solution involved encoding the information to organize the data to identify and develop themes from them in two stages: open coding and then axial coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Axial coding uses a ‘coding paradigm’ that involves thinking about possible causal conditions, contexts, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies used to respond to a phenomenon in its context, and the possible consequences of action/interaction not occurring (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2010). In this study, the researcher reviewed responses question by question and identified themes to develop strategies for identifying the trends observed in the ways that the interviewee may have responded (Vaughn & Turner, 2015). The coding manual was used as a template for organizing text for subsequent interpretation. The coding manual was developed based on a preliminary scanning of the transcript and before beginning a detailed look at the text (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The reliability of the data was maintained through the interrater reliability agreement process (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). For this study, the researcher employed two colleagues for interrater reliability. After the colleagues completed their process, the researcher checked

for intercoder agreement using ‘consensual coding’ to ensure that the other coder agrees with and can apply the coding system as designed (Kuckartz, 2013).

Based on the reliability of qualitative data, this study had high dependability and was replicable. This dependability would allow other researchers to be able to replicate this study and achieve the similar findings. In this work, the researcher ensured that this study has transferability. These findings are applicable to not only other schools in Texas but in other states. The research findings have a high degree of neutrality thereby giving the study confirmability. The researcher created an audit trail which established that the responses truly reflect those of the participants and not researcher biases. By triangulating data, the researcher showed that the findings have credibility (LeBerton & Senter, 2008).

### **Sampling**

In the completed qualitative study, a small subset of the population was used to explore the selected research questions. This study employed non-probability sampling which has three sampling techniques: Convenience, judgmental, and snowball.

Convenience sampling is when a researcher chooses a sample based on the ease of accessibility (Bhat, 2020). This sampling technique was also inexpensive. In the judgmental sampling technique, participants are selected by the investigators, and its primary limitation is researcher bias (Elfil & Negida, 2017). Snowball sampling is used when it is difficult to access participants that meet the study criteria, and in this technique the participants assist the researchers in identifying others who meet the criteria for participation in the study. This study used convenience sampling and selected students

from two schools in the Houston area and two schools in East Texas. There was a network of educational leaders who assisted in the recruitment and selection of participants for this research study. Involving interested stakeholders reinforced the importance of the research goals and allowed for efficiency and responsiveness in selecting the participants. Several school districts who were approached about this study were apprehensive and denied the request to participate due to the misperception that this study was political in nature or controversial considering the nationwide discourses around policing and the unarmed killings of Black males by Whites.

The populations surveyed included high school students. Since the study examined the hegemonic discourses surrounding Black males in school, the best people to construct this social reality were Black males in high school. Particularly those who were juniors and seniors in high school. Prior research suggested that teachers play an immense role helping Black males to navigate these discourses and material constraints or can also serve as agents of the system by acting on stereotypes and engaging in exclusionary practices.

Lastly, the literature indicated that family can be one of the strongest protective factors for Black males in navigating the corridors of hegemony and structural constraints that schools foist on Black males (Dolma, 2010). Sociologists have revealed how social structure and forces affect whole categories of people based on race, class, or gender (Cole, 2018). By understanding social ties and relationships researchers can gain insights into the nature of groups and the individuals in these groups. The next unit of analysis

would be the organizational level, and an even wider unit of analysis would include investigating societies, cities, nations (Dolma, 2010).

In examining the hegemonic discourses around Black males, the sampling sought to understand how stereotypes and anti-intellectual tropes such as “acting White” affect Black males as a group. Furthermore, prior literature reviewed above suggests that families are a strong protective factor for Black males in schools. Specifically, this study sought to discover which strategies these families employed (i.e. barrier messaging) and when these strategies were used to most effectively support Black male students.

### **Research Timeline and Procedures**

1. Prepared IRB with Mentor
  - a. Completed the IRB application with the assistance of my mentor.
2. IRB approval:
  - a. Waited for IRB approval notification and address any concerns especially as this student involved adolescent subjects (under 18).
3. Identified and refined the problem and question
  - a. Based on the knowledge and experience of the researcher as a veteran school leader, the research questions and aims of the study were discussed with the dissertation committee.
4. Updated the review of the literature
5. Statement of the problem
  - a. Determined whether this problem is aligned with the literature and adjusted as needed.
6. Designed the study
  - a. After choosing a qualitative design and convenience sample where the unit of analysis were male high school students.

7. Conducted the study
  - a. Sent a letter for approval to two school districts. One in East Texas and one in the Houston area. These districts were chosen because through professional relationships which gives easier access to participants, and efficient communication from the district personnel.
  - b. After approval was received from the districts, access was requested to four Black males who are juniors or seniors in high school that have at least a 3.0 GPA.
  - c. Secured written approval from their parents to participate in the study, and the researcher set up a time to conduct virtual interviews.
  - d. In this interview the researcher asked 12 open questions in a semi-structured format.
  - e. The researcher transcribed this data using thematic coding. Once the data was analyzed the researcher reported the findings.
8. Collected data
  - a. The researcher used Google Meets to record the interviews. Throughout the interviews the researcher asked probing questions for clarity or when there was rich perception yet untold.
9. Analyzed data
  - a. Once the interviews were finished, the next steps were coding, developing a code-manual, testing the reliability of codes, summarizing data and identifying unified themes, applying templates of codes and additional coding, connecting the codes and identifying themes, and collaborating and legitimizing coded themes.
10. Reported findings
  - a. A narrative was used to report the findings. As a storyteller, the voices of the participants were validated to assist in constructing of their social world.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were a series of assumptions related to this research study. Specifically, the sampling occurred a geographic region where potential personal bias may have impacted sampling. For example, the study involved four Black males who met the following criteria: a high school junior or senior who self-identifies as a Black male. Furthermore, this individual must be labeled through the district metrics as having a low socioeconomic status while maintaining a GPA of 3.0 or higher. Since the selection of students was in the control of the school counselors, student participants who failed to meet this criterion could impacted these results. A second assumption was that the four participants have experienced the effects of hegemonic discourses and material constraints as Black male students and are willing to discuss these experiences.

Another limitation of the proposed study was in the examination of the findings for this phenomenon. Personal bias is the final limitation of the study since the researcher is a Black male who has experienced and continues to experience hegemonic discourses regarding race and gender, the researcher's subjective experiences may impact the implementation and the interpretation of the evidence gained from the interviews with the participants. The researcher also spends a considerable amount of time in his professional life "handling" Black males in school as they are simultaneously coping with barriers in school. These factors may have some potential impact or bias in the ability to accurately interpret and disseminate the results of the study. Convenience sampling was another limitation of this study; therefore, the ability to generalize the results of this study to the

population would be limited. Finally, there was also the limitation of over or under-representation of the population of black male students in this sample.

### **Summary**

Understanding how such material constraints and oppressive hegemonic discourses are affecting Black male students and how they can be successfully negotiated. The academic achievement of Black males in Texas schools is low compared to other groups. This problem can be explained, among other things, by race-based structures of power and stereotypes that school personnel are informed by and employ to handle Black males in schools. It was logical that the research takes this direction because the literature describes in detail the use of structures such as zero tolerance policies, academic tracking, and curriculum which are created because of stereotypes about Black males which inundate the society through media. These structures listed are designed to handle the Black male due to the stereotypes such as “thug,” “gangsta”, or other hyper masculine perceptions of Black males as being dangerous sexually. This approach is justified against the literature since scholars use Critical Race Theory and Social Ecological Theory to explain why these oppressive structures exist, their impact, and their complexity. With a CRT lens, the researcher can examine how historical oppressive systems in American history (including education) play an active role in society.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

The academic achievement of Black males in Texas schools was low compared to other groups. This problem was explained by material constraints and oppressive hegemonic discourses surrounding these students. The overall purpose of this study was to discover strategies successful Black males utilize to navigate oppressive structures and stereotypes in the education system by hearing the participants construct their social world through counter narrative stories.

