I Ain't Do Nothing: The Social and Academic Experiences of Black Males in a Dismantled School

Don Sawyer

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/etd

Part of the Education Commons, and the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://surface.syr.edu/etd/20

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the SURFACE at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations - ALL by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.
ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the experiences of Black eighth grade males attending an urban middle school dismantled in the midst of mandated educational reform. Some of the students were the victims of repeated school closures and were left behind because of a lack of space in other schools as a result of efforts to disperse students across the district. These students are part of a group that attends classes in a small section of their former building that has been converted into a high school. To gain insight into the lived experiences of these students, the following questions guided this project: How do students analyze and articulate the experiences of being Black males in an urban school and neighborhood as racialized, gendered, and classed individuals? How do students understand, cooperate with, and resist school structure? This project centers the often-silenced voices of Black male youth as experts with the ability to understand and articulate their lived experiences. My analysis revealed student frustrations related to the school setting and relationships with teachers and administrators. Students voiced concerns about respect, relationships with teachers, and the imbalance of voice and power in school. Students articulated feeling more like objects to be controlled than learners to be nurtured. In spite of the oppressive measures put in place to control their behavior, students continued to actively resist efforts to marginalize their existence in the school building. I argue that these students and others should be read as knowledgeable about their own lives and not seen through the lens of “deficits” they bring to school. I also argue that in light of social promotion and lowered expectations for academic excellence, for some students, schools become prison preparatory institutions (PPI) and structure experiences for students to be “pushed out” and primed to enter the criminal justice system. This work is about finding, recognizing, and engaging students’ knowledge and experiences in sociological research and practice.
I AIN’T DO NOTHING:

THE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALES IN A DISMANTLED SCHOOL

by

Don C. Sawyer III

B.A., Hartwick College, 1999
M.S., Syracuse University, 2003
M.A., Syracuse University, 2008

Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology.

Syracuse University
December 2013
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my Creator for life and the sustaining power that made everything possible. Your hand has been evident in my life and has guided me on this journey. To my wife LaToya, words cannot express how much you mean to me. You are a phenomenal wife, friend, mother, and most of all, an extraordinary woman. I plan to share the rest of my days upon this earth with you. To my four beautiful children, Nyelah Necia-Grace, Khalif Kevin, Hakeem Emmanuel, and Safiyah Pearl, you have changed my life and renewed my sense of purpose. I will do all I can, with all I have to ensure you reach the potential our Creator has placed within you. I could not have been blessed with greater gifts. You are my angels. To my parents, Donald Jr. and Lenore, the sacrifices you have made for me can never be repaid. I am thankful for the vision you had for my life. I did not enjoy it at the time, but I now appreciate all of the time you made me spend in the library researching famous Black people. Your dedication to my success is a gift from above. To my brother, Jermaine, greatness lies within you. Continue to walk towards your destiny. To Mama San, thank you for allowing me into the family and not swinging on me when we had “the talk.” A heavenly shout out to William Holley (Pops) for making me jump through hoops and travel great distances before you allowed me to date your daughter. To my countless family members, I thank you for being a steadfast support system in my life. There are too many of you to name, but please know I dedicate this accomplishment to all of you.

To my Lincoln Projects, Harlem NYC crew, words cannot express how proud I am to have grown up with all of you. We lost many people along the way, but without you, I would not be where I am today. I can still see all of you making fun of me when my grandmother would scream “DONNNYYY” at the top of her lungs from her 12th floor window. To Owen, Demond, my nephew Thomas, and my cousin Daniel, keep your head up while serving your
time. I hope to see you free real soon. Your letters keep me focused and grounded. You are never far from my thoughts. To the K.D.L. Posse, Darren (D-MAC), Doc (Baby DOC), Eddie (Kid Grand), David (Slack D), Jermaine (Pac), and Jermaine (E-Z-J), our rap careers never took off, but we had bars for days. I love you man! To Kelly Ross, Duane Jackson, Tai Tedder, Rob Dickerson, you already know. To the MFN Crew, Alvin, Thanya, David, Alex, Tremayne, Christina, we still doing big things. MFN 4 Life! To one of my greatest mentors and role models, Barry L. Wells, your vision for excellence helped to change my outlook on life. I am grateful for you. To my brother from another mother, Dr. Paul M. Buckley, thank you for being you! To Dr. Adam Banks, thank you for being my template for community scholarship. Christabel and Ernest, you already know...nothing but love. To all of my SU family, there are way too many to name, but I love all of you. Thank you for your support. To my fellow Sociology folks, Emily, Jackie, Alecea, Nats, Tre, Jeremy, Karyn, Fumi, Griselda, Carrie, Karen, Janet C., Marj, Chris, A. Paris, and so many others, thank you for the support over the years.

To my dissertation advisor, Dr. Sari Knopp Biklen, it has been a long process, but we made it. Thank you for believing in me and my voice. There were so many times I doubted myself, but you always said something that would help to lift my spirits and let me know that I belonged in graduate school. I am a work in progress, but I have become a better scholar because of you. To my dissertation committee, Dr. Marcelle Haddix (MHPd), Dr. Amy Lutz, Dr. Yingyi Ma, and Dr. Jeff Mangram, thank you for your support and believing in my work. You all inspire me and are shining examples of engaged scholarship. I will make you proud.

Last, and definitely not least, I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my grandmother, Arnita Grace Sawyer. I miss you Granny. I told you I would be a doctor!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I
### INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1
  - Reflexive Statement .......................................................... 3
  - Statement of the Problem .................................................. 9
  - Significance/Purpose of the Study ......................................... 13
  - Research Questions .......................................................... 14
  - Site of the Study .................................................................. 15
  - Critical Race Theory and My Work ...................................... 17
  - Overview of the Dissertation ............................................... 19

## CHAPTER II
### LITERATURE REVIEW .......................................................... 22
  - Introduction ........................................................................ 22
  - Black Male Experiences in a U.S. Context ............................. 24
  - Socioeconomic Status, Neighborhood, and Parenting Effects .... 29
  - Parental Involvement and the Impact on Educational Outcomes 31
  - School Structure, Black Males, and Educational Attainment ...... 34
  - The Path to Prison: School-to-Prison Pipeline ....................... 39
  - Black Adolescent Psychology and Identity In Relation to Academic Achievement 45
  - Oppositional Culture and School Performance ........................ 50
  - Reframing Oppositional Culture .......................................... 53
  - Hip-Hop Culture and Urban Youth ....................................... 55
  - Critical Race Theory and Methodology .................................. 58
  - Closing .............................................................................. 69

## CHAPTER III
### METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN .............................. 71
  - Considerations for My Work ................................................. 72
  - Situating Myself in the Research .......................................... 73
  - My Race and My Research ................................................... 75
  - Study Design ........................................................................ 82
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION .................................................................................. 219

Summary ...................................................................................... 220

Limitations ................................................................................... 223

Future Research .......................................................................... 224

Contributions of the Study .......................................................... 226

Transforming School Discipline .................................................. 229

Hip-Hop and the School ............................................................... 231

A Love Note .................................................................................. 234

REFERENCES .................................................................................. 236

APPENDICES ................................................................................. 261
I AIN’T DO NOTHING:
THE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALES IN A DISMANTLED SCHOOL

DON C. SAWYER III

“I ain’t do nothing” was a common phrase with multiple meanings heard throughout the school on a regular basis. When a student was kicked out of class I often heard him say to the teacher, “Miss, I ain’t do nothing,” as he left the classroom. On other occasions when asking students what they did for the day in school, the response would be, “I ain’t do nothing” as they shook their head trying to recall how they spent their time.

INTRODUCTION

It is an honor to be able to introduce this dissertation with the words of an African-American sociologist, W.E.B. DuBois. As a Black male scholar, I have been amazed by many of his works and his words have often been the support to hold me up during the rough times on this journey to doctoral completion. In his 1903 book, The Souls of Black Folks, Dr. DuBois, eloquently states:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, --a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.
This powerful quotation, penned more than 100 years ago has not lost any of its truth in 2013. It is in the context of this double consciousness that I approach my work, my life, and the lives of the students in this study.

One of the other questions Dr. DuBois deals with is, “How does it feel to be a problem?” As Black males in an American context, we are often seen as problems. We are seen as an accumulation of pathologies and problems that through the eyes of many make us unworthy of being seen or treated as human. In essence, we are problems. We are assumed to need fixing and if we cannot be fixed, prison, social and physical deaths are the ways in which we are handled. Racial profiling, the war on drugs, police brutality are often lived experiences for Black males. There are so many that fall victim to society’s forces hell bent on our destruction, but for this piece I will honor the names of a few fallen soldiers: Sean Bell, Amadou Diallo, Patrick Dorismond, Oscar Grant, Timothy Stansbury, and Trayvon Martin.

The young Black males in my study are viewed as problems in society and in their schools and their social experiences are impacted by the negative views of Black males. This project is a qualitative analysis of the social and academic experiences of Black eighth grade males attending an urban school dismantled in the midst of mandated educational reform. To gain insight into the lived experiences of these students, the following questions guided this project: How do students articulate their social and academic experiences as eighth grade Black males in a dismantled urban school setting? How do students understand, cooperate with, and resist school structure? How do students react to definitions of success constructed for them by teachers and how do they create meanings of academic success in light of being defined as academically deficient?
How do students analyze and articulate the experiences of being Black males in an urban school and neighborhood as racialized, gendered, and classed individuals?

The site of this study is important because the students in this dismantled school are the ones “left behind” as a result of reform efforts. This research adds to the work of scholars researching the plight of students of color in failing school districts and aims to center the often silenced voices of Black male youth as experts with the ability to understand and articulate their lived experiences. It is important to note that my focus on Black boys is not meant to overshadow the plight of Black girls in educational spaces. Girls are victims of similar school environments and their experiences should be highlighted as well. I built a relationship with the young men in the study and decided to focus on their unique experiences as Black males in this dismantled school. I argue that these students (females included) should be read as knowledgeable about their own lives and not seen through the lens of “deficits” they bring to school. This work is about finding, recognizing, and engaging students’ knowledge in research and practice.

Reflexive Statement

My interest in working with Black males in education settings began as I reflected on my educational journey. During this process, I noticed that a number of my friends were not successful in school and were often relegated to service related employment where high educational attainment was not a major factor in the hiring process. In a sense, some of my research interests were born out of the guilt I felt as a result of being able to successfully navigate through my educational journey. I questioned the results and often wondered, “why me?” It did not seem fair that I was able to make it out of the
projects, earn multiple degrees, attain prestigious jobs, and travel to different countries, while some of the people I grew up with were in prison or still living in the same apartments of our youth.

Both of my parents dropped out of high school and later attained their general equivalency diplomas. They were teens when I was conceived and did not have many resources. They vowed that my brother and I would not repeat their fate. They did everything in their power to ensure my brother and I had the best education possible with their limited resources. At the age of six I remember my mother taking me to a dingy brick building that looked like an old castle to take a test. At the time, I did not know why I was taking the test, but I later found out it was to get me into the Catholic school two blocks away from our apartment. I attended a Catholic school from first through twelfth grade even though my family was not Catholic. My parents thought that I could get a better education in a parochial school.

There were times I felt guilty and somewhat embarrassed by the fact that I attended my school. Most of my friends, and family attended the neighborhood public schools. I remember days when I would rush home just so I could take off my ugly school uniform and fit in with the rest of my friends. I had plenty of friends and made great connections with the students in my school, but I wanted to make sure I fit in with the friends who lived in my neighborhood. I did not want to be seen as different just because I was fortunate enough to go to a Catholic school. For the most part, my friends never asked me about my schooling experiences. However, they would make fun of the tight navy blue pants and awkward black shoes I had to wear as part of my uniform. At the end of the day, I was no better than anyone else. We all were living in the same
housing project, in the same underserved neighborhood, with the same mice and roaches, so our similar lived experiences are what kept me grounded and connected to my neighborhood peers.

As we got older, we were met with the crack cocaine epidemic in NYC. Crack literally destroyed neighborhoods and families to a point that even now, I do not think the impacted communities have fully recovered. Crack was everywhere. One of the hardest things to deal with was seeing the parents of some of my friends strung out on the new drug. Families were breaking up, children were being removed from houses, people were getting shot on a daily basis; crack wrought havoc on our lives. As I reflect back on this time in my life, I still get an uneasy feeling in my stomach. I remember a similar feeling when walking to the corner store at night. I often wondered if I would get shot walking past the drug dealers on the corner. Violence in the neighborhood did not have a schedule or a list of victims. At any given time, you could be taken out by a bullet and it did not matter if it was intended for you. Death was a real possibility for many of us during this period.

When I was around 12 or 13, I was asked to take a package to a building about ten blocks away from my afterschool program. I was sitting at a table with some of my friends, when an older teenager came to me and asked me if I wanted to make some money. He pulled out a large “knot” of money. I had never seen that much money held in a single pocket. He said all I had to do was take the package in my backpack and drop it off to someone in the building. Before I could respond to his request, one of the counselors came over and asked the dealer to leave. I often wonder what would have happened if I had taken the package and made some quick cash. Would I have been
sucked into the drug game? Would I have been caught and sent to a group home? I am thankful I will never know the answer to that question. Unfortunately, some of my peers are able to answer this question. I have lost a number of people to prison and death as a result of getting involved in the drug game. For them, the drug game made sense. If you are poor and struggling without resources, making money, even if it involved illegal practices, made sense. People were able to provide for their families and make more money than they would work a legal minimum wage job. So when weighing the costs and risks associated with dealing drugs, it seemed rational to choose drugs.

To this day, I am thankful for my Harlem peer group. There was a time when they would not let me hang out with them. We all used to sit on the bench on the weekend, smoke weed, and drink St. Ides malt liquor. (I am not sure if my parents knew, but now they do.) This started around high school and for some it continued beyond. There was a time when I stopped partaking in the festivities and I was not allowed back in. I still hung out with people, but they would not let me participate in some of their activities. It was as if they saw something special in me. They protected me. One of my friends who is serving a 25+ year prison sentence wrote me a letter about a year ago in which he said he knew I would be the one to make it out. He mentioned seeing “something in my eyes” and that he knew I wanted something greater than what was in front of me. I am so thankful for my peers and the protection they gave me. I am forever indebted to them and they are another reason why my academic work focuses on the experiences of young men of color living in underserved neighborhoods. Without them, I may not have been able to do this important work. I do not think I have done anything
special. I have done what many others would have done if they were given the same opportunities to succeed.

My lived experiences as a Black male, father, husband, mentor, educator, and scholar have played a major role in determining my academic and research focus. When I see news footage and statistics about young Black men going to prison, I see myself. When I see young Black boys wandering aimlessly in the streets because schools have failed them, I see myself. When I see stories of young Black men being killed in the streets, I see myself. In all of these instances, I know that I could have been one of them. My research in communities of color is not just about gathering data for the sake of publishing, but rather me using my resources and capital in an attempt to positively impact society through research driven social change. This dedication to a community-centered approach is what guides my research choices. My research is done for and with …and not on Black youth.

**Beyond Belief: Boys, Basketball, and Business as Usual**

This study employs a qualitative case study and ethnographic approach to investigate the social and academic experiences of Black adolescent males in a dismantled K-8 school. The school was “dismantled” and redesigned into a high school with a number of 8th grade students (that other schools across the district didn’t have space for) remaining in the building to finish the academic year. The site of this study is important because the students in this dismantled school are the ones “left behind” as a result of reform efforts. In some ways, we can read these youth as those no one wanted.
During one of my days of observation in the fall of 2010, I had a conversation with one of the young men I worked with during a summer enrichment program set up for seventh and eighth grade boys as an alternative to traditional summer school. This young man was one of the top performers on the eighth grade basketball team. During our conversation he mentioned that the team was having issues with getting access to the gym because the high school basketball teams were monopolizing the gym time. I inquired more about how they planned to overcome this and he mentioned that a plan had already been executed to solve the problem of basketball practice for the school’s teams. Rather than asking the coaches to compromise and alternate days of practice during the week, it was decided that during the basketball season, the eighth grade team would practice during the day. When I first heard this, it didn’t cause any alarm. Later when talking to one of the teachers in the building, the plan for practice was made clear. The eighth grade boys’ basketball practice would take place during fifth block. Instead of attending their regularly scheduled math class during this block, the boys could be found in the gym practicing for the upcoming games. Young Black boys facing so many academic obstacles in this school district were now being told, implicitly and one could argue explicitly, that basketball was more important than academics…well at least more important than math. Again, I worked with a number of these boys during a summer school enrichment program that many of them had to attend for failing math! I share this story to shine as an example of misguided practices in schools charged with educating and caring for Black boys. This is just one instance of the kinds of educational practices that continue to allow Black boys to fail.
Statement of the Problem

Concerns about the academic experiences and achievement level of African-American males have remained important topics for educators, researchers, policy analysts, and the general public. There are a number of arenas where one can hear about the issues: national forums, political speeches, college classrooms, BET, CNN, school board meetings, family living rooms and even the local barber shop. National and state academic assessments and numerous research articles consistently report that Black adolescent males are performing lower than other groups (e.g., Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2008), disproportionately placed in special education, school suspensions and expulsions, and leading in school dropout rates, unemployment, and juvenile incarceration (Artiles and Trent, 1994; Artiles, 2003; Holzman, 2006). Duncan (2002) argues that that Black male students in schools suffer a condition characteristic of a population that is beyond love. This is “a condition of those who are excluded from society’s economy and networks of care and thus expelled from useful participation in social life…black males are constructed as a strange population… as a group with values and attitudes that are fundamentally different from other students, their marginalization and oppression are understood as natural and primarily of their own doing” (page 140). He argues further that black males are relatively powerless to define their circumstances and as a result are often relegated to a state of being defined by others. Delgado (1996 in Duncan, 2002) states:

…the incessant characterization of blacks in demeaning terms means that the average member of society virtually equates any one of us with trouble. We come to be seen as absent fathers, welfare mothers, lazy office worker “quota queens,”
and so on. Once this sets in, we have little chance of appealing to the better natures of persons who hold this unconscious image of us. The image renders us “other.” It means people simply don’t think of us as individuals to whom love, respect, generosity, and friendliness are due. We are “beyond love” (p. 51).