The aim of this chapter is to share these findings from the voices of four Black male juniors and seniors in urban and rural high schools in Texas. The qualitative research design allowed the researcher to investigate how Black males in urban and rural K-12 schools successfully navigate these hegemonic discourses that surround them to achieve academic success. In the current chapter the researcher describes the demographics of each district and school and demographic information about the four participants. Next, the researcher addresses the points of agreement and disagreement and trends and patterns in the data. In the conclusion of this chapter, the researcher will report on the limitations and delimitations. Through these means the researcher will provide further understanding of factors that contribute to Black male student achievement. Specifically, the results are centered around the following research questions:

1. How do successful Black male students overcome oppressive hegemonic discourses and material constraints affecting their education?
2. How do successful Black male students describe the related oppressive hegemonic discourses and material constraints surrounding them?
3. How do academically successful Black male students describe the reasons for their academic success?

## **Demographic Profiles**

### ***School Districts***

In this study the researcher chose two school districts from which to draw the participants. One district was rural and one was urban. The rural district was nestled in East Texas and had four traditional schools' grades PK-12 and one alternative disciplinary campus. This district had a total of 700 students in which 53% were Black, 25% Hispanic, 18% White, and 5% were of two or more races. More than half of the students were female and 88% of the student body were economically disadvantaged. The urban school district was located in a large metropolitan city in Texas and had 40 schools designated as K-12 and several of these campuses were alternative schools with various focuses such as international studies or early college. The district had a total of 34,000 students in which 39% were Black, 49% Hispanic, 6% White, 2% Asian, and 2% were of two or more races. A little more than half of the student population was male, and 88% of the students were economically disadvantaged.

### *Campuses*

For the purposes of this study, the researcher chose one high school from the rural district and one from the urban district; furthermore, pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Starfleet High School was located in the rural district and was a traditional 9-12 grade comprehensive high school with a population of 200 students. Fifty-nine percent of these students were Black, 25% Hispanic, 17% White, and 4% identify as two or more races. At Starfleet High School, 52% of the students were male and 48% were female; in addition, 90% of the students came from economically disadvantaged households.

Jedi High School was located in the urban district and functioned as an early college high school. In order to enter this school, students must apply, interview, and be accepted based on grades, attendance, and disciplinary history. The campus was physically located on the campus of a local community college. Approximately 400 students were enrolled at Jedi High School; thirty percent were Black, 47% Hispanic, 12% White, 8% Asian, and 2% identify as two or more races. Fifty seven percent of the students were female at Jedi Academy, and 68% of the total student body was economically disadvantaged.

### *Participants*

In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, they each chose their own pseudonyms in the study.

**Martin.** Martin, age 16, was a junior at Starfleet High School and he lived with his mother who has a bachelor's degree. Martin stated that he wanted to go to college and be a marine biologist. At Starfleet High, Martin was the president of the Interact Club (a club formed by Rotary as a means for teens to engage in service projects in their community) and he also served on the student council.

**Chadwick.** Chadwick, age 17, was a junior at Starfleet High School as well and lived in a Christian centered matriarchal family. As a student at Starfleet High School, he was actively involved in the band, athletics, the Interact Club, and student council. His hobbies included fashion, tailoring, and entrepreneurship.

**Mister A.** Mister A was a 17-year-old senior at Jedi High School and lived in a traditional nuclear family. Mister A is involved in extracurricular activities at school surrounding music and band. He was the president of the Jam Club, a musical organization that allows students to develop and foster their skills for future careers. At this early college high school, Mister A was in a program called Emerge designed for academically advanced students who were economically disadvantaged and desire to attend a four-year university. He also expressed a desire to become an actor.

**Tyler.** Tyler, age 17, was also a senior at Jedi High School who lived with both his mother and father who were immigrants from Kenya. Tyler desired to be an entrepreneur, and he was involved in numerous clubs and organizations on campus in

preparation for university. On Sundays through his church, he was responsible for setting up the audio-visual equipment for the morning and afternoon services.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The researcher was intentional to present the perspectives of each participant in a logical and sequential order as guided by the semi-structured interview formatted questions. The data derived from the analysis of the interviews with the students were presented to correspond with the research questions of the study.

A software analysis program called Dedoose was utilized in this qualitative study. Dedoose was designed to support researchers to incorporate qualitative and mixed methods approaches with text, audio, video, images, survey, and test data. The program allowed for traditional qualitative data management, excerpting, coding, and analysis. Dedoose produced a full set of interactive charts, tables, and plots that enable the discovery of patterns not easily seen. The word cloud below was used to develop the themes that emerged from the research (See Fig. 1).

## Figure 1

*Themes Emerged from the Findings*



### **Being Black and School Climate**

Two distinct themes appeared from the interview data: (1) Being Black and (2) The Impact of School Climate. The themes summarized participants' experiences and perceptions that influenced how they viewed themselves and the world around them. The participants detailed the positive and negative aspects of being Black in school, their communities, and the larger world. Within this theme the participants described their experiences through the sub-themes of smartness, stereotypes, family, and the concept of "acting White."

*Tyler*

The researcher questioned Tyler about the stereotypes around being a Black male in school and society. He responded:

“To be Black, man, you know, I feel like being Black is kind of a threat. You don't know how someone views you, you know? People could just treat you differently just based on your appearance without knowing who you are, and especially I could stress on that, you know? Me coming in as an African student, you know? It's a lot harder because it's like I'm different from everybody else, so getting picked on, jokes, stereotypical jokes all the time. Being a Black person, I guess, you know? Just a lot of stereotypical jokes, I guess, or knowing that, hey, you're not always safe. You could go and have fun but then you don't know if you're going to come back home safe and sound, you know?”

In this excerpt, Tyler spoke to the stress he and other Black males carry because of racist stereotypes that depict Black males as dangerous. He alluded to how these stereotypes can lead to death quickly and easily. Another layer presented was that Tyler was from Kenya and was the target of racist jokes and stereotypes about African people.

When questioned about the concept of smartness in relation to being Black, Tyler shared the following:

That's kind of also, if I'm being honest, that's one of the reasons why I came to early college because I knew if I go to early college, I won't be viewed or seen as, "Oh my God, you're smart." Because I have a lot of smart people around me, right? So, if there are a lot of us, I'm normal, you know? Kids don't necessarily go to early college because of the opportunities but they go to early college to escape the real high school because if you're smart, you're a bad person. So, I could go to

early college and be smart but still at the same time, you can't be really 100% yourself, because at the end of the day, you're going to always have to fit in. At least for me, I always have to try to fit in. I have to act a certain way to fit in. In the excerpt above, Tyler spoke about how being smart in traditional schools was problematic for him; so, he decided to enroll in early college where the culture normalizes 'smartness.' Furthermore, his desire to fit in and belong resonates in this excerpt.

That question led the researcher to ask him had he heard the phrase "acting White" and what that meant to him:

Like let's say wearing suits to a class presentation. Let's say you're presenting something in class and you decided to wear a suit. See, you're doing too much, you know? That's acting white. Being formal, talking with I guess formal language, you know... because I know an example is when somebody drinks carbonated water...so that's kind of like acting White.

Tyler at this point connected the concept of 'acting White' to acts such as being what his peers view as unnecessarily formal or drinking carbonated water.

In regards to family and being Black, Tyler expressed the following:

No, because that's the thing I feel like we don't understand, is being ... especially this part just for immigrants, it's like we live two lives. Me being Kenyan, I have to take care of people back home, and also my parents have to take care of them, and also, we have to live lives over there.

In this moment Tyler expressed how his family lived a duality as immigrants with roots in Kenya which required a responsibility to a larger extended family.

In regards to school climate, Tyler spoke to how the faculty played a significant role in his connection to the school and learning:

We have a lot of great teachers on campus and I feel like that's also a very good thing, because I feel like I would not be as successful as I am without my teachers at my school. So, I feel like that's also something that I like about my school, or the school culture, yeah.

Tyler spoke to the power of the school climate and culture generated by high quality teachers and administrators. Tyler also discussed how important it is for him to feel a sense of belonging at school:

I feel like for us we have a closer connection with the administrators. Yeah, I think ... and also just knowing that we have to help each other to become better students, and just having ... I guess also amazing teachers.

Here Tyler detailed the importance of feeling connected to the adults at school and how it fosters a culture of cooperation and growth.

Tyler is often recruited by his principal to participate in extracurricular activities in service to the campus:

...she considered me for the Men's Summit, which is a ... Young Men's Summit, which is a leadership thing. It's like a leadership program so I was even part of the committee who planned the Youth Men's Summit while serving on the student board.

Here in this quote, it was evident that Tyler was valued by the school leadership, and he was given opportunities to grow and show his potential as a student.

Tyler spent much time thinking of a bright future for himself:

...my, I guess, career goals, but really lately just business. I know when I was younger, I wanted to do business, but I was discouraged because you need a lot of money, you need a lot of capital, but then when you do a lot more research and you read and you realize that's not necessarily true. So, I guess just business, just being my own entrepreneur, being my own worker. That's my dream. If I'm able to make money without going to work, passive income. That's kind of my dream.

Already at this early age, Tyler displayed a desire for financial independence which he believes he can achieve through being an entrepreneur.

### *Mister A*

When Mister A was questioned about stereotypes and being Black, he shared the following:

That one, overall that we're dumb. All we think about is basketball and football during class, just forget about like the math subjects and everything, we just think about sports. That we don't listen very well.

This excerpt spoke to the anti-intellectual stereotype about Black males and their potential value for brawn /physical strength over mental acuity. This led the researcher to ask Mister A if he believed he was smart, and this was his response:

I'm just a little bit cocky, so I of course believe I'm smart. And then there's times at school where there'll be a test, and if I won't ... Like a math test, I don't remember the formula, but I'll somehow come out with the way to figure out how to get the answer in that time of taking the test. I don't know other people's definition of smart, but that's pretty smart to me, to be able to figure out the problem and address it to get the right answer.

Mister A embraces the concept of smartness with his own identity and gave a clear example of how his smartness manifested in school. The conversation then turned to the topic of acting White. Mister A responded thus:

Well, it still means now that when somebody's acting white, they're talking very proper, and have a higher vocabulary. They dress a certain way, like wearing khakis with nice church shoes I guess, like just casual shoes. That's what it means. However, I don't think that it really exists. People say it of course. I don't think it exists because you have White people that dress the same way as a rapper, like the rapper Tyga. You have White people that talk the same way as well. So how can I be acting white when they still act, I guess, Black?

In this excerpt Mister A rejected the notion of acting White as he acknowledged that people use it. He goes so far as to say it doesn't exist. However, he did define it as activities such as dress and formal language. He then deconstructed the acting White notion and asked if White people who dress and act like rappers are acting Black. When the researcher asked him if anyone accused him of acting White he stated, "I think it was freshman year of high school. The way I dressed, it was high school and I'm all into my fashion and all that, and somebody commented that the way I dressed was really white." He concluded by saying that no one ever accused him of acting White because he did well in school.

Mister A spoke extensively about the impact of family on being Black and its connection to school:

My family, they support me through everything. If I can't make it somewhere to like a family function because of something I have with school, then they 100% agree that I should go to the school function. They actually say, like many other people don't do this but they say, "Put your education before family." Of course, in certain scenarios I wouldn't. But if there's a meeting I have to attend or miss out on going to the movie theater with my family, then I'll have to go to that meeting, things like that.

Mister A indicated that family support with school activities and success were paramount and family will excuse him from family events if school conflicts.

The faculty at Mister A's school plays a large role in his self-concept: There was only one teacher that changed my perception of how smart is defined, and that was my professor for sociology, Dr. Pink. Before that, I believed that getting all A's in class and 100's on tests meant being smart. But then he pointed out to me that I'm going to meet a lot of dumb people in life. They might have a master's degree, all these degrees, but aren't intelligent, just very educated and very education-based.

Here Mister A detailed how his self-perception of intelligence was strictly academic but after being under the tutelage of his sociology teacher learned that intelligence is based on much more. Mister A expressed how the teachers at his school created an environment that fostered a sense of belonging in comparison to other high schools:

I like the togetherness and all the support you get from the teachers. In other high schools, the teachers would have favorites and stuff like that. They'll talk to a certain number of students, and other students they'll just forget about and be in the back of the class. They're just there to learn. They don't try to make connections with those students. But here, the teachers and professors try to make connections with all students and they treat everybody equally.

Mister A spoke to how critical it is for teachers to create a sense of fairness and make connections to the students in class. Mister A shared his involvement in extracurricular activities at school:

Like I was in a program with alumni from Yale, and then there were some who were still students at Yale, and just the atmosphere was so great...there's one program that I'm in called Kappa League and they do a great job of that. They'll send out multiple scholarships and give us all the tools that we need to become successful.

Mister A's involvement in extracurricular activities have been a means for him to get support and stay connected with school. Mister A shared his aspirations for the future as well:

I'm definitely going to college. I've not decided which one yet. My first pick is I'm going to be applying to an early decision, that's going to be Johns Hopkins. Then there's multiple other colleges I'm going to be applying to. Then after that, I want to become either a neurosurgeon, sports medicine physician, or something which is completely unrelated, actor.

Mister A was undecided on what path to take, but he saw the future as one that was full of opportunity to him.

### ***Chadwick***

When the researcher asked Chadwick about being a Black male and on the receiving end of stereotypes, he shared:

...because I feel like you can be stereotyped for being your skin color, which is... I hate that. For instance, I could go into Walmart. I'd probably be wearing a white tee, some joggers, slides, socks, just regular stuff...and then somebody comes to me, or I can hear someone whispering, 'Okay, he's one of those people.' You see what I'm saying? 'He's one of those Black people where you have to watch him'...And I hate to say it, but it's like young Black men, we have to watch our backs 24/7.

Chadwick described being a Black male as a burden to carry when doing every day activities like going to the store then having to deal with being surveilled due to stereotypes about Black males being thieves or misanthropes. Chadwick made it very clear that he considered himself to be smart and embraced it:

I consider myself to be smart; the reason why is because I hate coming in second. That is my pet peeve, mainly because the way I was raised is, you go get it no matter how hard it is, you keep fighting and you keep God first and everything will fall into its place. So that is the life creed I live by.

His concept of smartness was derived from his family values of work ethic, tenacity, and faith. Chadwick had a visceral reaction when questioned about the concept of Acting White:

That phrase is terrible, that is terrible. Because, okay, for instance, I dress like this because I go to church a lot. So, I dress like this, I was raised like this, I love to dress. I feel like dressing, it helps get your point across.

Here Chadwick defined that phrase as something to do with dress not intellect or smartness. For Chadwick, family played a huge role in his self-identity and his drive to do well in school:

And my grandmother, with the way she raised my mother and how it translated into how she raised me, generations upon generations of my grand... And how she taught me so much, just thanking Black women.

Throughout the interview, Chadwick made references to Black women in particular who taught him to value education, maintain resilience, and how to be grateful. For Chadwick, he had a close relationship to his building principal and he saw that as a source of inspiration and forges his connection to his school:

Me and Mr. Sisko, we had been having meetings ever since he came into the principal last year. When we first found out, we became good friends and not only good friends, but he became a mentor to me.