This description is not abnormal but a common occurrence for Black males in a schooling context. The schooling environment is not always conducive to success for Black students (especially males). The voices of young Black males in social and academic settings are often silenced and marginalized (Sealey-Ruiz and Greene, 2010). Black males are researched and talked about, but are rarely given the space to exist as experts with their own voices, experiences, and bases of knowledge. Research points to the need for an understanding of urban youth and urban youth culture as a means to promote academic achievement and self-esteem (Milner, 2010; Sealey-Ruiz and Greene, 2010; and Duncan-Andrade, 2004). On the whole, if students are not successful in school, the chances are low for them to be successful in life. This research aims to disrupt deficit positioning of Black boys and to complicate dominant framings of them in educational and social research (Haddix, 2009).

**Educational and Social Experiences of Black Males**

The current situation facing Black males in U.S. education settings is a serious matter and the 2010 Schott Foundation 50 State Report, “Yes We Can” is a glaring example. The report is an assessment of the academic outcomes of Black male students in all 50 states. The overall goal is to “provide a basis for evaluating the success of
out of 10 of the lowest performing states for Black male high school graduation, New York was number one with a mere 25% of Black males graduating compared to 68% of white males. Of the lowest performing large school districts, New York City ranked second and Buffalo ranked sixth with 28% and 25% graduation rates respectively. In New York State, 75% of Black males do not graduate from high school. This lack of school completion is problematic in light of the increasing correlation between Black males who are failed by the school system—and perform poorly—and eventually drop out and their involvement with the penal system (Howard, 2008). Black males outnumber all other ethnic groups in the prison population and have a rate of incarceration five times higher than that of white males. One in every eight Black men in their 20s and 30s was behind bars in 2003 (Elsner, 2004 in Howard, 2008). Howard (2008) found:

Research done by the U.S. Bureau of Justice and the Justice Policy Institute revealed that in 1980, 463,700 African-American men were enrolled in higher education compared to 143,000 who were incarcerated. By 2004, the study found that 758,400 African-American men were enrolled in colleges across the U.S. compared to approximately 924,000 who were in the nation’s jails and prisons. The Justice Policy Institute estimates that over this twenty-four year period, for every one African-American male who entered college or a university, three entered jail or prison. In California, African-American males are five times more likely to go to prison than enter one of the colleges in the state’s university system…to quote Alan Elsner (2004) who has done extensive work examining the crisis in the United States Prison system, “for many young black men, prison is their college” (p. 958).
Even scarier, Department of Justice statisticians project that based on current demographics one in every three African-American men can expect to spend some time incarcerated, on probation, or under some type of jurisdiction of the penal system during his life time (Howard, 2008). These statistics paint a picture of the failed educational practices and policies and set the stage for the work needed to counteract the impact of these lived realities.

**Urban Discourse and the Deficit Model**

When discussing Black youth in educational contexts many people view students through the lens of deficits and focus solely on what is lacking in their lives. While it is important for researchers to understand what students do not have, it is even more important for us to acknowledge what they do have and what they offer as students. Viewing students through their deficits informs our views on what can be done to improve their educational realities and limits the possibility of us finding ways to ensure meaningful change. Ford and Grantham (2003) argue that deficit thinking exists when researchers, policy makers, and educators hold uninformed, negative views about students of color and in doing so, lower their expectations of this population of students. Deficit thinking in the midst of reform is not a safe mixture.

When we discuss the achievement gap or the plight of black male students in school, we often hear the problem framed as if it lies totally within the student or their family. Seldom do we hear a critique of other gaps that exist, i.e. the school funding gap or the wealth gap (Ladson-Billings, 2007). In addition to these under-discussed gaps, the remnants of the cultural deficit discourse from the 1950s and 60s still exists today.
During this historical period it was thought that people of color suffered from an inferior culture that was detrimental to their educational success. These forms of thinking pathologized the cultures of people of color and saw them as their own worst enemies. The language may have changed, but the thinking still surfaces. She goes on to list common themes we can hear if we were to walk into an urban school and engage in a discussion about students failure, “The parents just don't care,” “These children don't have enough exposure/experiences,” “These children aren't ready for school,” “Their families don't value education,” and, “They are coming from a culture of poverty,” (Ladson-Billings, 2007, p. 318). In order to create environments conducive to transformational educational experiences, students must be viewed with potential and not human bags of deficit.

**Significance/Purpose of the Study**

Mainstream educational research on Black males tends to be conceptually framed by the “academic achievement gap” as it addresses the problem by comparing Black and white students (see, for example Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2008). The focus of this research is not to solve and analyze problems of Black boys not performing up to the same level as their white counterparts. This research joins those who frame the gap as one between Black boys and high expectations (Hilliard, 2003). If high expectations are set, and students are supported, they will have a greater likelihood of reaching goals. The current social and structural obstacles facing Black boys may determine their opportunity to do well, but not their capacity. Changing the performance goal to a more self-deterministic understanding of education with high
expectations for students reframes the discussion and allows us to articulate high performance outside of using whites as the measuring stick for academic success.

The emphasis in sociological and educational research must include a systemic investigation of the social and academic experiences articulated by Black students to avoid further reifying deficit constructions of Black adolescent males and their prowess for intellectual performance in research, policy, and practice (Haddix, 2009). This research study aims to center urban youth culture as well as the often silenced voices of urban Black youth and situate them as experts with the ability to understand and articulate their lived experiences.

**Research Questions**

To gain insight into the lived experiences of the 8th grade students who were left behind, the following questions guided this project:

1. How do students articulate their social and academic experiences as eighth grade Black males in a dismantled urban school setting?
2. How do students understand, cooperate with, and resist school structure?
3. How do students react to definitions of success constructed for them by teachers and how do they create meanings of academic success in light of being defined as academically deficient?
4. How do students analyze and articulate the experiences of being Black males in an urban school and neighborhood as racialized, gendered, and classed individuals?
Site of the Study

This study takes place in what was once the former Arnita Grace Academy, but had become, for two years before its closing, a K-8 school in the Abraham Lincoln School District in Upstate New York. The site of this study is important because the students in this “dismantled” school are the ones “left behind” during the reform efforts. On March 23, 2010, the Lincoln School Board voted to close Arnita Grace Academy in order to save $2 million and help close the projected $18 million budget gap and balance the budget. In addition to the closing of the school 88 teachers and instructional support staff, 67 teaching assistants, and 12 administrators were laid off through the district. The school board selected the Arnita School to be used as a temporary site for the STEM Academy High School while their building was being renovated. The majority of Arnita’s students were sent to other schools throughout the district. Most of the rising 8th graders were kept in the building with the new high school. In a 2010 interview, the president of the school board stated, “It’s a complicated equation and we’re doing the best we can. I really believe we’re doing the very best we can to minimize the impact and cost while completing the goal of moving the construction project along at a pace that’s reasonable.” Doing the “best we can” may not mean much to the students whose lives were disrupted. For all intents and purposes, Arnita disappeared. If you go to the district website, Arnita is not listed as an existing school. This invisible status had an impact on the students that were left behind in the building. They are not students in the STEM High School that moved into their building and their former school does not exist.
During some of my conversations with the students, the theme of being left behind often emerged. Many of the students wanted to hold on to their Arnita school identity. A number of these students have been victims of school closings and staff departures in the past. Some of them came to Arnita when the Middleton School was closed to merge with Arnita. Middleton was a relatively small K-6 school that was closed in an effort to save money and create an “innovative” educational space in the Arnita School. There were promises made to the students and their families that the transition from Middleton would be positive for them and Arnita would be a cutting edge place of education. Two years later, the students were faced with another school closing and uncertainty. Students often mentioned that they “don’t trust people” in the schools. They have been let down continuously in the past and it was difficult for them to put their trust in a school system that seems to displace them without considering the impact and outcomes of these actions.

My dissertation project is a qualitative investigation of the academic and social experiences of Black adolescent males in an urban middle school in the midst of mandated reform. As a Black male scholar and father of four (including two Black boys) I am dissatisfied with the public education system and I am appalled by the statistics concerning Black males in this country. I have a vested interest in the academic and life outcomes of Black males.
Critical Race Theory and My Work

“The typical Black boy in a K-12 educational setting is taught almost exclusively by white women who combine an insufficient anticipation for his academic achievement with high expectations for disruptive behavior, intellectual stupidity, and a dispassion for learning that will ultimately culminate with high school dropout” (Harper, 2009, p. 697).

Critical race theory is the theoretical lens that frames the dissertation project. I am primarily concerned with the experiences of Black males in educational settings and their lack of voice in educational research. This population is often studied and objectified while their perspectives remain invisible. The focus of this study is on the voices/stories and experiences of Black adolescent male students. Critical Race Theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for this project. Even when focusing primarily on the schooling experiences of African American males, it is important to pay attention to larger social and political factors that impact the lived realities of these students (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, & Jennings, 2010). Critical race theory and methodology is the theoretical framework for this study.

Critical race theory in education has a multidisciplinary origin. It is primarily grounded in critical legal studies, however it also borrows from critical pedagogy, Black Studies, Chicano Studies, Black feminist and Chicana feminist thought, multiculturalism and multicultural education (Lynn & Parker. 2006). Ladson Billings and Tate (1995) introduced critical race theory into education in an attempt to advance research and theory where issues of race were concerned. In this initial article, the authors argued that race was under-theorized in education and that studies at the time did not have a way to
discuss race that would move the field forward. Critical race theory draws from a broad base of literature in law, sociology, history, etc. (Yosso, 2005). Critical race theory serves as a challenge to the dominant discourse on race. Critical race theory, as it was founded in law, holds the following tenets:

• Racism has been a normal daily fact of life in society and the ideology and assumptions of racism are ingrained in the political and legal structures as to be almost unrecognizable. Legal racial designations have complex, historical and socially constructed meanings that insure the political inferiority of racially marginalized groups;

• As a form of oppositional scholarship, CRT challenges the experience of White European Americans as the normative standard; CRT grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive contextual experiences of people of color and develops, through the use of narrative knowledge and story-telling, to challenge the existing social construction of race; and

• CRT attacks liberalism and the inherent belief in the law to create an equitable just society. CRT advocates have pointed out the irony and the frustrating legal pace of meaningful reform that has eliminated blatant hateful expressions of racism, yet, kept intact exclusionary relations of power as exemplified by the legal conservative backlash of the courts, legislative bodies, voters, etc., against special rights for racially marginalized groups (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Critical race scholars have worked for more than a decade exploring the theoretical and methodological significance of CRT as well as its role and links to education (Lynn & Parker, 2006). The above description of the historical view of CRT paints a picture of how race and racism have impacted law and policy in this country. Racism is so ingrained in our culture that it is almost invisible. However, just like the wind, you may not be able to see it, but you feel it and know it is present. Unfortunately, white privilege protects people from having to see it. Because race and racism is so ingrained in society, they are also present in every structure of society, including education. If some people are racist and some racist people create policies that inform educational practices, then educational policy and practices are in effect contaminated by racism. CRT calls into
question racism and attempts to expose it and all forms of injustice. Critical race researchers attempt to disrupt master narratives and interrupt the processes of reproducing white supremacist, racially biased outcomes. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) argue that these notions attempt to hide the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in society. “A critical race methodology in education challenges White privilege, rejects notions of “neutral” research or “objective” researchers, and exposes deficit informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color” (Delgado Bernal, 1998 in Solorzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 28). This uncovering of the latent functions of the educational and racial systems allow for marginalized populations to have their lived experiences and stories validated. CRT is not the means used to validate—these stories and experiences are already valid—but is used as a mechanism for moving the experiences form the margin to center.

Overview of the Dissertation

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 introduce the dissertation and set the foundation on which the data and my analysis rest. This dissertation utilizes literature on the social and academic experiences of Black youth, urban education, the school-to-prison pipeline, critical race theory, and hip-hop and youth resistance. After my review of relevant literature I present my research methods and my reflective analysis of my role as the researcher. I also included information on some of the “speed bumps” experienced throughout the process. After the methods section, I present three data chapters based on my findings from participant observation, focus groups, and individual interviews with students and teachers at the Arnita Grace Academy.
Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of the dissertation showcase the data and my analysis from the articulated experiences of the participants in my study. Chapter 4, “This was our school first!” Being Educated in a Dismantled Space, explores the process and reasons given for dismantling a school. I focus on the experiences of the students and teachers in the dismantled school space and center the voices of the individuals impacted by the top-down reform mandates. I argue that students and families impacted by reform efforts should be involved in the decision making process. Their lack of involvement is disrespectful and is an example of their lack of control over their educational lives. The experiences of the students in the dismantled space are the focal point of this chapter.

Chapter 5, “All Eyes on Me”: Discipline, Surveillance, and the Control of Black Male Bodies, explores the lack of control that exists in the school space. It also critiques the policies of control, discipline, and punishment in this dismantled school. I argue that students are rendered powerless and are exposed to policies of control that maintain white supremacy and the continuation of a subordinate population. These notions of control and exclusionary discipline practices are complicit in maintaining the school-to-prison pipeline and in essence, the school serves as a prison preparatory institution (PPI). In Chapter 6, The 3 R’s in a Dismantled Urban School: Relationships, Respect, and Resistance, the final data chapter, I present the argument that as a result of limited opportunities to control their educational destinies students find ways to resist authority and create their own spheres of influence in school. In these spaces, respect and relationships become important and respect is the currency that is traded in this counter-cultural place within the schooling context. Students demand respect from peers as well as adults and when respect is not given, or students are “dissed” (disrespected), conflict
arises. The data from students show the importance of positive student-teacher relationships on the educational experiences of the Black males in this study. Finally, in this countercultural space, students use hip-hop as a medium for resistance and maintenance of sanity. I argue that students use hip-hop in a way that is in line with Kelley’s (2002) notion of the Black radical imagination and what Prier (2010) terms a counter-space of resistance.

In Chapter 7, the final chapter, I summarize the dissertation as a work that reveals the complexity of school and its impact on the lives of Black male youth living in and being educated in underserved environments. I discuss lessons learned during the process and give suggestions for students, parents, teachers, and administrators to consider when making policy decisions, working with youth, and connecting with youth. I offer ways in which we can develop programs targeted to getting youth actively involved in their educational futures. Youth in this study were situated as the experts of their reality and were able to offer complex articulations of issues impacting their lives. The voice of Black youth must be valued in educational spaces.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter consists of literature that helped to frame the dissertation project. My review of selected literature will cover the following areas: Black males and urban schools; Black racial identity development; oppositional culture; the school-to-prison pipeline; critical race theory; hip-hop and youth resistance; and Black masculinity. There are a number of research areas to be considered when doing work with Black males in urban settings. The selected areas of focus are what I feel are the most important for the project. This chapter should be seen as a review of selected literature that was important for the framing of this study.

My interests for the dissertation are connected to understanding the lived experiences of the students in this study. Even though most of the time I spent with the students took place within the school setting, I understand they have complicated lives and influences outside of the school space. Since this is the case, it is important to have a collection of literature that engages the Black male perspective from multiple vantage points. There is no essentialized Black experience, so the multiple lenses, studies, and theories are important in gaining a clearer understanding of the lives of Black male youth in a United States context.

The review of the literature was guided by the experiences of the students as well as my observations during the time of the study. There were a number of occurrences and experiences that aided in my selection of this literature. Since I was working with
young males in an urban school setting it was imperative for me to engage the literature on the experiences of Black males in urban schools. In addition to the experiences in these educational settings, the academic achievement gap is often discussed and is connected to educational experiences of Black youth. I engaged with the school-to-prison pipeline literature as a result of the disciplinary practices I witnessed during my time in the school. I also worked with some students who had been arrested and involved with the criminal justice system. Their involvement often stemmed from incidents within the school space. Scholarship on critical race theory was important because it provided a foundation for understanding how race and racist practices intersect in the school space in addition to how the policies and practices, often racialized, impact the lives of students in school and in their neighborhoods. Lastly, I briefly engage with scholarship on hip-hop culture and youth resistance. When interviewing and spending time with the young men in this study, it became evident that hip-hop played a large role in their lives. This relationship to hip-hop, went beyond just musical enjoyment, and also included tools of resistance and survival for these students.

Again, this is not an exhaustive representation of the literature on the social and academic experiences of Black males, but it should serve to frame the work carried out in this dissertation project. More literature will be engaged in the remaining chapters to support and at times reiterate the main points that exist in previous scholarship on my selected topics.
Black Male Experiences in a U.S. Context

Concerns about the lived experiences and perceived pathology of Black males have remained important topics for educators, researchers, policy analysts, and the general public. These often-unqualified perceptions of Black male pathology tend to be divorced from an analysis of the social and structural obstacles facing many Black males. For instance, in his 2008 edited volume on poor, young, Black males in society, Elijah Anderson argues, “Living in areas of concentrated ghetto poverty, still shadowed by slavery and second-class citizenship, many Black males are trapped in a cycle that includes active discrimination, unemployment, crime, poverty, prison, and early death” (p. 3). When a few act out violently to these forms of oppression, with media assistance, the implications for other Black men is expansive. As a result, Black males are assumed violent and untrustworthy, simply based on their skin color. The image of the Black male is seen with fear and suspicion.

As previously discussed in the introductory chapter, Duncan (2002) argues that Black males suffer a condition characteristic of a population that is beyond love. This is: “a condition of those who are excluded from society’s economy and networks of care and thus expelled from useful participation in social life…Black males are constructed as a strange population… as a group with values and attitudes that are fundamentally different from other students, their marginalization and oppression are understood as natural and primarily of their own doing” (p. 140). This description is a common occurrence for Black males in society. Many young males are targeted in decrepit school environments that have become militarized police zones for many urban centers. The schooling
environment, which some consider to be a place where gaps can be equalized, is not always conducive to success for Black students (especially males).