Here, the building principal reached out to his students in mentorship and friendship.

Chadwick explained how he had a sense of belonging and a sense of family at his school:

We're like a school where, okay, we make jokes and we'll crack at each other, but at the end of the day, you're still family, regardless of any situation you have going on. And it's a lot of caring people, a lot of caring people, a lot of people that will build you up when you're torn down. There's a lot of caring people in my school.

This sense of family and caring was key to Chadwick's success at school. This sense of caring was best represented for Chadwick through his work in student council and

various other organizations, but his mentorship with the principal held incredible weight for him:

I'm involved in STUCO, student council, I'm involved in Interact Club, band, athletics gentleman's club, we're trying to get that back started. Me and Mr. Sisko, we had been having meetings ever since he came into the principal state last year. When we first found out, we became good friends and not only good friends, but he became a mentor to me. He's been guiding me through it.

Here Chadwick forged a significant bond with a school leader by means of student clubs and organizations. When it came to the future for Chadwick, he envisioned a world where Black entrepreneurship can be a gateway for Black pride and identity:

If it's going to be Black-owned, I want it to be fully owned. And I know I don't necessarily need somebody half sharing my stock, my generational stock, I don't need that. I want a generational stock, fully mine, where when my generation comes after me and I'm gone, they understand that I came into it owning everything. I came into it with a strong mind and I followed my plan, and you can be a successful Black man in America. Not even a man in general, just a successful Black person.

For Chadwick his future wasn't just tied to his individual success, but he viewed his success as something that can be inherited by future generations.

### ***Martin***

Martin shared his thoughts on the burden of being Black:

The stereotype of being a hood person or something like that. Growing up without a father, just really things like that. Those are the main things. That people are

always trying to steal or something like that, they're stealing it, assuming that, well, Black people are criminals just because of the color of our skin.

Martin detailed stereotypes and discourses that surround Black males such as being fatherless and criminal in nature.

Martin defined smartness as a collection of knowledge and experiences:

It's different instances, like sometimes I feel smart and different in some ways, but not as smart and different in others. I feel that way because I have some book knowledge and that can help me in school. I have some knowledge about other things outside of school. But when I think knowledge of things outside of school, I can't truly call myself smart because I'm not knowledgeable about the entire world, obviously.

Martin saw smartness as situational and multi-dimensional. He saw academic knowledge as just one of many ways of being smart for him. But he contended that outside of school there was knowledge to be derived from real world experiences. He followed up with insights about the concept of Acting White:

I have heard that phrase, and a lot of the time when I see that phrase it's like the way somebody wants to talk or something, like the way somebody talks, if they don't use a lot of slang, if they are carrying themselves in a certain way, which is completely weird. And there shouldn't be such a thing as acting a certain color because you can't act color. You are who you are based on the way you were brought up and the environment that you were raised in. Like many students, Martin has heard the phrase and connects it with a reference to using formal language or someone who is "completely weird."

Martin further contended that one cannot “act” a color but that it was the environment that shapes people.

For Martin, family has a significant influence on his view of education:

My mama helped me by just talking to me and the talks that we used to have and like we still have now. She helped me come to the definition of that. Because I feel like my mama's pretty knowledgeable about a ton of situations and she has passed that knowledge on to me. And she doesn't have a super high degree in college. She went to college, she graduated, but it's not like she has a master's or anything like that. But I still feel like she's incredibly smart.

Martin's mother made education a priority in her life and that has passed down to her son which impacted his view on smartness and desire to get an education. For Martin it was important for the faculty to be committed to the students in his school:

There's a teacher that stays up there till seven o'clock just trying to help students with work, comes up there almost every Saturday, is doing her best to try to help students. So, it's nothing like those teachers just up there for a check. They really do love what they're doing and trying to make a difference in young people's lives.

It was evident to students when teachers approach their work as a “calling” and motivate students in school. An environment with caring and supportive teachers who were not only kind but build tenacity and resilience in students had great meaning for Martin.

My school environment, I'm surrounded by incredibly kind and uplifting people. It's obvious that the teachers up there don't want anything but the best for me, even if it might not seem like that at all times. There's a teacher whose class I've struggled in since my freshman year and over time she's become one of my

favorite teachers, because it's obvious that she's not just assigning this work to assign the work. She's assigning this work to try to help me better prepare myself for the future. So, I'm surrounded by incredibly kind people up there.

An environment with kind and uplifting adults who inspired students to keep working even when the work was difficult. Through a caring and nurturing adult, Martin found himself in a leadership role at school in some particular extracurricular activities:

I have a teacher that was a pretty big role in me joining the Interact Club. And I joined the Interact Club, and now I'm the president of the Interact Club at school.

Martin saw a career in science in his future because of his desire to pursue knowledge:

Right now, I'm leaning towards marine biology. When it comes down to me, for some reason I have this...Whenever I see something that I don't know, it doesn't sit right with me. So, I'm incredibly hungry for knowledge and things like that to the point where I see something that I think is interesting, I'll do a ton of research and it'll lead me down different paths.

Martin's desire to attain knowledge in the field of science.

Conspicuously absent in the analysis was a comparison of findings between urban Black males and rural Black males. As the findings above indicate, there was no distinction between the experiences of Black males in rural school settings versus urban school settings. As described with great alacrity in the literature review, these hegemonic discourses permeate the society and surround Black males in all spaces they reside.

### *Summary of Findings*

This chapter reported the findings that emerged from the data collected from the four participants in this study: two Black male students from a rural high school and two Black male students from an urban high school. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher obtained the perceptions of the selected students at Jedi High School and Starfleet High School. The findings in this study noted common themes and patterns related to the hegemonic discourses surrounding Black males in schools and how they successfully navigate these discourses to attain success. These participants were not only academically successful but were valued members of their school communities and saw bright futures for themselves. This researcher proposed the concept of “flourishing” to describe these students which is the ultimate aspiration for Black males in the K-12 school system. The factors or barriers that impacted the achievement of flourishing of these participants include: parental involvement, caring teachers and school leaders, activism in student organizations and a safe positive environment. Challenges to Black males flourishing in school included negative stereotypes, hostile school culture, and a fractured family structure. Finally, the ingredients necessary to give rise to Black males flourishing included positive role models, mentoring, and strong family support.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

#### Introduction to the Discussion

Through the work of this study the researcher explicitly manifested the voices of Black males in urban and rural schools as they described the hegemonic discourses that followed them into schools and how they successfully navigated the material constraints they encountered. Chadwick, Martin, Mister A, and Tyler discussed strategies they utilized to navigate oppressive structures in the education system so that they *flourished*; this study was a vehicle for them to tell their counter narrative stories. The Black males in this study utilized various strategies for successfully navigating the hegemonic discourses that surrounded them in their respective high schools by embracing their own Blackness, intentionally disproving stereotypes about them, relying on faculty and family members to give them love, guidance, accountability, and support.

This chapter examined how the findings contributed to existing literature and conversations of critical race theory and social ecological theory while reflecting on the meaningful experiences of the participants as Black males in this society. This chapter also illustrated the connections between being Black and the effects of a positive school climate.

This researcher also challenged the deficit mindset applied to Black males in K-12 schools. The final chapter closed with the implications for practice, limitations and possible ideas for future research.

### **Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Literature**

In chapter two, the researcher presented the body of literature that described major areas of research including: media representations, the theory of acting White, parental involvement, teacher efficacy, and strategies for survival. The focus of this research was to challenge the deficit view with an anti-deficit view through the counter narrative stories of these participants. The participants in this study reported their experiences being Black and the impact of school climate on their success in school.

#### ***Stereotypes***

*Media representations.* Mass media including TV, movies, news outlets, and social media present a deviant image of Black males and utilizes language with negative connotations to describe Black males in disparaging ways compared to other racial groups. The Black male participants in this study each were impacted by the harmful effects of stereotypes which were often derived from media sources. The participants in this study spoke of a paradoxical duality where they were both feared and revered. These findings were consistent with the literature. These stereotypes created ideas of what it meant to be Black. Some examples included ways that being Black is considered ‘cool’ or was marked by ‘confidence’ or having ‘swag’. The paradox that Black males are both

feared and revered through stereotypes was often found in media constructions; Black males have been both loathed and applauded in their environments. “Perhaps no other group of people is emulated yet despised simultaneously so to the extent that Black men are today” (Howard, 2013, p. 55). When the researcher asked Chadwick about what it means to him to be Black he spoke of this paradoxical duality, “I still think being Black in America is one of the most, not only troubling things, but it's one of the most gracious things that you could be in America, in my opinion, because you have so much culture and so much power behind just your skin color.”

Students reported awareness of these stereotypes and their negative impact on school experiences. Another manifestation of these stereotypes was ‘acting ghetto’ which is a class-based version of talking loudly or acting ‘crazy’ or ‘with no sense’ (O’Connor et al., 2011).

These challenges impacted how Black males are perceived in society in general. Again, Chadwick spoke woefully about how he overheard store personnel whispering about him as being “one of them” and how as a Black male one slip up can get you killed because people are afraid of you. Similar sentiments were echoed by all four participants. These stereotypes had a profound impact on the students’ psyches (McGee & Pearman, 2015). These stereotypes dictated how Black males experience school. “The social construction that views Black men as violent, disrespectful, unintelligent, hyper-masculine and anti-social beings is the primary contributing factor that affects how Black males experience school” (Robinson & Werblow, 2013, p. 203). As a result, Black males

are convenient scapegoats for moral panics resulting in new regulations and systems of management for super predators, thugs, and criminals.

*The Myth of Acting White.* Despite popular culture's obsession with foisting the concept of 'acting White' on Black children, there has been little to no empirical research that supported this racist and hegemonic trope. Numerous studies either totally debunked Fordham and Ogbu's work, uncovered its methodological errors, or delved deeper to explain the behaviors that the researchers defined as oppositional culture activities. This discourse was problematic because it took the position that Black children and Black males in particular were a homogeneous monolithic block lacking the diversity that other groups of children have. "Another pressing criticism of the 'acting white' hypothesis stems from the assumption that involuntary minority students have similar experiences with schooling" (Olitsky, 2015, p. 962). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) also suggest this hypothesis has been oversimplified and neglects the complexity of the problem. "...Many overlook the collaboration and culmination of multiple forces on the educational outcomes of the Black students" (Horvat & Lewis, 2003, p. 266). The empirical foundation underlying the burden of acting White thesis is fragile at best (Tyson et al., 2005).

The theory of acting White is not exclusively attributed to Black culture. Although the phrase is used in Black discourse, research shows that its use is seldom in an academic context. The phrase is often a reference to White cultural norms such as language and activities. When the researcher asked Tyler what he believed the phrase

meant he stated, “My definition even though it's probably not the best definition, but for example, because I know an example is when somebody says... I guess if somebody Black can have carbonated water, so that's kind of like acting White.” Mister A defined the phrase through wardrobe and then discounted the phrase even while acknowledging its usage, “They dress a certain way, like wearing khakis with nice church shoes I guess, like just casual shoes. That's what it means. However, I don't think that it exists really.” This conclusion aligned with findings from a study by Bergin and Cooks (2002); the issues pertaining to acting White that included dialect, hanging out with White students, acting stuck up, and style of dress. “Being in an honors class was not necessarily a problem” (p. 132).

In this setting, academic achievement was not a marker for acting White. Martin denied that this phrase has anything to do with academic achievement but with the use of slang or informal language, “When I see that phrase it's like the way somebody wants to talk or something, like the way somebody talks, if they don't use a lot of slang, if they are carrying their self in a certain way.” In the study when the researcher asked about this phrase, the participants all had heard of it. When asked them to define it, their context was social and did not apply its use to any academic contexts. Instead, the participants referred to activities or behaviors such as drinking carbonated water, using formal language in informal settings, not using profanity, or acting “weird”.

### ***Parental Involvement***

The theme of parental involvement in schools was a significant protective factor for Black males in schools and the participants spoke extensively about the impact of family on how well they flourished in school. The mothers and fathers of Black male students are willing to engage; however, they may be unable to for multiple reasons such as poverty. “For many reasons, many families are unable to be involved in their children’s education, which can serve to hinder their access to important educational opportunities. Many of these parents must work multiple jobs at odd hours to make ends meet” (Henfield et al., 2014, p. 148). The literature depicts that most families care about their children’s academic success but factors such as family and community socioeconomic status, number of parents in the household, and students' ages were found to hinder families’ involvement level. Mister A remarked on how his family supported him and his academic aspirations even when it conflicted with family obligations, “My family, they support me through everything. If I can't make it somewhere to like a family function because of something I have with school, then they 100% agree that I should go to the school function.”

This was further compounded by the Black family structure. The number of Black single-parent, female-headed households has caused Black fathers to be viewed as unfit. In understanding and confronting these perceptions, our society must examine the causes of this phenomenon, so that the impact they have had on Black males can be examined (Hucks, 2011). Even though Chadwick hails from a home headed by a single Black

mother, he is still resolute, “Me and my dad, we have a shaky relationship. It's good, mostly bad, false promises, that's just been happening. It used to get me down, but my mom, she was always there, she would always pick me up and she would always tell me, ‘Son, it's going to be okay.’”

Furthermore, strengthening parental engagement in the educational process will probably lead to a substantive improvement in the overall academic performance of Black male students both in school and beyond (Robinson & Werblow, 2013). Tyler shared his perspective on family and its impact on his academic progress. “Yeah, I think my parents have been strict on me when it comes to education. My parents, they take my education very seriously and they make sure that I'm on top of things, I'm getting good grades ... If I bring a B home, oh my God, hey... So, them being strict... I mean, yes, do I get B at times? I do, but I guess them just knowing that B is unacceptable.”

Family income was another important factor according to Dixon-Roman (2012); family income was mediated by both social connections and cultural capital for these students. When parents are not present, Black male students are likely to seek connection with their peers which may lead to involvement with drugs, crime, and other anti-social behaviors. Though there is an adolescent need for refuge within their peer groups, this can be problematic for Black male students living in high risk and urban areas (Piazza & Duncan, 2012).

## **Teacher Efficacy**

The literature maintained that the quality and experience of teachers makes a difference in the success or failure of students; this is acutely true for Black male students. Martin shared his thoughts on the efficacy of teachers and their impact on him: “There's a teacher that stays here till seven o'clock just trying to help students with work, comes up almost every Saturday and is doing her best to try to help students. So, it's nothing like those teachers just up there for a check. They really do love what they're doing and trying to make a difference in young people's lives.” Teachers who invest their time, go out of their way to help students, and are passionate about student success were valued by the Black males in this study. Further complicating the issue of teacher quality, studies indicate that teachers working in urban, high minority schools often have low attendance rates and high turnover rates. Therefore, those students are taught by less prepared and perhaps less qualified substitute teachers (Ford & Moore, 2013). Low expectations from teachers have had a powerful negative impact on Black male students contributing to the low number of Black males in advanced classrooms. “According to the research, teachers’ and counselors’ low expectations and lack of support are known contributors to the lack of enrollment and success of high ability Black male students in AP courses” (Hunter, 2016, p. 76). The research literature supported this; “When educators internalize these negative depictions of Black male students, there is a great potential for them to operate according to their low expectations” (McGee, 2013, p. 452).