(Hyper)Masculinity and Black Males

The social construction of masculinity is important to understand when working with young men. Masculinity is not a biological trait, but is created and formed through social interaction (Davis, 2006). “Masculinity comprises the social and culturally constructed meanings and definitions attributed to being male” (p. 292). Children are born into a world in which they are given cues of what it means to be a boy/man and female/woman. At a young age children must learn to categorize themselves and learn the appropriate roles associated with their gendered identities (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Young men learn to regulate their emotional display. Usually emotions related to anger and dominance are accepted as manly and things considered feminine are shunned. For example, males involved in sports, police the expressions of emotions in other boys to ensure they do not show fear and pain. At an early age boys learn the acceptable behaviors related to being manly through these expressions of manhood acts, however marginalized males face a special challenge. Men in marginalized groups are often portrayed in negative and stereotypical ways. Lower-class white males are portrayed as dumb, while Black males are often portrayed as violent, lazy, criminal, and hypersexual (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). These depictions become the common understanding of society at large.

Davis (2006) stresses that it is important for us to understand and interrogate perceptions of masculinity, in particular, Black adolescent masculinity, in an effort to
understand its power and influence in the lives of Black male youth. Not only is it important to understand how students view masculinity, it is also important to understand how educators view masculinity. “Research on schools shows that teachers and administrators often stereotype African American and Latino boys as unruly, prompting increased surveillance and discipline” (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 282). Educators’ perceptions of Black masculinity impact how Black students are treated. Cultural messages about Black males carry over into schools and impact how they are read and how they experience school (Davis, 2006). As previously stated, Black males are constructed as violent and dangerous. These views of Black males not only impact how they are treated, but has severe educational consequences as a result of how they are viewed in school. Being constructed as violent and dangerous leads Black males to be punished harsher and more frequently than their peers (Ferguson, 2001). In Ferguson (2001) she grapples with the notion that the mixture of negative perceptions of Black males and their resistance to inequitable treatment in schools, leads Black males to be treated in exclusionary ways that allow them to suffer in educational institutions.

Media representations play a major role in the public perception of negativity associated with being Black and male. Black males are seen as hyper masculine, but hyper masculinity is not a normative, cultural behavior, but should be viewed as a reflective coping response to societal stressors (Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani, & Seaton, 2004). In their work, they point to the economic decline of cities and its influence on how urban boys see themselves in gendered and racial terms. Masculinity robs young men of their emotional health because of the need to continuously suppress emotions and hide behind the guise of toughness and invincibility. “In an exaggerated form, this
discordance of emotions may manifest itself as hyper masculinity: the exhibition of stereotypic gendered displays of power and consequent suppression of signs of vulnerability” (Spencer, et al., 2004, p. 234). The overly hyper displays of masculinity tend to lead to conflict in schools. For Black males, hyper masculine behavior serves as a coping response in an effort to handle the fear of being victimized. Spencer, et al. (2004) argue that few studies attempt to demonstrate the notion of hyper masculinity across race and class. This omission in the research allows Black and Latino men to be continually stigmatized by perceived aggressive behavior while white males go unexamined. Even though males of color and white males can exhibit hyper masculine behaviors, men of color are often criminalized while white men receive limited intervention (Spencer, et al., 2004). In essence, negative perceptions of hyper masculine behavior sticks to Black and Latino males but not to white males. Black masculinity is inherently viewed as hyper masculinity even though they are not the same.

Spencer, et al. (2004) state that schools and neighborhoods can be extremely stressful places for adolescents. In addition to the day-to-day stresses of being an adolescent, fear of victimization in school and in the neighborhood is a stressor for many youth, particularly Black males living in urban settings. “Fear is one of the most basic emotional states; it is evoked when one perceives a threat whether real or imagined, and it constitutes an adaptive survival response by prompting the individual to avoid potential dangers” (Spencer, et al., 2004, p. 237). Unfortunately, for urban Black males, hyper masculine posturing is used as a coping mechanism and survival tactic to guard against potential victimization. These behaviors may work in the streets, but are often not tolerated in educational settings. Coping responses can be adaptive or maladaptive
depending on the setting. Maladaptive responses (hyper masculine behavior) may provide a short-term relief from a stressor, but in the end lead to increased encounters with other stressors and increase the possibility of negative results (Spencer, et al., 2004). These coping responses in the context of the public discourse about Black males often collide in the school space in which these behaviors are viewed as threatening and lead to students being disciplined.

Black males are often viewed through a lens of cultural deficit. Their suffering and plight is viewed as their fault because of a lack of positive traits (Duncan, 2002). Gordon (1997) states:

At the heart of the Cultural Deficiency model are the ideas that the "social deviance" and poverty of poor Black males are the consequence of their own dysfunctional culture and that this culture is separate, monolithic, self-sustaining, and immutable. The view that "ghetto" culture is pathological and that the "deviant," "self-destructive" behavior assumed to be typical of African American men is both a product and cause of that cultural "web of pathology" has become a part of common sense within the academy, media, U.S public, and the Reagan/Bush/Clinton administrations' public policy apparatus (p. 37).

Black masculinity is tainted and viewed through fear and often divorced from the context of an oppressive society with structures that exist to break Black men down and keep them as a permanent underclass for which prison is a suitable resting place. It is important for researchers and educators to understand these views in the context of the inequalities that exist across race, ethnicity, gender, and class (Archer & Yamishita,
2003). Black male existence is haunted by negative perceptions and hostile treatment by those who partake in the discourse of Black hyper masculinity.

**Socioeconomic Status, Neighborhood, and Parenting Effects**

Existing as Black males in urban spaces is complicated by numerous dynamics. For example, parenting, neighborhood factors and socioeconomic status have all been linked to issues of (under) achievement in students. Students in one-parent homes and poor neighborhoods are not expected to do well and live in areas not necessarily conducive to high achievement (Entwisle and Alexander, 1995; Fisher & Kmec, 2004; Massey & Denton, 1993). Throughout history there have been changes to what we understand as family and what constitutes “family values.” Family structure has changed and there has been an increase in single mothers as heads of households (Entwisle and Alexander, 1995). During the time of their report only 58% of children lived in “traditional” families with both biological parents. For African-Americans, only 38% lived with two parents. In their study, they were looking to see what type of impact family structure had on the achievement of students and they found that differences in impact of standardized scores were a seasonal occurrence. During winters neither having two parents at home nor family socioeconomic resources impacted growth in achievement. However, during the summer when schools are closed, resources had an impact, but family structure did not. Often single parenting is used to explain the shortfall in achievement for African-American families but this study found similarities in impact for whites as well. The socioeconomic status of single mothers seems to have the greatest impact and not family make up or race.
In a move from looking at the socioeconomic status of individual families, Fisher and Kmec (2004) investigated the relationship between socioeconomic status and high school completion, but focus on overall neighborhood SES. A neighborhood is described as a subsection of a larger community; a collection of people and institutions occupying an area influenced by ecological, cultural, and sometimes political forces (Sampson, et. al., 2002). Black children are much more likely than white children to grow up in high-poverty neighborhoods and hyper-poverty neighborhoods (Gosa & Alexander, 2007). The level of family resources has an impact on a child’s level of educational attainment. Neighborhoods are also shown to play a role in the levels of attainments. For instance, Ainsworth (2002) explained that neighborhood effects often exceeded the effects of family on educational attainment. The type of neighborhood dictates the types of resources present. Neighborhoods with high concentrations of people with managerial or professional jobs are likely to provide resource rich relationships (Fisher & Kmec, 2004). Low socioeconomic neighborhoods usually provide fewer productive ties among residents. After accounting for individual and family characteristics, higher SES neighborhoods have a positive effect on school readiness and achievement (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn 2000). Massey and Denton (1993) argue that segregation plays a substantial role in maintaining levels of SES for neighborhoods. Racial segregation impacts the opportunities available to students in low SES areas. The availability, affordability and quality of service of community resources—educational, recreational activities; childcare; medical facilities; and employment opportunities—have an influence on student outcomes.
The data show that low socioeconomic status can negatively impact the academic outcome and achievement of students who live in these neighborhoods. How do we explain the (under) performance of African-Americans who are in “better off” situations and environments? Gosa and Alexander (2007) state that African-American youth from higher-income households and/or with more educated parents perform better in school than the African-American students who do not live in these environments. However these students do not perform as well as whites in similar family structures. They point to various studies illustrating the gap between high SES Blacks and whites of the same and lower SES (Ferguson, 2002; Murray & Herrnstein, 1994; Ogbu, 2003; The College Board, 1999). They ask “why” and examine the socio-historic development of the African–American middle class. They find that neighborhood segregation, schooling environment, and race continue to have a serious impact on African-American families. Although some scholars attempted to argue that gaps existed because of a deficient Black culture or genetics (Murray & Herenstein, 1994), this was not found to be the case. “These education gaps at the top partly reflect socioeconomic differentials, but more so how race limits or constrains the life chances of black parents and their children, including well-off parents and their children” (Gosa & Alexander, 2007, p. 310). The harsh reality of racial segregation and stratification impacts the educational outcomes and achievement level of African-American children.

**Parental Involvement and the Impact on Educational Outcomes**

In addition to family resources, socioeconomic status, and parental education level, parental school involvement is also touted as an important aspect for student
success. “Increased parental involvement” is often the cry of people concerned with student performance and is often one of the tenets of perceived effective reform policy. Some educators have identified the involvement of parents as a primary vehicle for improved academic achievement (Hara, 1998). Jeynes (2005) points to scholars who argue that in urban areas, in particular, parental involvement is important because of high family dissolution rates, numerous two-parent working families, and the sociological pressures facing children. In the past, families had a high degree of control over the school and played roles in hiring teachers and administrators (Hill & Taylor, 2004). By the middle of the 20th century, there was a noticeable separation between the families and schools. In this role reversal, schools were now responsible for the academic focus and families were to be responsible for the moral and cultural education of the children. Families “were responsible for preparing their children with the necessary skills in the early years, and schools took over from there with little input from families” (Hill & Taylor, 2004, p. 161). They argue that today with the heightened focus on accountability, both families and schools are responsible for children’s education at all levels. Can parental involvement really improve the educational outcomes of urban children?

Parental involvement is defined as: volunteering at school, communicating with teachers and other school personnel, assisting in academic activities at home, and attending school events, meetings of parent-teacher associations, and parent-teacher conferences (Hill & Taylor, 2004). In a meta-analysis of studies on the relation of parental involvement to elementary school academic achievement, Heynes (2005) found that parental involvement was associated with higher achievement for students of color, both boys and girls and his data show a consistent relationship between parental
involvement and the educational outcomes of urban students. He found statistically significant results for overall academic achievement as well GPA, standardized tests, and other academic measures. He states even though he found parental involvement can help to decrease the gap, researchers need to find reasons why certain aspects of involvement are more beneficial. Hill and Taylor (2004) argue that there are two main reasons why parental school involvement promotes academic achievement. They point to the increasing of social capital and social control. The additional social capital increases parents’ skills and information, which equips them with the ability to assist children in school related activities. This increase also assists with navigating the terrain of the school and building relationships and larger networks. Social control, they argue, occurs when parents and schools work together to build consensus about appropriate behavior that is then communicated to children both at home and at school. “Parents’ coming to know one another and agree on goals—both behavioral and academic—serves as a form of social constraint that reduces problem behaviors” (Hill & Taylor, 2004, p. 162).

Socioeconomic status has an impact on the levels of involvement a parent can have. A higher level of SES and education is positively associated with a greater tendency for them to advocate on their students behalf for placement in high level courses and manage their children’s education (Baker & Stevenson, 1986, in Hill & Taylor, 2004). On the other hand parents from lower SES backgrounds may face more barriers to involvement (not flexible work schedules, lack of resources, transportation issues, etc.). The unequal distribution of resources as well as schools devaluing the resources of lower SES families, can constrain the involvement options for parents (Auerbach, 2007). She points to the fact that parents of color and schools are often separated by cultural divides
as well as legacies of racism and mutual mistrust. All of these barriers hinder the involvement that many researchers and educators call for in schools. The fact that the barriers are in place is not always visible to educators and administrators and the parents are often blamed for not being involved in the children’s education. There is a myth of the uninvolved minority parent. This is the result of a narrow view of parental involvement. As previously stated there are barriers that impact the involvement of lower SES parents. Educators may not be aware of the other strategies parents employ to be involved in their students education lives; making sacrifices so children can attend better schools, or limiting chores to allow for study time (Mehan et al., 1996, in Auerbach, 2007). Parental involvement is important, and there is a need to broaden the notion of parental involvement and move from a strictly white middle class definition to recognize the multiple forms of involvement exhibited by other families. Families care and are concerned about their children’s education however their efforts often go unnoticed and are unappreciated.

School Structure, Black Males, and Educational Attainment

Few would dispute the impact schooling has on the education and life chances of a student. Educational experiences often serve as antecedents to many of the social and economic experiences students face later in life (Davis & Jordan, 1994). Thus, “inequalities in schooling experiences have potentially broad consequences for students’ future educational attainment, employment, and family relations” (p. 570). One could argue that life’s trajectory is greatly impacted by the type of school a student attends. The schooling environment is a major player in student development. According to
Davis and Jordan (1994) students develop a sense of order, place and expectations that are in part determined by the school structure and curriculum, interactions with peers, and relationships with teachers. In addition to all of these factors, race, class and gender intersect and impact the schooling experiences of children. They argue that schools are typically conceived as having two primary functions: promoting and structuring the intellectual development of students; and socializing young people for their roles and responsibilities in society. In relation to students in urban schools, or students of color, the schools are failing at this job (Duncan 2002; Ferguson 2001; Howard 2008; Noguera 2008).

Teachers and the Structure of Schools

Teachers are critical actors in the structure of schools. This structure has been shown to have a major impact on the schooling outcome of black students. Tyson (2003) argues that teachers have the responsibility of educating other people’s children (Delpit, 1995) and while doing so they reveal much of their own fear and much of their own uncertainty about how best to negotiate the realities of race for Black children in the US. Teachers are required to prepare students for a successful life as a responsible citizen, but this preparation is hindered by the social realities of inequality. If teachers are open to highlighting the “culture of power” and the rules of the “game” for students, this could assist in eradicating some of the troubles faced by both teachers and students while navigating the educational system (Tyson, 2003).

In becoming teachers, they come to be agents of the institution that is part of the dominant culture and whose interest is to reproduce the system. Although teachers have different styles, for the most part, they have all been taught to reproduce the mainstream
through the curriculum and the way in which they structure learning, evaluation, discipline, and the overall classroom environment. The system expects all teachers to operate in a particular institutionalized frame, one that defines mainstream cultural norms as not just standard, but the best (Nieto 1994). And because they have successfully negotiated the system, teachers have some evidence that accepting the expected norms works. Thus, although some teachers may resist becoming ‘agents of repression’ (MacLeod 1995), others seem to follow the prescribed norms, either because they agree with or simply do not question that position or because they understand that conformity to mainstream cultural norms is required of minority and low-income students for success in school and in the wider society. Not all teachers view teaching as a political act or see themselves as players on the political landscape. Even the ones with a more political outlook are often overwhelmed by the discourse of power that exists in school spaces. Teachers walk a tight rope when educating students and balancing the possibilities of teaching to resist and playing it safe and maintaining the status quo of the secondary function of schools. Many teachers do resist in an effort to counter narratives of what it means to be Black and deconstruct racialized stereotypes in the lives of their students. Unfortunately, these resistance strategies against the dominant ideology, at times can reinforce them (Tyson, 2003).

**Educational Disparities and the Role of the School**

Students entering schools, come in with various levels of abilities. Different family structure, neighborhood, as well as variance in socioeconomic status, make it almost impossible to expect students to enter school at the same academic levels.
Students are raised in different environments so it is plausible that this will have an impact on their academic preparation. What role does the school play in the initial disparities? Downey et al (2004) point to a number of possible options. One argument is that schools play an active role in reproducing inequalities. Advantaged children often attend schools with higher levels of resources, are assigned to higher tracks and ability groups, and enjoy more favorable interactions with teachers. A competing argument is school also serves to reduce disparities in skills between advantaged and disadvantaged students (Cremin, 1951 in Downey, et al. 2004). In this view schools are seen as an equalizer. Although these views can seem in opposition, they both can be correct (Downey, et al. 2004). Students may have poor schooling experiences, but the disadvantages in their non-school environment can be even more severe. As a result, “a disadvantaged child attending a low-quality school can enjoy a larger ‘school boost’ than an advantaged child attending a high quality school” (Downey, et al. 2004, p. 614). This means that if a disadvantaged child attends a better school, they will see a larger initial gain in achievement. Schools still favor advantaged children, yet still serve as “equalizers.” In their study (Downey, et al 2004) found that the primary source of inequality lies in non-school environments and that when in session, schooling does reduce the rate at which inequality grows. They argue that more attention needs to be paid to improving out-of-school environments for students.

As stated previously, it has been found that school can serve as an “equalizer” in certain instances regarding educational attainment. However, there are school structures and policies that reproduce, rather than equalize, inequality. There is a long tradition of scholarship documenting how educational stratification begins when children start formal
schooling or just before (Oakes, 1985; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). The early schooling years are a time when basic skills—reading and math—are developed and not acquiring these skills will force students to face an almost insurmountable handicap. They argue that early learning is a cumulative process and requires the building of basic skills. School achievement trajectories are also set at this stage and continual educational sorting takes place. Students are placed in groups constructed by perceived ability levels and once a student is placed in a group, it is not likely they will be removed or given the opportunity to move to a more advanced group. This grouping often results in racially and socioeconomically segregated classrooms (Oakes 1985; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). Often, low-income, students of color make up the majority of the remedial courses while middle-to-high income white students enroll in higher level and/or honors courses. Even with current talk and practices of giving parents and students a choice in class levels, little movement is shown in students of lower tracks advancing or selecting higher-track courses. The effects of these early tracks and sorting practices have a lasting impact on student outcomes (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993, 1996; Oakes 1985). These are the years in which students, “construct their academic self-images, and establish themselves as ‘paper personas’ with school dossiers that then shadow them up through high school and beyond” (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993; 418). These students are in effect, labeled for life.
The Path to Prison: School-to-Prison Pipeline

“The [school-to-prison] pipeline is so named because it appears actively to collect school-aged youth and funnel them toward a future in prison. The school-to-prison pipeline implicates the educational system in the structuring of a path that leads to incarceration” (Simmons, 2009, p. 229).