A study by McEwan (2019) determined that Black students perceived Black teachers as more beneficial to them. “Their perceptions suggested that Black teachers are inherently more beneficial to Black students based on their increased level of caring and commitment to their educational needs and mutual cultural identification and understanding” (2019, p. 115). The effects of having Black male teachers as role models can have a significant impact on student achievement for Black male students. “More efforts to increase the presence of Black male teachers in the classroom may provide Black males with positive role models and support systems that might be lacking within their families and communities” (Dyce, 2013, p. 167). Martin spoke about his principal, Mr. Sisko, who was a Black male also and how his mentorship has been transformative and inspiring, “Every day of the week, he has a word or something like that. And this week is legacy. Leaving your legacy and leaving your mark on the school. And I took in every word that he brings on every week on the announcements.”

Martin spoke of a particular teacher who he connected with because of her intrinsic commitment to her work, “There's a teacher that stays up there till seven o'clock just trying to help students with work, come up there almost every Saturday, is doing her best to try to help students. So, it's nothing like those teachers just up there for a check. They really do love what they're doing and trying to make a difference in young people's lives.” Black males like all students benefit from positive relationships with their teachers. “When it comes to the relationship between culture and care for Black male youth, we believe a caring teacher-student relationship must be preceded or at a minimum

developed in conjunction with a cultural understanding of them” (Hunter & Stinson, 2019, p. 22). Principals should hire teachers who specifically are interested in working with Black males. Black male students need teachers who expressed interest in teaching Black male students that can affirm their identities and prepare them to navigate the discourses regarding Black males (Morris & Adeyemo, 2012).

### *Strategies for Survival*

Many unfounded discussions in schools suggest Black males are abandoning academics for cool masculinities. L’Heureux (2016) also found that students engage in these scripts to protect their perceived normative masculinity beyond the school day. These students reported using a ‘protective stance’ so that their masculinities were not impacted as a result of school affiliation (Brooms, 2015). Some researchers warn against the dangers for Black males who internalize these negative beliefs. “Nonetheless, Black males who adopt traditional ideas of what it means to be ‘masculine’ increase the risk that they will develop poor coping mechanisms that have a negative impact on their mental health and consequently, their academic achievement” (Henfield, 2013, p. 60).

The literature indicates that Black males also engage in positioning behavior to respond to the hegemonic discourses and stereotypes surrounding them. A Black male who encounters an assumption about his identity may choose to reposition himself to resist the stereotype (Allen, 2017). However, situations where a student might reposition himself depend on the context, and this decision also demonstrates the strategic resistance of Black male students interacting within their educational system (Allen, 2017). When

asked how he responds when people at school question his intelligence or just perceive him as an athlete Mister A responded, “I just show them my report card. I've done that before.” Furthermore, Black males are adept at managing adult relationships within schools as a means of survival. “Participants suggested that at an early age, boys have a systematic way in which they identify and connect to the adults who support them and have a clear sense of those who do not through ‘reading’ their behaviors” (Hucks, 2011, p. 346). This spoke directly to the resiliency of Black males which was a racial and political act of resistance’ according to Thompson and Davis (2013).

Their examination of the motivations, expectations, and intent behind Black male behaviors highlighted the agency of Black males in managing their academic identity proactively as well as the ways the students performed masculinity (Thompson & Davis, 2013, p. 213). Chadwick told the researcher this was his method for responding to such attacks, “I feel as if the best way to end that stereotype forever is to smile in their face and do exactly the opposite of what they thought you would do. Walk away. That's all you have to do. And that is the strongest argument you can build, by walking away with a smile. That will mess up their heads so bad. I've had people come back to me after they did their stereotyping and stuff, come back to me and say, ‘You held yourself so well,’ like it was a test or something, like they wanted to test me”. The participants in this study often remarked how they are often tested and challenged to respond in an expected way but they cleverly craft responses that often take the person off guard.

Unfortunately, these hegemonic discourses often lead Black males to emphasize their brawn at the expense of their brains. “Too often, young black males envision athletics as the only pathway to success. Black males disproportionately underperform in American public schools but are overwhelmingly represented in college and professional spectator and revenue-generating sports such as basketball and football” (Morris & Adeyemo, 2012, p. 30). One study discussed the continuum between two phenomena: effortless achievement and self-handicapping. Adolescent males may exhibit these negative strategies at different levels based on the level of support for their academic success. None of the participants in my study reported any compulsion to hide their intellectualism. Quite the opposite actually. They know they are smart and look for opportunities to show others.

## **Discussion of Findings in Relationship to Theory**

### ***Critical Race Theory***

Since conservative activist Christopher Rufo used his platform on Fox News to create a moral panic in school boards across America making Critical Race Theory (CRT) into a folk devil, it was necessary to define the method of CRT is and is not. In essence, a theory that was primarily taught in graduate schools was deceptively fed to the public as if it was relevant to teaching in K-12 schools; it was not. Furthermore, any program that promotes unconscious bias, systemic racism, or oppression has all been lumped under CRT. States such as Texas have made it illegal to teach any historical topic that cause a student to feel uncomfortable. Therefore, subjects like red lining or the racial

wealth gap would be difficult if not impossible to teach in classrooms. Right wing activists have successfully managed to slowly alter the meaning of CRT into a definitional creep has allowed the 1619 Project, diversity and anti-racism workshops, and culturally relevant teaching to be characterized as CRT. For example, parents objected in a school board meeting within a Tennessee school district to teaching about Ruby Bridges, the six-year-old girl who integrated the all-White New Orleans Elementary School in 1960 because of the controversy about CRT. Rufo (2021) set out to make CRT a toxic weapon through intentional misuse of definitional creep as in the 1619 project:

We have successfully frozen their brand—'critical race theory'—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think 'critical race theory.' We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.

CRT was an approach to thinking about race and the law. It emerged in law schools in the 1970s and 80s led by a group of scholars who posited that the law perhaps was not a neutral arbiter but in fact the inefficiencies of the civil rights laws were built into the laws themselves (Taylor et al., 2009). The scholarship built around this premise came to be called CRT which in essence is an analytical tool set or framework for investigating how it is that racial inequities persist despite the fact the Constitution promises equal protection under the law. CRT generally agreed upon 5 major tenets. The

first tenet claims that Racism is ordinary and not aberrational. The second tenet centers around Intersectionality. The third tenet states that Race is a social construction, and the fourth tenet addresses the use of storytelling and counter-storytelling. The fifth and final tenet of CRT states that Whites have been recipients of civil rights legislation (Taylor et al., 2009).

The participants in this study were four flourishing Black males who have found strategic ways to resist the hegemonic discourses that follow them into school. The fact that each student could speak to the effect of stereotypes and their impact was indicative of the first tenet of CRT that racism is an ordinary part of their existence. Even though they have been flourishing and developed strategies of resistance, these students shared these common experiences. When his intelligence is challenged, Mister A showed the challenger his report card. Chadwick responded to these discourses by simply smiling and then working to prove the stereotype wrong. Martin responded by embracing his racial pride and identity.

The current study was rooted in tenet 2 which is about the intersectionality between the participants' race and gender. There are unique hegemonic discourses around Black males that state that they are anti-intellectual and are more brawn than brain; therefore, we see more Black males in athletics than in Advanced Placement classes. Discourses surround Black males when it comes to anti-intellectualism versus being “cool” when this can be applied to all races and classes of male students. Even more critical was the discourse that Black males are uniquely hyper sexual and hyper

masculine leading to policies that create disproportionality in out of school removals, placements in disciplinary alternative schools, and the school to prison pipeline.