The perils of being involved in the criminal justice system and then facing reentry problems become visible when we take a step back and review the process youth often follow to prison. The school system is often a funnel for Black and Latino youth and structure experiences that prime these students for entry into the prison system, also referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Meiners and Winn, 2010; Simmons, 2009). Structural racism, the criminalization of Black males, race and class privilege, and zero-tolerance policies in school settings contribute to the increasing number of students being directed to prison (Monroe, 2005). The place where education is thought to take place is also a place where we see other functions of school, such as, socializing, social control, and sorting (Noguera, 2003). These latent functions of the school are powerful in helping to determine the educational and life trajectories of the students entrusted to its system on a daily basis and unfortunately, a life in prison becomes a possibility as a result of these oppressive measures. The main purpose for public schools in the context of youth of color is to ensure that this population accepts a subordinate role in schools, the economy, and society (Duncan, 2000).

Duncan (2000) argues the relationship among schooling Black males, the global economy, and the prison-industrial complex is significantly related to three main areas: the service industry, popular culture and media, and the curricula in public schools. He argues that:
These domains work through adolescents of color to construct them as a superfluous population for whom society views prison as a reasonable, if not natural option…urban pedagogies are the means by which information, images, symbols, are proliferated in, and disseminated to, urban populations. As is characteristic of all instructional processes, urban pedagogies have intention, direction, and purpose. Pedagogies are designed to forge identities by inculcating in students behaviors, attitudes and values, by mobilizing their fears, joys, and desires, and by shaping their tastes and perceptions (p. 36).

First, urban pedagogies work through adolescents of color, making them less competitive economically by subjecting them to an education that emphasizes discipline and control rather than gaining meaningful skills. Second, they work upon adolescents of color, to impact their image of themselves and how society views them, thus making them undesirable as employees. This process occurs as various media depict them as violent, lazy, and incompetent. These views allow Black males to be seen as menaces to society for whom prison is more appropriate than a good education (Raible and Irizarry, 2010; Feirman, Levick, and Mody, 2009; Tuzzolo and Hewitt, 2007). Rather than developing strategies to improve the educational standing of urban Black males, there is an alternative “solution” to the issue. As stated previously, zero-tolerance policies and the criminalization of Black males prime these young men for entry into prison. “The social and economic problems related to nonviable public secondary systems for Black and other racialized youth populations would eventually be solved, in part, by the exponential expansion of the prison industrial complex…” (Duncan, 2000, p. 33). Rather than
improving education and skill levels to make Black males “more employable,” what were once considered jobs that were reserved for poor Blacks can now be outsourced or “in-sourced” to correctional facilities. The prison industrial complex has benefitted from increased funding while our most needy urban educational centers have been the victims of repeated budget cuts. For example, from 1984-2000 in the U.S., every state spent six times more funds on prison than on higher education (Meiners, 2011). States have been investing large amounts of their budgets in the maintenance and development of the prison system while urban students suffer in decrepit educational institutions. Approximately $70 billion is spent annually to place adults in prison, hold youth in detention centers, and to supervise 7.3 million people on probation and parole (Hawkins, 2010).

In schools, the neediest children are often punished as the system tends to focus on managing student behaviors and controlling their bodies rather than educating them (Noguera, 2003). The focus on discipline and punishment is falsely considered more central to the schools success and quality education often takes a back seat to the other priorities of control. Under this regime of control, students are often labeled as behavioral problems resulting in a stigma that tends to follow them throughout their school experiences. Some researchers show that the practice of labeling along with exclusionary discipline practices have the potential to create a self-fulfilling prophecy that often results in negative student behaviors that become habitual (Noguera, 2003). As students internalize the label placed upon them by the institution, they are perceptive enough to begin to notice that their educational trajectories will not get them to the same levels as others and begin to view school as a waste of time. “Once they know that the rewards of
education—namely, acquisition of knowledge and skills and ultimately, admission to college, and access to good paying jobs—are not available to them, students have little incentive to comply with school rules (Noguera, 2003, p. 343). School teaches them, in other words, that it is not here to work for them.

In addition, the disciplinary practices in schools closely resemble our approach to crime in the larger society. We attempt to remove the “bad apples” before they spoil the rest. These exclusionary practices keep students out of the classroom and are seen as methods that allow the students that “want to learn” the space to do so without being distracted by the students who are assumed to have no interest in learning. Seldom are the institutional barriers to student learning called into question. Schools, for these students, serve as places where oppression and repression are reified. Not only do they face these harsh realities in the world, but the school re-inscribes their second-class citizenship and reproduces systems of inequity. Not only are inequalities reproduced in urban educational spaces, but as previously argued these tactics are part of the prepping for students to enter the prison industrial complex (see for example, Ferguson, 2001, for a powerful study of how schools prep Black boys to become “bad boys” in this pipeline).

Exclusionary Discipline

One of the ways in which students are pushed out of school and into prison is through the criminalization of their behaviors and harsh disciplinary practices. Research reveals that Black students receive harsher punishments than their peers, often for the same offenses (Monroe, 2005). The disciplinary inequalities are most evident in relation to Black boys (Ferguson, 2001). When students attempt to resist the draconian policies in
school they are often met with swift punishment. Schools aim to suppress student resistance and use harsh disciplinary practices to maintain a population of docile bodies (Foucault, 1995). Schools make efforts to quell resistance through the increased use of zero tolerance policies. Originally these policies, derived from the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act, were crafted to deal with more serious violations, but they are often used to control student resistance and minor behavioral issues (Meiners, 2011). As time progressed, federal funding became contingent upon schools adopting these behavioral policies. Schools along with federal mandates have often expanded the policies to include minor infractions (Nolan, 2011). The dependency on zero tolerance discipline policies has not benefited students as many of the sanctions are tarnished by discriminatory practices that can be traced through race-based biases evident in the system of disciplinary practice. In addition to the rise in suspensions and expulsions for Black youth, with the increase in police occupation of schools, acts of resistance and other behavioral violations have been criminalized. Police officers and the courts now handle violations that were once covered by school administrators.

The model used in urban schools with police officers was based on problem-oriented community policing that has extended the criminal justice system into school buildings by creating partnerships with law enforcement agencies (Kupchik & Bracy, 2010). Most of the officers in schools are armed and uniformed, with some who wear plain clothes. Their presence is supposed to give off a perception of safety and to quell concerns about school violence. The number of police officers is continuing to grow. By 1999, more than half of our nation’s public middle and high schools reported having officers. By 2005, the number increased to approximately 68 percent (Kupchik & Bracy,
2010). An interesting fact is that suburban schools, where many violent incidents have occurred, tend to avoid the heavy reliance of surveillance levied against urban schools (Hirschfield, 2010). According to Hirschfield (2010), the increased presence of police officers and metal detectors in urban schools tend to reinforce racial, gender, and socioeconomic disparities in educational outcomes, school suspensions, and arrests. He further argues that “…the resultant disproportionate policing and surveillance of urban minority students functions to prepare such students for their rightful positions in the postindustrial order, whether as prisoners, soldiers, or service sector workers” (p. 40). The school does not only push students into the criminal justice system, but in a way has come to resemble prisons in the ways in which they function.

Black male students are often seen as deficits rather than possibilities and are pushed aside to exist as a superfluous population for which prison seems like a real possibility...an inevitable stop to the journey of life. The most important question to address is “What are we doing to prevent these realities for students?” Unfortunately, the treatment of students in school exposes the reality that some students are on their way to a life of prison and second-class citizenship as if there is nothing that can be done through the school to change their trajectory. The current reality is that school practices are clearing a path for certain populations, mainly poor people of color, to march towards entry into the prison industrial complex. Even the numerous reform efforts, including the rise of charter and for-profit schools, have done little to interrupt the functioning of the pipeline.

The recent “tough-on-crime” policies have ushered in an increase in incarceration of youth and this increase in people entering the prison system has also increased the
numbers of former prisoners reentering society (Mears & Travis, 2004). According to Mears and Travis (2004) we are facing the reality of reintegrating approximately 200,000 youth and young adults ages 24 and younger, who return home each year and the transition from prison to citizen may be more difficult for young people. Many of these youth are returning from institutions that taught them how to be prisoners, to underserved neighborhoods that were influential in them initially getting “caught up” in the system.

**Black Adolescent Psychology and Identity In Relation to Academic Achievement**

Concerns about the academic experiences and achievement level of African-American males have remained an important topic for educators, researchers, policy makers, and the general public. In order to fully address the concerns of African-American males and their educational achievement, there must be a move beyond focusing solely on social factors or environmental factors. Psychologists have addressed African-American self-perception and identity development (Cokley 2000, 2003; DeCuir-Gunby 2009; Duncan, 2005). For African-Americans, racial identity consists of some shared physical attributes as well as shared racial experiences (social, economic, and political). Black Racial Identity (BRI) has been explored in a multitude of academic disciplines: psychology, sociology, and education. Although BRI has been studied in these disciplines, scholars in each field have all used different approaches to analyze racial identity. Psychologists have focused on attitudes about identity; sociologists have focused on collective racial identity; and educational researchers have focused on power and policy as it relates to identity (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). Although there are different focal points, most researchers in the area of identity were influenced (positively or
negatively) by the racial identity model of William E. Cross Jr. The initial identity model was produced by Cross in 1971 and later revamped in 1995. Cross conceptualized what he thought was the “black experience” in his development of the model of psychological Nigrescence (Cross, 2001). In this model, he aims to describe the process of becoming Black by a full embracement of Black Identity and reaching “self-actualization” under oppressive conditions. The model involves a continuum consisting of five stages of development ranging from a negative to a positive self-identity:

- Pre-encounter (pro-white/anti-black self and outlook)
- Encounter (questioning of pro-white/anti-black self and outlook)
- Immersion-Emersion (embracing Blackness and development of anti-white sentiments)
- Internalization (racial understanding)
- Internalization-Commitment (commitment to black identity and racial understanding) (Cross, 1971, 1995).

The model was expanded to address concerns from scholars on the simplicity of the original model. Even with the revision, some scholars still disagree with the “simplistic” notion of what it means to be Black. The model is setup in a way that assumes there is a specific way that all Black people develop their identity. This simplification privileges certain identities (e.g., the types of identities that are discussed in his original model) over others and ignores the multiplicity of Black experiences (DeCuir-Gunby 2009). Duncan (2005) is highly critical of the Cross Model. He argues that the studies and supporters of this model attempt to legitimize the development of Black youth in a way that reinforces the supremacy of middle-class white American
culture by establishing the values of the concept of “respectability” as the highest stage of human development. The use of this model or similar models reinforces the dominant ideology of how a person should act or progress as a responsible citizen.

In other words, when it comes to studying the subjective processes of black students, the focus is largely on race relations. This focus has both theoretical and methodological problems. Theoretically speaking, the idea of race relations, as commonly understood, implies acceptance of the beliefs that racial categories in the United States are fixed and are defined by biological factors. Viewing the construct of race in this manner ignores the political dimension, or the relations of power, that accounts for the color-coded stratification of cultures in society and that gives race its significance in the United States. Much of the research in this area situates Black students as a population that can only benefit from remediation in classes and assimilation into white cultural norms. Assimilation is pushed as one of the only viable options for success and decreasing any gaps. Duncan (2005) concludes with an important thought for researchers interested in Black identity and schooling to consider: “Clearly, the lives of these young people do not fit the models of black identity that purport to explicate their subjective processes. At what cost to them and, indeed, to the broader society do we marginalize and erase their realities in our research” (p. 20). It is important to understand that Black students are not a monolithic group and do not fit neatly into established models of Black identity development.

DeCuir-Gunby (2009) describes two specific environmental factors that influence Black Identity: White Educators and Peers. She also discusses the relationship between academics and racial identity. She argues that educators, including both white teachers
and administrators have an impact on the identity development of African-American students. She points to research that documents how white teachers treat their students differently depending on their perceived academic abilities, gender, and race as well as research documenting black students and their perceptions of lowered teacher expectations in regards to their ability. The lack of Black teachers (even though some practice similar methods as white educators), culturally sensitive teachers, and Black representation in school curriculum all impact students’ racial identity development and academic performance. Because of historical and current issues of prejudice, discrimination, and the institutionalization of racism in every aspect of the society—including the educational system—African-American students experience difficulty in defining themselves racially in relation to academics. With the noted impact of race and racial identity on academic identity it is important for students to develop a positive sense of self. This development is often aided by the development of close-knit peer groups that are organized around specific characteristics. Students have a need to belong and feel connected so they tend to group with peers that they feel share the most characteristics which in turn increases their chances of being accepted. For students of color in educational settings, the main characteristic is race (Tatum, 1997). These group associations within the racial group are “comforting” for black students being educated in a racially hostile environment. The social support is needed to counteract the negative experiences of black students (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009).

In addition to developing a positive racial identity for success, students must also develop a positive academic self-concept. Black students value a strong racial identity and this identity is related to academic motivation and achievement (Cokley, 2001).
Academic self-concept is how a student views his academic ability when compared with other students and consists of attitudes, feelings and perceptions about one’s academic skills. Self-appraisals such as this are assumed to be related to motivation and achievement because individuals who think well of themselves are believed to be more motivated to succeed (Graham, 1994, in Cokley, 2003). Cokley (2003) finds that academic self-concept is correlated with academic achievement and intrinsic motivation. “When individuals see themselves as academically and intellectually capable students, and when this idea is reinforced by teachers and family…they are more likely to want to do well in school” (Cokley, 2003, p. 530).

An important addition to the study of black students, academics, and racial identity is stereotype threat. This concept is defined as “the event of a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs that becomes self-relevant; it is usually as a plausible interpretation for something one is doing, for an experience one is having, or for a situation one is in, that has relevance to one’s self-definition (Steele, 1997, p. 616). Stereotype threat can occur when a black student identifies with an academic area (or subject) and stereotypes also exist regarding blacks and their performance in that academic area. For example, this awareness of the stereotype can have an impact on the performance of the student as well as have a negative impact on the student’s self-concept. This impact can have detrimental consequences on the academic outcomes of students in educational settings.

Black Racial Identity Theory is an important theoretical framework to use when addressing academic outcomes for black male students. Societal/social structures, culture, and educational institutions are often analyzed however the racial identity
development and the academic self-concept must not be overlooked for a site of analysis in relation to the academic performance of marginalized groups.

**Oppositional Culture and School Performance**

In an effort to explain the (under) performance of Black students in schools, several researchers build on the theory of oppositional culture (OCT) and argue that African-Americans and other oppressed groups utilize their own cultural resources to defend against oppression under internal colonialism (Fordham & Ogbu 1986, Mitchell & Feagin 1995, Martinez 1997, Ginwright 2004). According to Fordham & Ogbu (1986), the low school performance of Black children stems from the following factors: “first, white people provide them with inferior schooling and treat them differently in school; second, by imposing a job ceiling, white people fail to reward them adequately for their educational accomplishments in adult life; and third, Black Americans develop coping devices which, in turn, further limit their striving for academic success” (p. 179).

Scholars heavily debate the findings of Ogbu and Fordham. One would be hard-pressed to find a theory aimed at explaining racial/ethnic gaps in school performance that has sparked more interest and debate in the past 30 years (Downey, 2008). In this work they discuss the academic experiences of Black Americans and the “burden of acting white” some face in a school context.

Fordham & Ogbu (1986) argue that Black Americans develop a collective/social identity in opposition to their treatment by Whites. For instance Black Americans develop a sense of “peoplehood” because their negative experiences are seen as a collective experience. This fictive kinship is a symbol of the collective identity of Black
people. In addition to this identity development, these groups also develop a negative cultural frame that maintains a barrier between them and the dominant group. This leads to certain members of the group associating certain behaviors and activities as being inappropriate for them because the behaviors and activities are seen as being White. Behaviors that are not considered to be a part of the lives of Whites are valued.

“Individuals who try to behave like whites or try to cross cultural barriers or ‘act white’ face opposition from their peers” (p. 182). These oppositional frames enter into school which can be interpreted as a place to learn the White cultural frame which can negatively impact their own cultural identity. They argue that this group sees being successful in school as a white frame of reference and as a result, the minority group fails to put forth the proper effort needed for good academic performance. They posit that students who perform well have to camouflage their academic success from their peers in order to avoid negative sanctioning (being labeled a braniac or considered “acting white”). Coping with the burden of acting white has a negative impact on the academic performance of Black students.

Some supporters of OCT find that pursuing academic excellence is a burden to black students and that oppositional culture does exist in minority peer groups (Farkas, Lleras, and Mczuga, 2001). In response to this burden, they agree that students reduce academic effort and use other outlets such as sports to protect themselves from peers and avoid sanctioning. Another supporter of OCT Mickelson (1990) describes an attitude-achievement paradox in relation to the schooling of Black students. She questions why Black students continue to say that “education is important,” but act in a manner that shows little relation to their positive, verbalized attitude about education; thus, the
attitude-achievement paradox. She argues that student attitudes toward education take two forms. Their abstract attitudes are those based in the American view that education is the best tool to get ahead and maintain upward mobility. The abstract beliefs are mainly ideological and reflect widely accepted notions of the American dream and are general “faith” statements. Their concrete attitudes are defined by the experiences of being raced and classed in society. This is not the major belief system and it is based in the experiences of people and can be similar or different from the dominant ideology. These beliefs are not tied to generalizations about the world and are based in the realities of lived experiences. These concrete beliefs that are developed from the “real” experiences of minorities have a greater impact on academic achievement than that of their abstract beliefs (Mickelson, 1990).

Perceived Oppositional Culture

Opponents of OCT such as Downey (2008) argue against dismissing the attitudes of Black students because of a perceived attitude-achievement paradox. He claims that there are other issues that have a greater impact on underrepresented groups’ educational experiences than their attitudes or beliefs. He looks at social structures that have continued an attempt to keep Blacks as a permanent underclass as well as weaknesses in literature attempting to explain the achievement gap without considering all social and structural possibilities. In response to the “acting white” argument levied by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), researchers have found conflicting evidence on this phenomenon. The idea of “acting white”, although widely accepted, has been oversimplified (Horvat & Lewis, 2003). Some researchers overlook all of the forces that connect and impact the
academic achievement and educational experiences of Black youth. Lundy (2003) argues that acting white taunts from peers have more to do with speech, dress and style than academic effort and performance. “Rather than a rejection of academic success, cultural agency is at the heart of Black students’ resistance to acting white…Black students are seeking liberation from the destructive grips of white supremacy and are seeking a culturally affirming way of being human” (Lundy, 2003, p. 451). For Lundy, OCT is “antithetical to an African world view” as it views the traits of pride, connection to the black community, and nationalism as detrimental to the success of Black youth. OCT is part of deficit discourse that looks at students as inherently problematic and pathologic, while ignoring the racist, white supremacist structures and social obstacles as the major blocks to student success.

**Reframing Oppositional Culture**

Being a product of imperial domination and mis-education creates an environment for students to rebel against a Eurocentric approach to schooling, which is not necessarily a sign of low intellectual ability (Akom 2008, 2009; Ginwright 2004; Martinez 1997). This view of oppositional culture frames youth participation in creating oppositional spaces as a form of agency. Hip-hop serves as a space where youth define what counts as important and necessary for social and mental survival. For some scholars (Akom 2008, 2009; Prier, 2010) hip-hop is seen as a way for people to resist the dominant culture and create a space for marginalized groups. “Non-European groups…draw on their own cultures to resist oppression under dominant ideologies and, in turn, influence the dominant culture…their music, among other cherished aspects of culture become viable
forms of opposition” (Martinez, 1997, p. 268). This form of opposition is not a rejection of academic success, but a tool used to preserve the humanity of the oppressed group, and a show of agency in choosing what will be accepted as knowledge. Enslaved Africans were in constant fear of white retaliation, so they developed behaviors created as intentional tools to deceive the white power structure with coded or covert behaviors that criticized the dominant ideology and power establishment. “Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion…[that] quite often serve as the cultural glue that fosters communal resistance,” (Rose, 1994, p. 100). Black popular culture expression is a form of oppositional culture that stands in the face of perceived discrimination, racism and urban decay (Rose, 1994). This view of oppositional culture is not just a move to exist outside of the dominant culture, but also a move to create spaces and structures that allow for the defining of one’s own existence without being measured by the ruler of whiteness and supposed normalcy.

Marginalized students in these created spaces are not just victims, but are agents of choice concerning their personal liberation and destiny. These oppositional moves and developments should not be oversimplified and seen as reactionary tactics, but as revolutionary, progressive action in the face of marginalization and oppression. Using urban youth culture and hip-hop as scapegoats for the roots of all social ills and obstacles facing young Black males, as some scholars who believe in OCT do, is shortsighted and removes the focus from an educational and social system that has repeatedly failed students, with a higher concentration of this failure residing in urban centers (Anyon
1997; Kozol 1991, 2005; Oakes 1985). Many studies on Black male students in schools have focused on an analysis of educational outcomes and failure, resistance, accommodation, and reform (Allen, 2010). These studies have highlighted the experiences of Black males in school and the ways in which they are marginalized in the educational system. Students are suffering in an environment that situates them as a problem and is not conducive to their holistic growth and development. Students are continuously bombarded with negatives images, words, and actions. These assaults cannot be disregarded and must be understood as having a cumulative effect on the academic and social outcomes of young black males.

**Hip-Hop Culture and Urban Youth**

Youth use hip-hop as a form of oppositional culture that resists their marginalization in schools and society at large. This culture was created as a form of resistance to mainstream practices and resonated with urban youth across the nation and now around the globe. Hip-hop has musical, linguistic, and cultural roots that go beyond the United States and was born out of struggle during a time of economic and social ruin. The postindustrial Bronx in the 1970s provided the fodder for the creation of this culture (Clay, 2003; Rose, 1994). White flight, high unemployment rates, poverty, dilapidated living conditions, drugs, gangs, and crime had a profound impact on New York City urban centers (Chang, 2005). The Bronx was a vivid example of the destruction caused by failed urban policy, structural racism, and faulty economic programs. Life for young Black and Latino youth residing in the Bronx was pernicious. These youth suffered in a city with staggering youth unemployment rates, with decrepit educational structures, and
over-policed communities (Chang, 2005). Without stable employment or hope, youth generated hip-hop to provide them a sense of empowerment, to raise their opposition to the institutions and social actors responsible for the stark realities coloring their lives, and to provide a sense of community and social support.

Since this time, hip-hop has grown to become the language and culture of young people around the globe. Once thought of as a passing fad, hip-hop culture has emerged into a multibillion dollar industry that has invaded spaces once opposed to its presence. Fashion labels, alcohol manufacturers, food companies, and insurance companies all have tapped the marketability and coolness that has been linked to world of hip hop and associated with Black urban youth. The hyper-commodification of Black cultural expression has narrowed the presentation of the “true” culture to a point where the only representation shown is that which is deemed financially viable by a corporately driven market. Unlike in its early generative days when hip-hop was aligned with the cultural practices produced by Black urban youth, hip-hop is more reflexive of the ideals constructed by corporate leaders, who use hip hop to sell their products and services to youth across the globe (Petchauer, 2009).

Hip-hop has also been perceived as violent and detrimental to the lives of the Black community and other people of color. Many blame hip-hop for social problems and view it as a poison infecting American culture. Scholars such as Sullivan (2003) posit that anti-rap sentiments are veiled anti-Black sentiments. These anti-rap sentiments are framed differently from those that attack, although rarely, white musicians and their musical content (Binder, 1993). Rap has been blamed for youth violence, the rise of gangs, drug use, and violence against women, because of the prevalence of some
“commercialized” rap lyrics that contain violent and misogynistic messages (Dixon and Brooks, 2002; Reyna, Brant, and Viki, 2009). In this faulty, one-dimensional analysis, critics fail to acknowledge unjust social policies and forces that create environments of violence in underserved communities. America’s infatuation with violence, as evidenced in the entertainment industry is also overlooked (Richardson and Scott, 2002). Violent material is aggressively marketed to youth through video games, movies, and music. The violence present in music is not limited to rap music although with the amount of outrage related to rap music, other genres are able to market violence invisibly under the figurative “respectability and decency” radar. This violence is not exclusive to hip-hop culture, but to the larger American culture of violence.

Hip-hop has grown out of urban spaces and is now utilized in educational settings. Petchauer (2009) lists three ways that hip-hop has become relevant to education and educational research. He posits that teachers are increasingly centering rap texts in urban high school curricula; Hip-hop is more than just music and is tied to identity formation for youth and young adults; and increasingly more academic institutions are adding hip-hop courses to their listings. The prominence of hip-hop forces scholars to critically engage with the culture and gain an understanding in order to connect with youth. Hip-hop is the dominant language of youth culture (Akom, 2008), but educators should not ignore the negative aspects of the culture. We must “engage youth in constructive dialogue in the context of educational success. The alternative is to ignore, or even worse, invalidate the values and life experiences of many urban youth,” (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2010, p. 15).
Although some feel hip-hop and youth popular culture are detrimental to the academic success of youth, not all share this same critique (Akom, 2008; Binder, 1993; Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Irizarry, 2009; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Prier & Beachum, 2008; Sealy-Ruiz & Green 2010; Williams, 2009). For example, Morrell & Duncan-Andrade (2002) argue that as classrooms across the US become more diverse, new ways of engaging students must be developed in order to meet the challenge of educating youth and hip-hop can be used to aid in the creation of new educational practices. They invoke Freire and state that the raising of critical consciousness in people who have been oppressed is a first step in having them gain a “critical literacy” and liberation from oppressive ideologies. They argue that critical analysis of rap texts develops skills that can be applied to other subject areas. The analysis of rap lyrics can also serve as a catalyst for discussions of issues facing urban youth.

**Critical Race Theory and Methodology**

A major tenet of CRT is counter-storytelling or producing counter-narratives. These counter-narratives are told by people of color to go against or counter the master narratives that exist (Lopez, 2003). Critical race theorists argue that counter-narratives should be captured by the researcher, experienced by the research participants, and told by people of color (Milner, 2007). Race and racism are placed at the center of the narrative and counter-narrative in critical race theory. Critical race theory in education challenges the dominant ideology and centralizes the experiential knowledge of the research participants (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). The “ideology of racism” maintains the master narrative. “It is within the context of racism that “monovocal” stories about the
low educational achievement and attainment of students of color are told” (p. 29). Knowledge construction, naming one’s own reality, and the voices of people of color are central to critical race theory. Theorists argue that the tenets of critical race theory make it an important tool for dismantling the oppressive state of the educational system as it relates to people of color. It allows and enables scholars to ask the important question of what racism has to do with educational inequalities (Howard, 2008). CRT “examines racial inequalities in educational achievement in a more probing manner than multicultural education, critical theory, or achievement gap theorists by centering the discussion of inequality within the context of racism” (Howard 2008, p. 963). CRT applied to education also serves as a framework to challenge and dismantle prevailing notions of fairness, meritocracy, colorblindness, and neutrality in the education of students of color (Parker, Dehyle, & Villenas, 1999). Howard (2008) argues that CRT has the potential to enable a dialogue to take place in the educational research community that has occurred in Black homes, neighborhoods, churches, barber shops, and communal gatherings for years. “The inclusion of a CRT framework is warranted in education when one considers the perennial underachievement of African-American males in U.S. schools” (Howard 2008, p. 964).

As previously stated, black males are often discussed in educational literature, but their actual voices are often missing from the central analysis (Howard, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz & Green, 2010). In an educational context, a method that is similar to counter-storytelling is the concept of student voice. A number of studies point to the importance of centering the voices of youth which is also an aim of CRT. Howard (2001) argues that if the policies and practices in school are created with students’ best interests in mind,
there is no reason for their voices not to be centered. “The scant attention paid to students’ voice is inexcusable given their role as the primary clientele in K-12 schools” (p. 132). As the “primary clientele” in school settings, students should have the space to articulate the concerns, needs, and desires for their education. Students have the ability to understand and articulate in complicated ways, their lived realities in educational settings (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006; Fielding, 2001; Howard, 2001; Lincoln, 1995; Mitra, 2001, 2004, 2009; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2010). “Because youth are keenly aware of the problems that face their communities and their schools, student voice initiatives can help to foster educational change” (Mitra, 2001, p. 313). This focus on student voice does not come without complications. Researchers that assert student voice as uniform run the risk of not seeing differences among students, their outlooks, and their needs (Cook-Sather, 2006). Furthermore, it is understood that in the traditional school setting students and teachers are not treated as equals with the same authority to make fundamental changes (Fielding, 2004). In order for the inclusion of student voice to move beyond rhetorical calls for their inclusion, teachers have to be willing and open to hearing and honoring these voices (Lincoln, 1995). She argues, “…too little emphasis is placed on eliciting and negotiating students’ contributions to curriculum and on demonstrating how students can help to structure their own learning experiences” (p. 89). The experiences and voices of youth are important to educational research. Silencing the voices of students in educational research has led to misguided theories, programs, and practices (Howard, 2002).

Opponents of CRT in education critique the emphasis on racism and move to focus on class-based and gender-based theories that look at racialization as one of a
number of “unfortunate byproducts” of our capitalist society (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). However there is a need to focus on the intersections of oppression. Focusing on just class or gender is insufficient when explaining the experiences of people of color. Race and racialization are major parts of the lived experiences of people of color. Other critics of CRT and counter-storytelling argue that narratives may not always be “true” or “objective” (Farber and Sherry, 1995, as referenced in Fernandez, 2002). These opponents of CRT argue that the stories told by these marginalized groups may have a political agenda or may not be accurate. Hidden in these claims are questions of research objectivity (Fernandez, 2002). What is objectivity in research and what makes it objective? Most qualitative researchers understand that all research is subjective and our subjectivity is a part of our research practices. “Educators and scholars who use CRT…should be aware that stories or narratives are mediated communicative events…stories are constructed; there is no pure, complete story out there waiting to be recorded. Such a story can never be captured nor does it exist. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the value of such stories as testimonies to racism and other forms of oppression” (Fernandez, 2002, p. 51). CRT allows researchers to look at experiences of marginalized people and their responses to oppression in and out of school as “valid and necessary” forms of data. If methodologies have been used to silence, then methodologies can also give voice to people of color and “turn the margins into places of transformative resistance” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 39). Being able to voice their own realities while being situated as experts has the potential of being a cathartic and transformative outcome from the use of a critical race methodology in social and educational research.
Critical Race Theory and Research in Sociology and Education

CRT guides the dissertation project. In addition, it is important to highlight literature that uses CRT as a methodology and theory. In this next section, I will review studies that employ CRT as a methodology in qualitative research with underrepresented groups. CRT methodology is a “framework for conducting research on the work and lives of marginalized people that illuminates social inequalities (Lynn, 2002, p. 123). Using CRT as a method is important because in addition to offering a critique on traditional forms of research, “it provides an important alternative to outmoded research models that inadequately explain the conditions of people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002 in Lynn, 2002, p. 123).

Harper and Davis (2012) use CRT and focus on counter-storytelling as a method to analyze the responses to equitable schooling for Black male students. They aimed to reframe the “discourse concerning Black male students who have often been regarded as opponents to structures and systems of education” (p. 106). In order to counter the dominant discourse on Black males in education the researchers used counter-narratives as a method to center the voices of the students in their study. Harper and Davis (2012) argue for the use of data to tell the stories of Black male students with the hope of disrupting master narratives related to their schooling experiences and assumed rejection of educational success. The men in their study did not reject education. When they were given a space to speak their truth, the men expressed having an appreciation and deep care for education, but also vocalized that most schools did not care about them. “Perhaps if curricula and pedagogy were culturally responsive and more closely aligned with the educational needs of Black male students, they would acquire such skills at more
equitable rates. Why would one who is made to believe he is bad at school maintain excitement about education?” (Harper & Davis, 2012, p.117). When given the opportunity to tell their stories, Black males were able to articulate their lived realities and counter the dominant discourse surrounding their educational abilities and achievements.

Chapman (2007) uses portraiture and critical race theory to evaluate success and failure in urban classrooms. For her work, CRT was important because it “allows researchers to evoke the personal, the professional, and the political to illuminate issues of race, class, and gender in education research and to create possibilities for urban school reform as social action (p. 157). In her project she discusses a teacher that gave an assignment to a diverse class of middle school students in which she asked them to trace their ancestral heritage. Her intent was to tie the exercise to a class lesson on lineage, but she was shocked when the Black students responded negatively to her request. Many of the Black students, because of the institution of slavery, were not able to trace their heritage to their land of origin. Students participating in the study’s focus groups voiced their dissatisfaction and gave reasons for their anger. Their counter-stories gave the teacher, Mrs. Williams, tools to do a better job at teaching the lesson to students. “The confusion over the lesson made Mrs. Williams understand the importance of acknowledging and validating the different pathways that brought people to the United States” (Chapman, 2007, p. 160). Students, offering input based on how they understood their lives, were able to transform the classroom and create an environment where the teacher was more reflexive and inclusive in her instructional practices.
Fernandez (2002) uses critical race methods to examine the educational experiences of a Latino student attending a public high school in Chicago. The researcher argues that counter-stories should not be seen as “add-ons” to our research but as a main focus in qualitative educational research. “Storytelling allowed my informant Pablo to reflect on his experience within a public educational institution. Second, narrative allows the marginalized participant to speak or make public his or her story” (p. 48). Her project aimed to gain insight into how the student understood his educational experiences in the context of his peers’ experiences with public schools. Through his narratives they were able to gain a better understanding of the experiences of students who chose alternative activities over attending school. In the end Fernandez (2002) concluded that by listening to the stories and looking into the “sociocultural practices” of youth she was able to get a deeper understanding of how the students can be oppressed, but also use agency to resist school conditions.

Yosso et al. (2009) researched the experiences of Latino undergraduates at predominately white institutions (PWIs). The researchers were interested in using CRT to have students reflect on the frequency of microaggressions experienced on a daily basis. Over a two week period, in addition to using counter-storytelling, the researchers also asked participants to carry a journal to record their victimization as a result of racial microaggressions. Through the use of focus groups, listening to participant stories, and using a CRT lens to identify themes, the researchers concluded racism at three selective universities has become subtle, yet remains pervasive. On a daily basis, students in the study navigated a hostile campus racial climate in which they endure racial assaults.
There are additional studies that use CRT to highlight the experiences of marginalized populations in a number of settings (see: Harper, 2009; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; Lynn, et al. 2010). Critical Race Theory is important to my work as a framing theoretical standpoint as well as a methodology to center the counter-narratives of Black youth navigating their lives in a dismantled school and in underserved neighborhoods.

Racial Battle Fatigue

Many studies on Black male students in schools have focused on an analysis of educational outcomes and failure, resistance, accommodation, and reform (Allen, 2010). These studies have highlighted the experiences of Black males in school and they ways in which they are marginalized in the educational system. Students are suffering in an environment that situates them as a problem and is not conducive to their holistic growth and development. Students are continuously bombarded with negative images, words, and actions. These assaults cannot be overlooked and must be understood as having a cumulative effect on these young boys. Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) present the concept of racial battle fatigue (RBF). This is a theoretical framework they used to examine the stress responses of African-American men on historically white college campuses (HWIs). Some of the stress responses include frustration, anger, exhaustion, physical avoidance, psychological or emotional withdrawal, and escapism. RBF can aid in understanding how campus environments impact African American students. “We believe African American male college students have “raced” and “gendered” experiences at all stages of the educational pipeline. These experiences are often
detrimental to their educational aspirations and achievement” (p. 553). They posit that the environments at HWIs often respond negatively to the presence of Black males and as a result, these black students respond in a specific way to these negative environments that are different from whites and other students of color. The focus on Black males is not done at the expense of women or to battle for who is more oppressed, instead the aim is to highlight the complexities of being Black, being a male, and being a Black male. It’s one thing to be Black in America, but the addition of being male complicates their existence. Black males are often viewed as dangerous and a population to be feared. This views impact the ways in which Black males are treated. The focus on the unique oppression and experiences of Black males is important, and is not done to discount the oppression of other groups. Blackness and Black maleness are important to consider to understand how identities intersect and the implications of these social markers.