The most powerful aspect of this study was the goal of the study to use this as an opportunity to give these participants opportunities to share their own counter narrative stories; tenet 4 of CRT is directly aligned to this work. This act was empowering for the participants who felt a deep honor to be part of this study. Much literature surrounding Black males has been deficit centered. In fact, that was one of the barriers in securing participants for this study. One school district where the researcher attempted to recruit participants denied the request because the leadership insisted that the research was determined to examine struggling Black male students. No matter how well the researcher explained that the participants would be exemplars, the school leader insisted the study was based on doing a deficit model focused study. Nevertheless, tenet 4 of CRT allowed this researcher to tell the stories of Black males who are flourishing which means they are both academically successful and valued by their school communities.

### ***Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System***

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model was appropriate for this study. The issue surrounding Black male academic achievement is the result of a complex number of factors. The tendency to blame individuals (i.e., lack of effort, laziness, etc.) as opposed to understanding the interrelated effects of society, systems, geography, public policy, all affect the participants in this study's capacity for success. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model which consists of four environmental levels--the microsystem, the

mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem--with each level impacting differently the development of each person (Onwuegbuzie, et al., 2013). For the purposes of this study, the four levels correspond to the participants in the following manner. The microsystem is the individual participant; the mesosystem is the participants' family; the mesosystem is the school community, and the exosystem is American society which generates these hegemonic discourses.

Throughout the participants' counter storytelling the interplay of these four environments is readily apparent. Each participant spoke to how hegemonic discourses impacted them as individuals. Tyler made reference to being the target of jokes being the child of immigrants from Kenya and as a Black male. Mister A related a story when a fellow student on the bus told him he was not smart. Martin spoke about how people tell him he should use more slang as a Black male. Chadwick related a situation where people told him he doesn't have to be smart because he's an athlete.

Each participant spoke of the power of family as a mammoth impact on them. Chadwick told the story of how his single mother gave him strategies for resisting hegemonic discourses by smiling and then working hard to disprove any stereotypes. Tyler's immigrant parents were very strict about his grades and considered anything less than an A unacceptable which motivates Tyler to work harder. Martin took inspiration from his mother who values education; he spoke about how his mother's attainment of a bachelor's degree is motivation for him to go to college as well. Finally, Mister A shared that whenever he's searching for insight or knowledge on a life issue he goes to his

“elders” as a source. He further related to me how his family goes so far as to tell him to place his education before family events or activities. If he needs to study for a test, the family will tell him to miss out on a family event or obligation in order to ensure success on the test.

The school climate had a major impact on the participants and their engagement with the school community and culture. Chadwick talked at length about the nature of his relationship with his principal and how he looked up to him as a role model and Black leader. Martin iterated how the teachers in his school viewed him as smart since they referred him to special committees and organizations. Mister A meticulously described how the school climate fostered him and gave him the opportunity to grow as a student leader by serving as president of school organizations like the Interact Club. Tyler expressed his admiration for a teacher that pushed him harder in physics class demonstrating that she has higher expectations for him.

The hegemonic discourses that surround Black males in K-12 schools do not appear from a vacuum. They were generated from a society that historically sanctioned Black males as less moral, hypersexual, criminal in nature, anti-intellectual, and all brawn. These discourses in the society do not end at the school door, but they also follow Black male students wherever they go. Chadwick spoke to the dangers of being a Black male where one day you simply won't come home. This macro-system was evidenced in policies generated to manage Black males in school and in society. It was evident in the disproportionality of Black males in the criminal justice system, in special education

programs, in the unemployment line, and early death due to Black-on-Black crime and poor health care outcomes. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system model debunked the rhetoric that one's success or failure in American society is solely the foil of one's own individual efforts or habits.

### **Implications for Practice**

Educational leaders must make schools contested sites where blatant and institutional racism are excised in order to create environments for equity and excellence for all students in their schools, particularly Black males. This researcher implores the Black community, policy makers, educators, and non-governmental agencies to engage government, non-profits, and the Black community to repair the Black family and create healthy school climates where Black males are challenged. These students deserve rigorous instructional strategies delivered by faculty and staff who are highly adept at creating caring and nurturing environments where Black males are academically successful, involved in extracurricular activities, and are valued members of their school communities. These are the major outcomes of the stories from this study. In order for Black male students to have the bright futures they deserved and see for themselves - what this researcher terms, *flourishing*, there must be a systemic reevaluation of the educational climate and the teaching praxis.

### **Areas for Future Research**

Using the findings of this study with a larger qualitative sample that can extend this research. With this larger sample, researchers can further explore how other

successful Black males *flourish* by circumnavigating the hegemonic discourses that surround them in school. Once stakeholders understand the needs of these Black males expressed in their own voices, then school leaders can be intentional about creating environments where Black males can flourish; furthermore, the Black community needs to work towards healing the Black family unit to create the proper home environments required for Black males to *flourish*. The researcher posits that change will occur in the process of raising the consciousness of parents, educators, policy makers, and other stakeholders regarding the way Black male achievement exists in our schools.

Stakeholders can use Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model to disrupt the Horatio Alger myth that permeates American society with the faulty notion that success or failure of a particularly individual or a group of individuals is singularly based on their habits or character, but rather have the paradigm shift in thinking that humans are all influenced by systems on the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro levels. Moreover, utilizing the tenets of CRT, especially accepting that racism is a normal part of the lives of these participants, plus including the principles of intersectionality and counter narratives. If this is done, future researchers can explore theoretical and conceptual issues regarding race, systemic racism, self-identity and factors that contribute to Black male academic and social success. In conclusion, more anti-deficit research is also needed to combat deficit research about the academic and social outcomes of Black males in K-12 schools.

## **Limitations**

A distinct limitation to this study was the small sample size of the participants. With a larger sample size, the researcher could have collected more data and discovered additional variations on the themes presented. One of my participants happened to be child of immigrants from Kenya. No doubt an exploration of Black males who are immigrants or first-generation Americans would prove very intriguing. This study also limited its scope to juniors and seniors in high school; perhaps some variations in the results would have manifested if freshmen or sophomores were interviewed. This study explored 12 questions which does affect its applicability to other scenarios. The scope of questions used was broad which often resulted in broad answers. Although the interviewer probed further, additional questions would have gathered more in-depth explanations into how these oppressive hegemonic discourses might have affected respondents' feelings about their experiences as Black males in high school.

## **Summary of the Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to create a space where these *flourishing* Black males can construct their social world through counter narrative stories. The researcher deemed that these participants were *flourishing* because they were academically successful, valued by their school community, involved in extracurricular activities, and perceived by the leadership as having bright futures. These *flourishing* Black males detailed the hegemony they faced in society in general and within their schools. Sadly, there is a disproportionate body of research that focuses on Black male academic failures

and not their successes. This unbalanced approach on the educational crisis of Black males does not offer insight into those Black males who successfully circumnavigated through the barriers and constraints in K-12 schools to *flourish*. To reiterate, little research offers an anti-deficit view on Black males' achievement. It was especially important to the researcher to understand how Black males make sense of the negative perceptions portrayed through mass media and stereotypes. This study yielded two themes that derived from the meaningful experiences of the participants. These themes of strong family support and school climate are crucial in their contributions to Black males and whether or not they give in to the pressure to embrace and internalize hegemonic discourse that surround them or tenaciously resist them with grace and dignity like the participants in my study and flourish into well rounded beings who positively enhance this society.

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## Appendix A: Operational Definitions

**Academic stratification:** Black males are placed in lower tracked and remedial classes due to the low expectations of their teachers, pushed out of school by unjust discipline practices that target their negatively perceived behaviors due to living in poverty they are forced to attend under-resourced schools (Johnson, 2017).

**Acting Black:** Hegemonic narratives that creative ideas of what it means to be Black, “Otherwise blackness was marked by ‘cool’, ‘confidence’, ‘clowning,’ ‘loud’ talk, and/or ‘acting ghetto’ which is a classed articulation of blackness that included ‘loud talk’ but was also described as acting ‘crazy’, ‘stupid’, or ‘with no sense’” (O’Connor, Mueller, Lewis, Rivas-Drake, and Rosenberg, 2011).