When we analyze the experiences of black male students and discrimination, we cannot always look for the obvious (Pierce 1977, as referenced in Smith, et. al. 2007). Today’s racist practices are not necessarily the “whites only” signs or cross burning, but instead, cumulative mini-assaults. These mini-assaults are defined as microaggressions (i.e. a white woman tightly clutching her purse when a black guy walks by her in the cafeteria). These insults can be “minor” however the “cumulative burden” over the course of one’s life could contribute to the emergence of psychological and emotional stressors (Smith, et. al., 2007). In addition to the micro, black male students also experience macro-assaults that are “large-scale” public racial stressors (police brutality, driving while black, etc.). In essence, “Racial battle fatigue addresses the physiological and psychological strain exacted on racially marginalized groups and the amount of
energy lost dedicated to coping with racial microaggressions and racism” (p. 557). RBF is compared to combat battle fatigue and is differentiated from “typical” occupational stress. Combat stress syndrome and racial battle fatigue are natural, human responses to living (or being educated) in conditions of heightened stress and/or distress, when facing “potential perils or dangers because of tough, violent conditions or the perception that one’s life, personal dignity, or character is being threatened,” (p. 557). For a soldier, this stress is related to being in an environment of combat where one has to always be on duty and vigilant in avoiding potential danger. It is argued that the stress for black male students comes as a result of constant physical, psychological, cultural, and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in unsupportive environments (Smith, et. al., 2007).

The symptoms of RBF are both physical and psychological and include, but are not limited to:

(a) tension headaches and backaches, (b) elevated heartbeat, (c) rapid breathing in anticipation of racial conflict, (d) an upset stomach or “butterflies,” (e) extreme fatigue, (f) ulcers, (g) loss of appetite, and (h) elevated blood pressure. The psychological symptoms of racial battle fatigue include (a) constant anxiety and worrying; (b) increased swearing and complaining; (c) inability to sleep; (d) sleep broken by haunting, conflict-specific dreams; (e) intrusive thoughts and images; (f) loss of self-confidence; (g) difficulty in thinking coherently or being able to articulate (confirming stereotype); (h) hyper vigilance; (i) frustration; (j) denial; (k) John Henryism, or prolonged, high-effort coping with difficult psychological stressors; (l) emotional and social withdrawal; (m) anger, anger suppression, and verbal or nonverbal expressions of anger; (n) denial; (o) keeping quiet; and (p) resentment (p. 558).
As a result of micro aggressions, trust is either “broken or retarded” between black male students and their institutions of higher education. These students express higher levels of frustration, greater dropout rates and lower grades because of the hostile environment they experience on and off campus. Smith (2007) argues that researchers tend to ask Black males about their racial thoughts or the similarity of experiences shared with their black female counterparts, but they are not often asked about their “unique race-by-gender oppression” in this country (Smith, 2005, in Smith, et. al., 2007). “This deeper level of analysis is more meaningful for understanding the true experiences of Black males,” (Smith 2007, p. 560).

To be a black male, is to “have your integrity chronically under question, to always have to somehow verbally or nonverbally, communicate convincing reasons for being where you are if you are not in your “place.” Only the carefully presented facade, the meticulous expression of nonaggressive, nonassertive body language, the representation of a carefully managed nonthreatening persona, or old age; only standardized, “non-Black” dress, standardized English, averted eyes intently focused on the leading newspaper, magazine, or book can alleviate to some tolerable degree the fears and suspicions of others. But this diminution of fear and suspiciousness in others, bought at the too-high price of self-annihilation, is always tentative, delicate, and is easily rent by the smallest misstep or the tiniest deviation” (Wilson, 1990, p. 36, as referenced in Smith, et. al., 2007).

Akom (2008) goes further to describe the subtle forms of racism experienced by students of color as infra-racial racism. This term is used to describe:
Contemporary anti-Black racism, or other forms of racism, whether deployed through private practices or state sponsored legislation, often makes no mention of race yet reproduces a system of racially structured inequality that, like infra-red rays gets embedded in the body, penetrates beneath the skin, to such an extent that it negatively impacts the health, well-being, and social mobility of Black people/people of color beyond the visible end of the spectrum” (p. 211).

These studies and the theoretical assumptions are related to the educational experiences of black males and other people of color on college campuses, can also be transferred and used for the analysis of the educational experiences of younger middle school black males. These students also suffer from RBF as a result of the environments created in urban education centers that respond negatively to their presence.

**Closing**

In the above sections I have presented a brief overview of the current literature related to the academic and social experiences of Black male youth in the United States. Drawing from multiple disciplines to address issues facing Black males is important to understanding the plight of these students. The literature reviewed, although not all encompassing, is important to the framing and informing of this study. For instance, the focus on the critical race theory literature allows me to analyze how racism plays out in social and educational contexts for the young men in this study. In addition, the focus on counter-stories allows their experiences to be centered and serve as alternatives to the deficit discourse surrounding their lived experiences. The racial battle fatigue literature gives insight into the accumulation of micro-assaults experienced by the students and
helps to explain the toll living and being educated in hostile environments takes on the students. The reframing of oppositional culture situates the students as actors with agency and the ability to make choices about their future. Students are not just people to whom things happen; they are young thinking people capable of responding to and critiquing daily injustices. Lastly, understanding hip-hop as the language of youth culture allows us to enter into their worlds and understand its significance as a form of resistance to mainstream notions of respectability. Previous literature has informed this study and with this work I aim to add to the literature addressing these concerns and inform others researching the social and academic experiences of Black males.
CHAPTER III:

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter I discuss the methods and procedures used in my study of the social and academic experiences of Black boys in a dismantled school. I discuss the theoretical grounding supporting my selected methods as well as the complications with using qualitative methods in research with underserved youth in schools. I pay a considerable amount of attention to the role my identity plays within my research and engage the literature in this area of qualitative methodology. I also discuss my role as a researcher in this project and provide a reflexive analysis of what it means to be a participant observer and ethnographer working with Black boys in urban spaces with who I share similar upbringings and cultural understandings.

In addition, I discuss the struggles and experiences faced when conducting this study and highlight the difficulties with witnessing mistreatment of students while needing to remain in a researcher role. The complexity of qualitative research and connecting with youth participants is often hidden, but in this chapter, I bring to the forefront many of the issues I faced with gaining access, building rapport with students, scheduling interviews, witnessing verbal micro-assaults on students, student suspensions, and other issues faced in urban educational settings that complicate the conducting of qualitative research.

The overall purpose of this research was to understand how Black male students attending the Arnita Grace Academy understood and articulated their experiences in a dismantled school. In an attempt to gain insight into the lived experiences of these students I wanted to understand how students analyzed and articulated their experiences
of being Black males in a dismantled urban school and underserved neighborhood. I felt that qualitative methods (participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and photo elicitation) would serve me best in uncovering and understanding the articulated experiences of the students. Through the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and methodology, I concluded that these methods would allow the voices of these often marginalized students to be moved from the margins and centered in this project.

**Considerations for My Work**

My work is heavily informed by critical race theory/research methodology. With CRT, the participants in the study are valued and seen as co-contributors of knowledge being explored in research projects. I understand that as the researcher, I have the authority to choose and craft which stories I tell, but a commitment to a reflexive and respectful methodology grounds me in an understanding of the value of my research participants. CRT calls to question racism and attempts to expose it and all forms of injustice. A major tenet of CRT is counter-storytelling or producing counter-narratives. These counter-narratives are told by people of color to counter the master narratives that exist (Lopez, 2003). Critical race theorists argue that counter-narratives should be captured by the researcher, experienced by the research participants, and told by people of color (Milner, 2007). People of color and other oppressed groups must be given space to voice their experiences and concerns in an effort to counter the discourse that marginalizes their existence. Race and racism are placed at the center of the narrative and counter-narrative in critical race theory. Critical race theory in education challenges the dominant ideology and centralizes the experiential knowledge of the research
participants (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). These theoretical foundations provide the tools for understanding the complicated existence of Black boys in schools. My goal was to focus on their experiences and center their voices in our discussions. By centering, I mean that students are studied, but their voices are often left out of the discussion. In my work, my intent was to have their voices visible and at the forefront of the dissertation.

**Situating Myself in the Research**

During a presentation I gave for a doctoral dissertation fellowship, one of the faculty members in the audience, an older white male, asked me if I thought my research was biased since I was interviewing Black boys as a Black researcher. This question seemed to shock other faculty members as they moved restlessly in their seats awaiting my response. There were many things I wanted to say that may have not been seen as professional but I calmly responded and asked him if the research he does with white participants is biased. He did not respond, so I continued. His underlying assumption that people of color doing research with participants of color is biased, is quite troubling. This places a double standard on researchers of color. White researchers who ask this question are often guilty of a failure to place their own research under the same scrutiny. Seldom is the question asked whether or not their whiteness introduced bias into a study they conducted as members of a white community. There is an assumed level of objectivity that comes with the white dominant and privileged view in research that has to be problematized and deconstructed.
In order for whiteness to be demystified and stripped to its political essence, counter-narratives of whiteness need to emerge from our interviews [research and analysis] which give respondents the opportunity to rethink the white scripts, those “unquestioned assumptions” about race which are constantly being written, re-written, and internalized.”

(Gallagher, 1999, p. 166)

There is plenty of respected research done by Black researchers on/with Black populations that is not questioned. However, I have been asked about research objectivity on more than one occasion. I am not sure if it is because I am not a world-renown scholar (as of yet) or if they feel I have faulty research practices, but I read the questions about my research as an attack on my objectivity because of a shared racialized and gendered grouping with my participants. In response to being questioned in a similar manner, Hendrix (2002) answers, and I echo the sentiment, “In fact I would argue that because I do not take who I am for granted, I possess a heightened sense of reflexivity that can make me a better researcher than white colleagues inexperienced with assessing their social and/or professional position in surroundings that place them in a role of “minority” and who often take for granted their privileged status when in the majority” (p. 168). At times it seems as if researchers of color (or maybe just in my experiences) must grapple with the double standard and aim to constantly prove higher than normal levels of reflexivity and objectivity. The faculty member’s question actually helped me to predict other questions and critiques that may be levied against my work with Black
students. However, I am confident that through my reflexive practices I am constantly aware of my role and how I am perceived when doing research with populations of color.

**My Race and My Research**

I feel it is important to discuss my race and social location early in the chapter to situate my experiences in the context of how I am viewed as the researcher and the impact my identity has on the process and relationships built with my participants. Social location and identity impacts our lived experiences and the interactions we have with people around us. Qualitative researchers are not immune to the impact our identities have on our environment. However, unlike the general public, we have to be keenly aware of the impact our social locations and identity can have on research we conduct. Who we are impacts our research, the questions we ask and the responses we get, thus impacting the scholarship we produce (Gallagher, 1999). Being an African-American male, from Harlem, newly middle class, married, and having an advanced education will have an impact on how I am viewed by the population under study and how my scholarship is viewed by my academic colleagues.

Race still matters. I am not viewing race as a static category that we are placed in or self-select. I echo De Andrade (2000) in viewing racial and ethnic identity as it relates to society and research, as having complex meanings that are produced in social interaction. “They are presented by collections of symbols or signifiers that include such things as physical attributes, as well as behaviors, family relations, group rituals and even clothing” (De Andrade, 2000: 272). Race and ethnic presentations are produced through institutional and interactional processes (Omi and Winant, 1994). I also echo Best (2003)
who states racialized identities are mobilized and co-produced as people go about their everyday lives, which include the activities of social inquiry. Participants are not simply sharing their perspectives of race and ethnicity, but are crafting interpretations in reaction to and through interaction with researchers (DeAndrade, 2000).

Race and researcher objectivity has been questioned when the researcher and the researched share membership in a particular group; in this instance race and/or ethnicity (Gallagher, 1999; Hawkins, 2010; Hendrix, 2002). With this understanding, as a researcher I have to be mindful of my identity and my role in and my impact on the research process. I have an understanding of how I view myself, but just as important as a self-reflection and inward assessment, the view that my research community has of me is equally, if not more important. The community offers me access to their lives and allows me to get glimpses into their worlds. I can have the best intentions, but if I am not accepted by the community (even if I consider myself an insider), my research process will be stunted. Even if accepted as an insider I still have to question my intentions repeatedly during the research and analysis process. Being an insider because of one’s race does not mute or erase other social locations that serve to deny access, create misunderstandings, or bias interviews with those from the same racial background. Researchers have to consider how perceived characteristics may shape the interview as well as the analysis (Gallagher, 1999). My identity is important when conducting research in the field, and it is also important during data analysis. Whose stories do I foreground and whose do I ignore? What stories are invisible to me? How does my identity serve as filter for the data; does my identity allow me to see certain things more
clearly or does it obstruct my view of certain aspects of my data that I may take for
granted? All of these questions must be addressed.

Debates and discussions on conducting research within communities of color and
who has the authority to conduct such research are common in education research and
discourse (Banks, 1998; Best, 2003; Baca Zinn, 1979; Chavez, 2008; DeAndrade, 2000;
Dimitriadis, 2001; Gallagher, 1999; Hendrix, 2002; Hill-Collins, 1986; Milner, 2007;
Williamson Nelson, 1996). These debates are important to my work because of
previously mentioned questions regarding my objectivity and ability to connect with
research participants sharing my same racialized and gendered status. In addition people
have assumed that building rapport with my participants was easy because of our shared
statuses. The assumption that simply because I am a Black man, I can “automatically”
connect with my population of study is shortsighted and dismisses the complexity of
experiences of Black males. Black males are not a monolithic group.

Baca Zinn (1979) and Banks (1998) address concerns that outsiders have about
researchers seen as insiders conducting research on minority communities. They discuss
a position paper by Merton (1972) in which he critiqued and criticized a perceived claim
that Blacks made to a “monopolistic and privileged form of knowledge” in relation to
insider research, as being elitist and exclusionary. Two positions are discussed: the
insider and the outsider doctrine. The insider doctrine embodies the notion that insiders
have greater access and privileged forms of knowledge in relation to the group. The
insider is seen as having insight that is not readily available to a researcher situated as an
outsider. The other view maintains that the outsider position holds that “unprejudiced
knowledge” about a group is only accessible to non-members of a group (Merton, 1972).
Banks (1998) developed a typology of the insider outsider positions: the *indigenous-insider*, *the indigenous-outsider*, the *external-insider*, and the *external-outsider*. The *indigenous-insider* endorses the unique values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge of his or her primary community and culture. They are perceived as legit members of the community by members of the group. The *indigenous-outsider* was socialized in a community, but has experienced high levels of desocialization and cultural assimilation into an outside or oppositional culture or community. The values, beliefs and behaviors of this individual are indistinguishable from that of an outsider. Members of the group can view this person as a “sell-out”. The *external-insider* was socialized as an outsider in another culture. However, because of unique experiences, the community adopts the external member as an insider. The *external-outsider* was socialized within an outside community different from the one in which they are conducting research. They have a partial understanding of the group being studied and little appreciation for the beliefs, practices and values of the group. They view the studied group as “other” and often misrepresent observed practices and behaviors. Merton (1972) argued that the forced debate was unnecessary and researchers, both insiders and outsiders, should unite to understand all worlds.

Merton’s idea forces us to ask questions. Is an insider position more valuable? Can only outsiders maintain objectivity? Baca Zinn (1979) argued that Merton did not consider some important issues related to insider/outsider positionality. She argues that researchers in the field often raise concerns about distrust of researchers by communities of color and this distrust can make field research problematic for insiders and outsiders, even if insiders are able build rapport and connect with those under study. Outsider
status can prohibit some researchers from conducting research in some communities of color, and since field research involves studying events in their natural setting, in these instances a researcher with insider status may be the best option. “I do not suggest that white researchers should not study racial minorities, but I do think that field research conducted by minority scholars has some empirical and some methodological advantages. The most important one is that the “lenses” through which they see social reality may allow minority scholars to ask questions and gather information others could not” (Baca Zinn, 1979: 211). Merton underestimates the power of race in cross-cultural interactions in U.S. society. In a society such as such as this, where it is highly stratified according to racial distinctions, race often assumes a leading role in cross-ethnic and cross-cultural interactions because of its ingrained presence (Banks, 1998).

Current research continues to grapple with the insider and outsider debate in qualitative research (Chavez, 2008; Milner, 2007; Hawkins, 2010). The role of the indigenous-insider often gets questioned and critiqued for a possible lack of objectivity. There are contradictions between scholars’ call for subjectivity and reflexivity in research versus the charges that scholars of color who study participants of their same race and ethnicity potentially introduce bias into their findings (Hendrix, 2002). As an African-American researcher studying an African-American population, I am often faced with questions of whether or not my race introduced bias into the study. This places a double standard on researchers of color. White researchers who ask this question are often guilty of a failure to place their own research under the same scrutiny. Seldom is the question asked whether or not their whiteness introduced bias into a study they conducted as indigenous-insiders of a white community. There is an assumed level of objectivity that
comes with the white dominant and privileged view in research that has to be 
problematized and deconstructed. “In order for whiteness to be demystified and striped 
to its political essence, counter-narratives of whiteness need to emerge from our 
interviews [research and analysis] which give respondents the opportunity to rethink the 
white scripts, those “unquestioned assumptions” about race which are constantly being 
written, re-written, and internalized” (Gallagher, 1999: 166).

“Even the most innovative qualitative researchers tend to be overly concerned 
about standards—such as validity and reliability, embedded in the larger construct of 
objectivity—as they have been problematically and ethnocentrically defined within a 
positivist tradition” (Pizarro, 1998, p. 5, in Rodriguez, 2010). In response to whether or 
not she introduced bias into her research, Hendrix (2002) answers, and I echo the 
sentiment, “In fact I would argue that because I do not take who I am for granted, I 
possess a heightened sense of reflexivity that can make me a better researcher than white 
colleagues inexperienced with assessing their social and/or professional position in 
surroundings that place them in a role of “minority” and who often take for granted their 
privileged status when in the majority” (Page 168). Researchers of color must grapple 
with the double standard and aim to constantly prove higher than normal levels of 
reflexivity and objectivity. This requires a researcher to subject herself to the same level 
of scrutiny she directs to her participants (Hendrix, 2002). This standpoint requires that 
the researcher put her “taken for granted” assumptions, beliefs and stereotypes on the 
table for dissection. This “requires an analysis of how her own use of master narratives 
give form and substance to not just her experiences in the field, but her sense of her own 
identity as well as the identities of others…It is only through such candid examinations of
the researcher’s backstage that the implications of identity and difference on the research process can begin to be explored” (Hendrix, 2002: 205). These master narratives originate from dominant groups and operate to legitimize and naturalize the order of things (McCorkel and Myers, 2003). They become part of how we see the world and, by implication, our research subjects.