**Acting White:** A racist trope which resonates with popular culture and was reinforced mightily by the work of Fordham and Ogbu’s in 1986 which attempted to explain poor achievement of Black students by stating that Black students intentionally do not do well in school because of the fear of social ostracization from their peers for doing well in school (Durkee and Williams, 2015).

**Afrocentric curriculum:** A curriculum designed to help Black students understand the history of Black achievement therefore serving as a critical component to reframing the conversation around what constitutes academic success. Such a curriculum can be a critical component to helping frame the conversation in ways that offer Black students opportunities to move beyond Eurocentric models of teaching and learning (Albritton, 2015).

**Anti-foundationalism:** A doctrine in the philosophy of knowledge that asserts that none of our knowledge is absolutely certain (Bevir, 2009). Also, it is a movement tied to a collection of social theorists who are unified less by a common project than by a common critique (Baranov, 2016). This term can also refer to any epistemology that rejects appeals to a basic ground or foundation of knowledge in either pure experience or pure reason (Bevir, 2009).

**Athletic/Academic paradox:** This paradox has its origins in slavery where Black males were valued strictly for their physical prowess. This kind of thinking permeated Western society historically, particularly when Europeans encountered African people who they viewed as subhuman and more suited for physical labor. Schools today “handle” Black

males by allowing them to exist in an athletic space but not an academic space (Morris and Adeyemo, 2012).

**Barrier messaging:** A parenting strategy that fosters the engagement of Black males by sending them messages about the dangers of an oppressive racist society to alter the behaviors that will protect them (Smalls and Cooper, 2012).

**Case study:** This qualitative design is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. This ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

**Exclusionary discipline:** Practices schools use to remove students from school which results in disparate outcomes between Black students and their White counterparts. These practices often target subjective behavior such as disrespect and insubordination rather than for behaviors such as violence (Dhami & Fairbanks, 2016).

**Fictive kinships:** An idea that to survive racist power structures oppressed people create a connection with others not based on marriage or genetics. This connection is just as powerful and has the same leverage as relationships based on genetics or marriage (Stinson, 2011).

**Flourishing:** Black males who are academically successful, involved in extracurricular activities, valued by their school communities, and see bright futures for themselves

**Folk devils:** A group identified and defined as a threat to society and/or social norms as well as the interests of the community or society at large (Cohen, 2011).

**Hegemonic discourses:** Narratives that embody racist and stereotyped images that have dominated depictions of Black people for hundreds of years...From minstrel shows and early motion pictures to product advertisements, Black people were portrayed as lazy, stupid, violent, hypersexual sub-humans that enjoyed serving and taking care of White people. With the advent of new forms of media over time, (i.e., radio and later television), there was little change in these portrayals. Therefore, language and conversations about Black people take place in these frameworks (Piazza and Duncan, 2012).

**Hypermasculinity:** The ideological construction of Black masculinity in the United States as deviant and different. Fear of Black men's sexuality was constantly depicted as a threat to White womanhood if not controlled...this narrative, which constructs Black males as hypersexual and animalistic (Marsh and Noguera, 2018). Within a White

hegemonic society, Black masculinities are a collection of practices viewed through a particular intersection of raced and gendered discursive practices that pathologize black males as hypermasculine, deviant, hypersexual, intellectually inferior, and uneducable” (Allen, 2017).

**Implicit bias:** A state of mind when a person subconsciously acts on racist attitudes and beliefs. In schools the insidious nature of implicit bias creates a mental framework that students come from a place of deficit; so expectations are lower and thus the consequences for their behavior are well deserved. Empathy is abandoned for these marginalized groups and only reserved for those deemed worthy thus creating a disposable people (Rudd, 2015).

**Material constraints:** Systematic barriers that impede achievement that is structural in a society such as racism, slavery, poverty, single-parent homes, implicit bias, and exclusionary practices in school (Johnson, 2017).

**Moral panics:** A wave of exaggerated and distorted mass media campaigns which create fear, reinforce stereotypes, and add tension to preexisting divisions based on race/ethnicity and social class (Cohen, 2011).

**Oppositional peer culture:** The intentional opposition to academic achievement driven by the alternative motivation to deter criticisms and ridicule from peers for demonstrating behaviors associated with mainstream White culture (Durkee and Williams, 2015).

**Post-racial society:** The view that holds that since the progressions Black people have made in American society, most famously the election of Barack Obama, that racism is no longer an issue of American life. As a result, any struggles Black people have in society are because of their work ethic and not any systematic or structural barriers (Ward, 2013).

**Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome:** As a result of centuries of slavery and bondage followed by generations of persistent and systematic racial oppression have altered the behaviors and psyche of Black males which is then passed down through multiple generations. These traumatic experiences and memories and present-day oppression alters behaviors. Some of those behaviors are pictures of resilience, while others are self-destructive and self-sabotaging...this form of trauma is multidimensional, layered, complex, and embedded in the psyche of the members of the group (Murray, 2018).

**Protective factors:** Aspects of the lives of Black males that save them from the pitfalls that await Black males in this society. These aspects can be parents, teachers, church, coaches, or various community members. (Patton, Woolley, and Hong, 2012).

**Positioning events:** When Black males engage in behavior in response to the hegemonic discourses and stereotypes surrounding them they might take up dominant assumptions about their identity or reposition themselves as a way to push back against hegemonic discourses (Allen, 2017).

**Qualitative study:** A study whose commitment to viewing the social world-social events and actions-from the viewpoints of the people being studied. This commitment involves discovering their socially constructed reality and penetrating the frames of meaning within which they conduct their activities (Blaikie, 2005).

**Raceless persona theory:** The concept that Black students disconnect from their racial identity in school because of an ambivalence derived from a desire to attain academic success. This is coupled with pressure from school officials to disconnect from their racial identity (Mocombe, 2011).

**School to prison pipeline:** A theory that schools play a role in supplying bodies to the prison system by engaging in practices that systematically and intentionally remove marginalized children from the education system by relying on police officers in schools to administer discipline instead of teachers and principals. The school to prison pipeline theory holds that because of disproportionality students are removed from the learning environment for behavior that is subjective or non-criminal behavior such as disrespect and defiance becomes criminalized (Rudd, 2015).

**Stereotype threat:** Stereotype threat is the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype and the associated fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype. This burden that is carried around impacts the psyche of the individual and causes stressors that erode efficacy (Ford, Grantham, and Whiting, 2008).

**White privilege:** The implicit and explicit advantages that White people accrue from society creating an unequal balance of power and position when compared with minority races (Orrock and Clark, 2015).

**Zero tolerance policies:** A practice adopted by school districts in the 1990s where students are instantly and permanently removed from school for offenses related to violence and drugs. However, schools began to expand this to nonviolent offenses such as disrespect, insubordination, and non-attendance (Hoffman, 2014).

## VITA

Cleo Wadley graduated from Bellaire High School in 1989. After high school, he obtained his Bachelor of Arts Degree in English from Southwest Texas State University in 1994. He continued his education at Prairie View A&M University where he graduated with a master's degree in educational leadership in 2002. In the summer of 2018, he was accepted into the doctoral program at Stephen F. Austin State University, where he earned a Doctorate in Educational Leadership in 2022. He has 28 years of experience in K-12 education as a teacher, coach, assistant principal, and principal on the elementary and secondary levels. Currently, Cleo is the principal of Pine Tree High School in Pine Tree ISD. He also serves the community by sitting on the boards for non-profit organizations such as the Gregg County Historical Museum, Longview Teen Court, and East Texas CASA.

Permanent Address:           1101 Woodway Court,  
Longview, TX 75605

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Typist:                       Cleo Wadley, B.S., M.Ed.