Much can be learned from the experience of scholars of color who share a common ethnic or racial background with groups they study. However, we cannot be drawn to the assumption that insider status is guaranteed and problem free. Insider status has to be negotiated (Beoku-Betts, 1994). Even if a person is a perceived insider, they can have experiences or identity markers that differ from the research participants and produce a distancing effect (professional/class status, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation). An inward focus is required to provoke a consideration of the ways in which a researcher’s identity contributes to the kind and quality of the information we gather (Williamson Nelson, 1996). Native or indigenous-insider status is not fixed. This accepted status fluctuates from informant to informant and from place to place within a community of study. Researchers should not allow a focus on insider and outsider status to paralyze their research. Chavez (2008) views the insider/outsider debate as a false dichotomy since outsiders and insiders have to grapple with similar methodological issues surrounding positionality and a researcher’s sense of self.

Patricia Hill Collins (1986) offers an alternative view on the outsider vs. insider debate that is important for my work. She introduces the concept of the outsider-within.

“Outsider within status is bound to generate tension, for people who become outsiders within are forever changed by their new status. Learning the subject
matter of sociology stimulates a reexamination of one’s own personal and cultural experiences; and yet, these occupy a special place—they become different people, and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see.” (p. 29)

This outsider within status allows Black women and other underrepresented scholars to contribute new insights and not be blinded by the reality of being the “norm” in the field. Being an outsider, one must navigate the system in a manner that allows them to enter into the realm of the field with experiences that have been shaped by existence on the outside. “At its best, outsider within status seems to offer its occupants a powerful balance between the strengths of their sociological training and the offerings of their personal and cultural experiences…experienced reality is used as a valid source of knowledge for critiquing sociological facts and theories,” (Hill Collins, 1986, p. 30). The outsider within is able to offer new insights to inform the field and create new knowledge.

**Study Design**

A qualitative case study design was used in order for me to conduct a detailed examination of a single setting (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). This project is a qualitative investigation of the social and academic experiences of Black adolescent males in a dismantled school. Student voices were a critical piece to this study, as their voices are often underrepresented and marginalized in educational research (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006; Fielding, 2001, 2004; Howard, 2001; Lincoln, 1995; Mitra, 2001, 2004, 2009; Sealey-Ruiz and Greene, 2010). This study was designed to understand how students
articulated their educational and social experiences. In an effort to gain insight I planned to conduct participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and photo elicitation interviews. I was also interested in the transition from middle to high school, so this population was of great interest to me. The transition from middle to high school is a critical point for the academic success of Black males, so I wanted to understand the experiences that took place during this transitional time. I also sought to understand the practices of schools and how they aided in the successful or unsuccessful transition of these boys.

The summer before I started my dissertation study, I worked with an alternative summer school program in the Arnita School. I served as the character education and motivational presenter on Fridays. We would discuss issues facing young men in their committee and develop strategies to work through difficulties in an effective manner. In addition to this summer work, I served as a guest speaker for a male enrichment program which some of the students in the building attended. This familiarity with the space aided in my selection of this site for my study. When I was notified that the school was closing and that some of the eighth grade students would remain in the building, I thought this would be a great space to continue my work with the students and gather insights in to their experiences. This also heightened my interest in the middle to high school transition experiences of the students. Qualitative methods were selected because I am interested in the stories of these students. Many studies talk about black male youth, but seldom talk to them and give their voices a centered location.

I set out to conduct participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups and photo elicitation interviews with the students in this study. Using multiple methods
would allow me to triangulate my findings and provide more insight into the phenomena in question, than any one method could do if used singularly. The first phase of my data collection consisted of participant observation. Once given permission from the Lincoln School District, and the principal in the Arnita School I worked with two of the eighth grade teachers (English and Math) to observe students in the school setting. Most of my initial observations were conducted in the English class with Ms. Gusto who was warm, welcoming, and excited to have me in the classroom. During my initial visits I would sit off to the side of the classroom while she conducted her daily lessons with the students. Most students thought I was a student teacher sitting in the classroom to learn how to teach. From my observations, I decided whom I would approach for participation in my study.

After my initial phase of observations, I moved into the in-depth interviews and focus groups. I used the initial phase to become a “familiar” face in the school. I also built relationships with the students during my observations. When students approached me to ask what I was doing in their classroom, we began to have discussions about my work. Many of the students seemed interested in finding out more, especially when we discussed my love for sports and hip-hop. I was able to connect with some of the students I worked with over the summer, and they were able to “vouch” for me when other students wondered if I was “cool” and worthy of their time. These relationships with the students from the summer program proved valuable in helping me to gain access and connect with some of the most popular students in the eighth grade. When other students saw me hanging out with or having conversations with the “cool kids” it made it easier for them to have discussions with them since I had gained acceptance with the
other students. This familiarity aided in me getting the initial 20 students to show interest in being involved in my project. These relationships also created an environment where even the female students wanted to be involved in the study. However, my current project did not include the experiences of the female students. This initial group of young men constituted the pool I thought would provide the sample for the entire study, however this did not prove to be the case. I will discuss this more in the latter part of this chapter.

Project Design

Data were collected during the summer school session 2010, fall 2010, and spring 2011. During the summer school session, I spent three days each week as a participant observer, mainly in the English and math classes. I also served as their personal development facilitator on Fridays during the summer. During the fall one to two days each week were spent with the students in their English class and homeroom block. In addition to the classroom observations, I had informal discussions with students in the school during days when I shadowed individual students.

Research Participants

Official recruitment began during the fall 2010 semester. Since I worked with the students at AGA in 2009 and in the summer of 2010, they knew of my research interests. I had conversations with the young men about sociology and what sociologists study. A number of the young men knew I would ask them to participate in future projects. The
official recruitment started with connecting with the principal and the English teacher. Once I received clearance from the principal I met with the English teacher to discuss my study and answer any questions. She invited me to sit in on her class a few days a week to get acclimated to the school and classroom climate. Since all of the students had Ms. Gusto for class during some point of the day, she became the teacher of focus for this study. Ms. Vera was a teacher that all of the young men in the study had in common, so she became the second teacher of focus. During classroom observations, most of my time was spent with Ms. Gusto. During my observations, a number of the students remembered me because they had seen me previously in their school, and asked what I was doing sitting in their classes. I told them about my project and many of them wanted to be involved. I made a brief presentation to the class about my research and once I received IRB approval, I sent recruitment letters and consent forms home with the students who wanted to work with me.

In the spring 2011 semester, a sample of 20 male students who identified as Black/African-American was used for this portion of the study. The students’ ages ranged from 13-14 years of age. The selected students represented various levels of academic achievement (low, medium, and high achievers). The student sample also included students who were characterized by staff in similar ways to “troublemakers and schoolboys” (Ferguson, 2001, p. 9). Initially, the plan was to interview each student individually and then as a part of a focus group. All interviews were to take place on the school premises. Unfortunately, projects do not always go as planned. All 20 students were given the parental consent forms to take home to be signed by their parent. I also
called the parents of the students that were given the forms. I was able to reach and speak with six parents and left messages with four. I explained the study and answered any questions the parents had about their child participating. The parents I talked to on the phone verbally agreed to have their child participate. However, only two students returned the consent forms. The other students informed me that the forms were signed, but had been lost. I gave the students new copies and some of the students lost the forms again. After a few cycles of lost forms, I again informed the students that participation was voluntary and they did not have to participate. The students assured me that they wanted to participate but just kept getting the forms “messed up” or lost. In the end, after multiple attempts, I decided to move forward with the seven students who brought in their parental consent forms. Some of the other students still wanted to participate, but I did not think it was ethical to have them in the study without approval from their parents.

In addition to building relationships with the students, I hosted a dinner in which all of the participants were asked to bring their parents/guardians to meet me and ask any questions about the study. The family members of five participants participated in this dinner. They asked me questions about my work and were excited that their students were engaging with a Black male, university professional. They thought I would have a positive impact on their students. They did not have too many questions about the study, but offered to assist me if needed. They were more concerned about what their students would learn from their relationship with me. Out of the seven students in the study, only two had a father living with them at home. All of the parents/guardians that attended the dinner were women and expressed the importance of positive Black male role models for
their children. I wrote fieldnotes about the dinner and also wrote them about all the interactions I had with the parents.

**Portraits**

Below are portraits of the young men in the study. All names are pseudonyms that I chose for the students. These portraits offer a very brief introduction of the participants. I have grown to know them well and I am thankful there were willing to share their lives with me.

**Jeffrey** is an African-American/Black male from Upstate New York. He is a talented student-athlete as a member of youth football teams. Jeffrey is a pleasant young man who does not get into trouble in school, but often struggles academically. He admits to procrastinating and not doing all of his required homework assignments. Some of his classes are difficult for him, but he does not always seek extra assistance. He lives at home with both parents and his older brother. He hopes to attend college one day on a football scholarship.

**Jones** is an African-American/Black male from Upstate New York. He is deeply interested in comic books and drawing. He also spends a considerable amount of time playing video games. He is not very active in sports. During my time in the school, he broke his arm attempting to play football during gym class. He does not get in trouble in school and for the most part, does well academically. He passes all of his classes and usually completes all assignments. He had difficulty in a couple of classes, but improved
after focusing more and doing extra assignments. He is very talkative in school when he is with his group of “comic book” peers. He lives at home with his mother and little brother. His father has been in and out of prison for charges related to the sale of drugs.

**Kenny** is an African-American/Black male from Upstate New York. He is a student-athlete and participates on the basketball team. Teachers and administrators do not consider him a “troublemaker” in school, but has been suspended a couple of times for fighting. He believes very highly in being respected and most of his altercations happened as a result of him being disrespected by peers. He usually completed school work, but would often get bored during class. When bored he would he would disrupt other students. He wants to go to college on a basketball scholarship. He lives at home with his father, but many people around the school said the man was his grandfather because of his old age. Kenny was never clear when he spoke about his living arrangements, on whether or not the man was his father or grandfather.

**Malcolm** is an African-American/Black male from Upstate New York. Malcolm did not participate in any school-sanctioned sports but would always offer athletic challenges to students on sports teams. He is a very street-smart student and knows a lot of info about things that happen “on the streets” throughout the city. In school, some teachers and administrators consider Malcolm a “troublemaker” who is easily provoked into fighting. Adults in the school do not give him the benefit of the doubt because of his reputation. Malcolm had to repeat a grade and is the oldest student in the study. Malcolm splits
living time between his grandmother and mother. His father is serving a long prison sentence on drug related charges.

**Robinson** is an African-American/Black male from Upstate New York. He does not participate in school-sanctioned sports, but is very athletic. Teachers reported to me that he was a “trouble maker” because of his quick temper. He speaks his mind and has no problem telling you what he is thinking. Students in the school consider him to be one of the best rappers in their peer group. He is often asked to perform his raps in school. He passes all of his classes, but is not often recognized for his success because of his behavioral reputation. He lives at home with his mother.

**Sweeney** is an African-American/Black male from Upstate New York. He is a talented student-athlete as a member of youth football and basketball teams. He is street smart and has an unbelievable amount of charm. Even though he gets in trouble in school, he is able to use his charm to navigate the school system. He has been suspended a number of times for being disrespectful to adults in the building. He wants to go to college on a football scholarship. He lives at home with his mother and two older siblings. His father is serving a long prison sentence as a result of drug related charges.

**Wallace** is an African/Black male in Upstate New York whose family had spent time living in Georgia and Canada. He is a first generation U.S. student. His parents are from Western Africa. He is a student-athlete as a member of youth football teams. He is a good student and has the cleanest disciplinary record of any student in this study. He
hopes to attend college on an academic scholarship. He is usually the “voice of reason” for his peers and is successful, from my observations and from teacher reports, with building relationships with adults in the building. He lives at home with his mother. His father was a famous scientist/researcher and died when he was a baby.

Data Collection

I conducted a series of three interviews with each student in the study. Interviews took place within the AGA school building. A couple of the informal interviews took place on the Ernestine University campus where I was employed. Some of the students were brought to campus by their parents and others travelled with me if their parents did not have access to a vehicle. Having some of the interviews conducted on campus allowed me to spend additional time with the students without being restricted by navigating free periods during the school day.

The first interview served as an introductory part of the interview process. Each student participated in an introductory in-depth interview. This time was used as a way for the students to get acclimated to the interview process by responding to basic questions about their past and current educational experiences. Some of the participants were surprised that I was interested in finding out about their lived realities and were eager to give their perspectives. Even when interviews were not planned, students would ask to be interviewed.

The second interview was a photo-elicitation interview in which the students were given disposable cameras with instructions to take photos of what I would see if I hung
out with them for a week. They were also instructed to take pictures of things that were
important to them. The students were given the instructions for taking pictures during the
initial interview. I used photo-elicitation as a method because young students
participating in research can grow tired of the traditional interview format where they are
constantly asked to explain what they know about a specific phenomenon (Cappello, 2005). Photographs offer a way that can "enrich and extend existing interview
methodologies" (Collier and Collier, 1986, p.99 in Cappello, 2005). In a study by Clark-Ibanez (2004) she states:

Yet there is nothing inherently interesting about photographs; instead, photographs act as a medium of communication between researcher and participant. The photographs do not necessarily represent empirical truths or "reality." In this sense, photographs used in the PEI have a dual purpose. Researchers can use photographs as a tool to expand on questions and simultaneously, participants can use photographs to provide a unique way to communicate dimensions of their lives. The PEI can enhance qualitative methods and help address some pitfalls in conventional interviews. Photographs can ease rapport between researcher and interviewee. (p. 1512)

There are a number of approaches to photo elicitation. Some researchers take the pictures and share them with participants to elicit responses while other researchers allow the participants to take their own photos of what is "important" to them. These photos are then used as the basis for the elicitation interview. After the students in my study completed the photo assignment, I sent the photos away to be processed and then gave them back to the students for them to preview and order thematically. The students were
allowed to view the pictures before I looked at them, in case they had pictures they did not want me to see for the project. The photos were used to elicit responses during the second interview and were the property of the students. I did not keep the photos to be used as data. I was more interested in the responses elicited by the photos rather than my interpretation and analysis of the documents. Some photo-elicitation studies illustrate the text and photos, however, I made the decision to return all photos to the students without keeping a copy. This form of interview allowed us to discuss topics that may not have come up in a typical interview. Again, I was more interested in the conversations that took place after viewing and discussing the photos. In future studies, I will consider keeping a copy of non-identifiable photographs to use as illustrations to pair with quotations from participant interviews.

The final individual interview was used as a time to follow up with the students and cover any remaining topics not discussed in prior interviews. I reviewed the transcripts from earlier interviews to come up with questions about themes I missed. I also asked participants to share anything they felt we did not previously cover. In addition to the three individual interviews, I also conducted two group interviews with the participants. The group interviews were used to foster discussion among the study participants around some of the themes of the study and questions that arose from the individual interviews. The two group interviews do not include an informal interview I conducted with the students at the start of the study. I held a group meeting to explain the interview process and give the students an opportunity to get used to me asking them questions while recording our conversations. This informal group interview took place before I conducted the first individual interviews. This was a useful method because the
discussions focused on a general topic and was used to create an environment where multiple perspectives were shared (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis and interpretation. A sample of the questions are listed below:

**Introductions:**
- What is your name and age?
- What is your race and ethnic background?
- How long have you been in Arnita Grace Academy?
- What schools did you attend before coming to AGA?

**School:**
- What do you like about school?
- What do you dislike about school?
- If you could create the perfect school, what would it look like?
- How would you describe yourself as a student?
- What does it mean to be a good student? Bad student?

**Neighborhood:**
- Where do you live?
- How would you describe your neighborhood?
- Is there anything you would change about your neighborhood?

**Black Males:**
- Who are your heroes/role models?
- What does being a black male mean to you?
- How do teachers and other workers view black males in school? Why?
- How do you feel about these views? Do you agree or disagree?
- Are black males treated any differently than other students? Why or why not?
- Are black males ignored in schools? If so, how?

**Music and Culture:**
- What is your favorite music and why?
- How much time do you spend listening to this music?
- Who is your favorite artist and why?
- What does hip-hop mean to you?
- What does hip-hop do for you?
- Does hip-hop have a positive or negative impact on your school performance?
- Are you treated differently by adults because you like hip-hop?
- Do adults understand young people?
In-Depth Interviews, Focus Groups, and Counter-Storytelling

Critical race theory in [sociology and] education challenges the dominant ideology and centralizes the experiential knowledge of the research participants (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). The “ideology of racism” maintains the master narrative. “It is within the context of racism that “monovocal” stories about the low educational achievement and attainment of students of color are told” (p. 29). Knowledge construction, naming one’s own reality, and the voices of people of color are central to critical race theory. The tenets of critical race theory make it an important tool for dismantling the oppressive state of the educational system as it relates to people of color. It allows and enables scholars to ask the important question of what racism has to do with educational inequalities in unique ways (Howard, 2008). CRT “examines racial inequalities in educational achievement in a more probing manner than multicultural education, critical theory, or achievement gap theorists by centering the discussion of inequality within the context of racism” (p. 963). CRT in [sociology and] education also serves as a framework to challenge and dismantle prevailing notions of fairness, meritocracy, colorblindness, and neutrality in the education of racial minorities (Parker, Dehyle, & Villenas, 1999). Using in-depth interviews and counter-storytelling allowed for the experiences and stories of black males to be understood in a way that can be used to inform policy and practice. In my project, CRT serves as the methodological and theoretical basis for this work.
In School Observations

In addition to collecting data via interviews, I also took notes during my observations. On days when I shadowed students or observed a class, I would sit off to the side of the room in an effort to be “invisible” in the space. In the early stages students would look at me to see what I was doing in the class. They were not used to having more than two adults in any one class, so my presence was out of the norm. Many thought I was a teacher aide because local college students would often come to observe classroom practices. After a couple of weeks, my presence was no longer alarming.

During my classroom observations, I was mostly concerned with the students in the study. I would watch how they interacted with peers and teachers throughout the day. Who were their close friends? Who were their enemies? Who did they spend time with during lunch and recess? How did they spend their time in the classroom? What were their emotional triggers in school? These were some of the things I looked for during my observations. I also took notice of how other students, not in the study, interacted with people in the building.

I tried to jot down my notes periodically while observing. I did not want it to be obvious that I was taking notes on classroom interactions. Since I explained my study to the teachers on numerous occasions, I was not as concerned with them seeing me take notes during their classes. They knew I did not work for the district and that I was not there to report their behavior/practices to their superiors. I was fortunate to have a good relationship with the teachers, so my presence in their classrooms was not distracting for them. For instance, Ms. Gusto asked me to do a lesson during one of her classes. They expected to see me throughout the building.
Data Analysis

During the beginning stages, I was not sure if I was getting “good data” from my interviews. I remember thinking of studies and projects conducted by fellow graduate students where they mentioned how it was hard for them to get their participants to stop talking. They had so many transcriptions and rich data, and when I initially thought about what I was getting, I assumed I was lacking something. My colleagues were working with adults and I was working with marginalized youth. My participants were getting used to the fact that an adult was concerned about their voices and experiences. So initially, I was not sure how rich my data were after my first interviews. As I continued with the project, I realized that I did have rich data. Although the interviews did not last hours on end, they told very powerful stories. In addition, I had to remember that my participant observations were also data and helped to tell the stories of the experiences these students had. My participant observations would prove to be some of the most informative engagements I had with the students. The individual interviews with the students lasted 45 minutes or so. I assumed that answering questions from an adult for longer periods would get boring for the students. The group interviews lasted more than an hour because everyone fed off of one another and kept the conversation going.

During the project, I would record notes into my digital recorder at the end of the day. There were times when I did not walk around with a note book, so I ensured I recorded my notes while sitting in my car. I would later go back and transcribe my notes and use them to guide me through the rest of the project. At later dates when I reviewed my notes, I was able to see themes emerging from the time spent in the school. The regular engagement with my notes allowed the emerging themes to assist with the development
of new questions for the subsequent interviews and focus groups with the students and teachers. Patterns that emerged from the interview were organized into thematic categories to highlight important findings (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007).

I transcribed the interviews verbatim and listened to the recordings while reading the transcriptions. I took notes on the emerging themes and wrote analytic memos to assist with my analysis of the themes. For example, I wrote memos on student-teacher relationships as well as students fighting for respect in school. Writing memos helped me to work through my thoughts on emerging themes. I did not use qualitative software to assist with the analysis of data. I printed the data and coded by hand, highlighting, circling, and using margin notes while reading the transcripts. I then would use color coding and arrange thematic chunks of the data. The data consisted of thematic codes that I grouped into families of codes (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). The initial themes helped me to focus the subsequent interviews and follow up with students on new questions that arose from my memos. Themes were noted through comparison of the participants’ statements during the interviews as well as with my observations in the schools. Throughout the analysis of the data, I developed codes as I read the data. Some of the recurring codes included: respect, student-teacher relationships, punishment, existing as Black males, and getting in trouble. Using the codes, themes, and analytic memos, I formulated a thematic structure for the foundation of my data chapters.

My data chapters were guided by the themes and ordered accordingly. After reviewing my thematic separation of the data, I reviewed literature on similar topics to place the data in context. The first data chapter was a result of the discussions of the impact on the school closing on the lives of the students. The second data chapter was a
result of the discussion on punishment, control, and the participants’ understanding and experiences related to being young Black males. The third data chapter was a result of discussions on student-teacher relationships, respect, and the reasons for student resistance in school.

**Challenges**

One of the biggest challenges I faced in this process was the difficulty of getting students to turn in their parental consent forms. Going into the study, I wanted to have at least 15-20 student participants, but because of reasons I discussed earlier in the chapter, I was able to complete the study with only seven young men. Even though I did not reach the number I wanted, I was able to build close relationships with the students in the study. I connected with the students and studied their experiences in-depth. I shadowed them during school, took them to university events, and had conversations with all of their parents and other family members. I knew the students in this study very well and I still remain in contact with their families.

The fact that I built close relationships had both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, students felt comfortable with me and were not afraid to share their lived experiences with me. Many of them mentioned seeing me as a father figure. The negative impact of our close relationships is the fact that I knew eventually the study would end and that I would be heading on the job market and leaving Upstate New York. These students have dealt with school closings and faulty relationships with adults in their lives, and I felt my leaving would be another example of someone walking out on them. I struggled with how I would “leave the field” at the completion of the study. In
the end, I decided to stay connected with the students. We still speak on the phone and via text messages. Even though I am no longer in Upstate New York, we still stay in contact and have periodic check-ins. Whenever I visit Ernestine University, I make sure I coordinate a time to connect with the young men.

Finally, when getting IRB approval, I ran into difficulty surrounding the use of cameras with the youth in my study. The committee was concerned about the safety of having youth take photos of their lived experiences. One of the comments I receive asked “what will happen if a child takes a photograph of illegal activity? What type of instruction will be given to protect the students?” As a result, I submitted literature on photo voice and photo elicitation methodology to the IRB. In addition, I created a youth photo training agenda that was submitted to the IRB. The concerns about my photo elicitation methodology stalled my IRB approval. Excerpts of the submitted changes are included below:

Changes to Methods Section 4.1
1. These pictures will consist of places/spaces that are important to the students. These could include community centers, places of worship, playgrounds, etc. The pictures could also include time spent with friends. Students may take pictures of their families who they reside with, if approved by their family members. A photo approval/release statement will be provided for family members. Other than their immediate family members, students will be informed not to take pictures of people’s faces or any other identifiable areas of their bodies. Again, these pictures are not for display, but just to spark discussions during the photo interview.

Changes to Risk to Participants Section 12.2
2. Orientation Agenda
   - Understanding the Photo Project
     - Explanation of Photo Elicitation
     - The Importance of Photos

   - Best Practices in Photography
     - Functions of the camera
     - Use of natural Lighting and Flash
     - Framing the object being photographed
- Point of Reference
  - Safety and the Photo Process
    - “Get that camera outta here” Respecting privacy
    - Personal safety and quality photographs
    - Following project guidelines

3. Project Guidelines

- DO NOT take pictures of people who do not want to be photographed
- DO NOT take pictures of illegal activities
- DO NOT place yourself in danger for the sake of getting a “good” picture
- Outside of the members in your immediate family, DO NOT take pictures of people’s faces or any other identifiable areas of their body. (We will have a waiver form if you want to take pictures of your family)
- Take pictures that show what’s important to you as a Black male. This can include people, places, and things.
- Take pictures that will show what I would see if I spent a week with you.
- This can be a fun project if you stick to the guidelines.
- Have fun!

Leaving the Field

In ethnography, much of the focus is on getting access to the population and building rapport. This is a very important topic, because without access our research is impossible. However, how do researchers leave? What plans should be in place for departure? Is there a way to properly prepare participants for the end of the study? Iversen (2009) posits that questions similar to those I listed above need to be the focus of future research and deserve more attention in our planning. The traditional idea of doing research with a community for years, walking away after a defined endpoint, and cutting
ties no longer exists in all situations. Leaving the field can be planned on paper, but in practice it is not as simple.

Most of the time, the relationship between the researcher and the participants ends when the research is done or in certain cases, after the final product is shared with the participants (Rupp & Taylor, 2011). However, they continued relationships with the drag queens they studied for their book, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Rupp & Taylor, 2003). They studied the queens, became friends, and felt it was important to stay connected. In addition, they continued to write about the participants. Rupp and Taylor (2011) argue that going back or staying in the field is not the same thing as “going native” where the researcher gets so entangled with the population being studied that they lose all semblance of being a researcher. The concern about “going native” is usually a major issue in anthropology because of the long durations of time spent in the field with the populations being studied. For sociologists, we tend to leave the field when our data have become saturated (at least this is the ideal). However there are instances when we cannot easily walk away (Rupp & Taylor, 2011). When researchers spend large amounts of time with participants, leaving can be a difficult task. We get connected to them and they get connected to us. So “getting out and leaving participants feeling positive about the research can be tricky,” (Rupp & Taylor, 2011, p. 484). Ethnographic research is not an emotionless practice.

One of the issues I struggled with during my study was the fact that it would end and I would most likely leave the city in which the research took place. Some may say these feelings are to be expected, as all qualitative researchers must consider the point when they will need to leave the field. I understand this point, but the lives and past
experiences of the students complicated my idea of leaving the field. Many of the young men in my study had dealt with disappointment and being abandoned at some point in their lives. They had experiences dealing with promises that were broken repeatedly, and I did not want to add to this trauma. I struggled with “leaving the field” throughout the process and after the study was done. However, during a moment of clarity, I asked myself, “Do you need to leave the field?” After a short period of reflection, I decided I did not need to leave the field. I decided to maintain a relationship with the young men in the study and we are still in contact. Researchers need to rethink the taken-for-granted assumptions we have about leaving the field. This is especially key when dealing with vulnerable populations. I understand that is not possible for all researchers to stay connected to all participants, but as a social justice oriented researcher, I wanted reciprocity in the research process. I was able to get a dissertation out of the relationship, so my goal is to continue my relationship with them with the hopes that I can be of some benefit to their lives. There are plenty of times when people see marginalized groups as nothing more than living and breathing data to be used in ways that aid in the climbing of the academic ladder. This is problematic and I feel we “owe” something to our participants for allowing us into their lives.

I decided to stay connected with the young men in the study after the research was completed. I stayed in town for a few months after the study ended and remained in contact with the young men. They still came to events on campus and occasionally we would meet up for pizza. The students and I were sad when I told them I would be moving out of state for a new job. They wanted to know if they could still talk to me or if we would ever be able to hang out. Working with these young men was important to me
and I was invested in their lives. Completely cutting off communication was not an option. They invested so much of their lives into my project, so leaving was a difficult task for me. We decided we would stay in contact and talk on the phone at least once a month. We also stayed connected via text messaging and Facebook. I check in periodically to review their grades and they contact me to ask for advice on different topics. We have built a strong relationship that will hopefully last a lifetime. It is an honor to be allowed to stay in their lives and watch them grow as young Black men.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I highlighted the methods and procedures I used for the study. I aimed to be transparent about the choices I made throughout the dissertation process. In addition, I showed the positive and negatives element/challenges associated with my process. Conducting the project using qualitative methods grounded in critical race theory, I was able to collect data that centered student voices. Qualitative methods were the best choice for highlighting the lived experiences articulated by the young men in this study.
CHAPTER 4

“THIS WAS OUR SCHOOL FIRST!” BEING EDUCATED IN A DISMANTLED SPACE

The students in this study are familiar with the concept of school closings. Many of their siblings and parents experienced school closings through their time in the Lincoln City School District. The students in my study were added to the increasing national list of students experiencing school closure. Nationally, the closing of schools is an increasing trend as one of many options in urban school reform efforts. There is over a 40-year history of reform efforts in urban schools and some argue that we have experienced a variety of reform attempts, but little has changed in urban schools as far as measurable success (Payne, 2008). School closing has increasingly become a significant option when trying to improve districts and address the issues related to underperforming schools. Within the last few years, the Obama administration was in favor of school closings as one of a number of strategies to be used to turn around failing schools across the United States (Kirshner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, 2010, Brummet, 2011). According to Brummet (2011), over 1800 public schools were closed prior to the 2009-2010 academic year. Districts often cite under-enrollment and consistent underperformance as reasons for closing schools (de la Torre and Gwynne, 2009). No matter the reason of the school closure, they have a severe impact on communities as well as the academic success of the affected students.

The Black male middle school students in this study were selected from a group of students that had experienced multiple school closures and reform efforts during their time in the Lincoln School District (LSD). These students attended the dismantled school
before the closing and remained in the building for their eighth grade school year. The students were allowed to stay in the building because of a lack of space in other schools across the district.

When I first started working with the students in the study, I was interested in the lives of black males in the school district. I worked with the students in an afterschool and summer program and figured I would focus on their experiences in school and as members of the “manhood training program,” an enrichment program created for underrepresented males considered to be “at-risk” in district schools. I had no idea that the school would be closed and the students would then return to the same building as a leftover population of students. Once the announcement came that the school would close, I assumed I would need to rethink my study, as the students would be dispersed across the district to new schools and many of the young men would not be attending the same schools. After being informed that the students would be returning to the building and that they would share the space with the STEM high school that occupied the building while their own school was getting overhauled, I thought it was important to see how these events would impact the students. I knew the administrators would have their reasons for closing the school, but I figured the teachers and administrators would overlook the impact on the students. I felt there would be a focus on the “need” for reform, but I sensed there would be a lack of focus on the students impacted by the reform. From the previous conversation I had with the students, I assumed they would have a relevant understanding of the reform efforts and the reasons for the school closing. After the school year began and the students returned to the building, I began my initial talks with some of the students I met the previous year. My plan was to observe their
daily routines and talk to them about their experiences in the school. My focus shifted from their experiences in the manhood training program to their experiences in a dismantled school.

Marginalized populations are not often consulted when it comes to educational policies and school district decisions. This chapter is an attempt to center the experiences of students impacted by the decision to restructure their school. The voices and experiences of these students offer critical insight into how students experience school as a result of the many reform efforts facing our urban centers across the nation. Often when reform is discussed, students are reduced to numbers for statistical analysis rather than being seen as people who have to live with the policy changes on a daily basis. Their stories and observed experiences allow me to enter into their social worlds and see firsthand how school reform efforts impact their educational experiences. In this chapter I explore their lived realities as Black males living and being educated in an urban and underserved environment.

This chapter explores the articulated experiences of students who lived through the dismantling of their middle school as a result of school reform in upstate New York. All the data in this chapter are from the initial interviews with the students and my observations throughout the school term and is organized to highlight their experiences with the dismantling of their former school. The data show that students were not involved in the decision process for closing the school. In most cases students would not be consulted before decisions are made to close a school. However, it is important to understand the feelings of heartbreak and abandonment expressed by the participants in the study. Students articulated feeling like “left over problems” and felt they were not
being nurtured, but were only being tolerated in the school building. Data from their teachers also expose the impact the dismantling had on the students. The students in the study articulated strategies they used to “make it through” the school year in a place that was taken away from them without their input or any concern about the impact on their lives.

In this chapter I discuss their experiences in the dismantled school and address the question, “how are kids allowed to be educated under these conditions?” I then frame their existence in school as a population that exists in a space that Duncan (2000) termed “beyond love.” This notion of existing “beyond love” situates students as part of a strange population that are responsible for their own predicament, and are not viewed as normal parts of the society. They are in essence seen as being unworthy of love. I then discuss the deficit discourse and its impact on the views of black male students and their treatment in educational spaces. The bulk of the chapter is focused on the stories of the students and their articulated views of attending a dismantled school, their disappointment with how they were treated, and their strategies for survival under oppressive school conditions.

The findings from my data suggest that the students in my study objected to the decision to close their school. They critiqued how the reforms were carried out and they were upset at their lack of involvement in the process and the ways in which they found out about their school closing. They critiqued the way the decision was made to close the school—they felt as if they (including their families) had no say in what happened to their school. In addition, they discussed the impact the closure had on the students when they were informed of the plan to close and after they returned to the building. Students
articulated their feelings of anger, shock, and distrust of the school system. They also
discuss the methods they used to survive their last year in the dismantled school. I argue
and show through the excerpts of data, that students should not be seen through their
deficits but understood as a population with the ability to understand and articulate their
complicated lived experiences as victims of mandated school reform.

**Urban School Reform and the Decision to Close**

With the increasing number of school closures, parents, teachers, students, and
educational activists have raised concerns about the impact in the communities involved
in the reform efforts. In addition, with talk of accountability and the rise of the charter
school movement, it seems school closures will be an issue for many years to come
(Enberg, Gill, Zamarro, and Zimmer, 2012). "Closing schools is one of the most
controversial actions a district can take. Nevertheless, urban districts across the nation are
closing schools due to declining population, competition from charter schools, and
accountability regimes (such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act) that target schools
with chronically low achievement” (Enberg, et al., pg. 189). In their study they found
that students who were displaced did no better in their new schools. Brummet (2011)
reports that after a school is closed the displaced students perform at lower levels for the
first year and return to their previous levels of (under) achievement in subsequent years.
He also points out that the students who are in the receiving schools are also negatively
impacted by the influx of new students. Their decrease in achievement is temporary and
usually recovers after the first year of the influx. However, if schools are closed and new
buildings not opened, overcrowding is a real possibility and could lead to a continuous
cycle of school closings as each school becomes progressively worse as a result of increased student populations. This creates an environment for previously unsuccessful recycled reform strategies to flourish.

It may seem logical that the impact of students’ transition could be improved if they were moved to a substantially higher performing school, but this depends on the state of the district. If the number of school closings is on the rise, it will become difficult to place students in higher performing schools. There are also districts that exist where a number of their schools are consistently low achieving, thus limiting options for student transfer to a higher performing school. If the gains in academic achievement are attributed to students being sent to higher performing schools in the district, what happens when more than one school in a district is failing and no matter where you send the displaced students they are not "moving up" into a better educational situation? What happens to these students? School closure cannot be the only answer.

The outcomes of school closure are akin to the principles that guide the National Basketball Association (NBA) draft lottery process. The worst performing teams get the greatest percentage of chances to win the number one draft pick to improve their team, while the teams that are doing well have less of a chance to get the number one pick. As time goes on and certain teams improve, others are now placed in position to get the number one draft pick. It is understood in the NBA that teams will rise and fall. The teams that are great for a few years will more than likely not do so well in the future and become eligible for a top draft pick. There is a similar scenario when viewing school reform. The schools that get the most attention have the greatest possibility of improving, but sooner or later, the high performing schools can fall and will be in need of
assistance from the reform strategists. The cycle of reform continues and allows many districts to serve as places to experiment with supposedly “cutting edge” reform strategies.

Unfortunately, these reform strategies, such as school closings, often take place in poor underserved communities consisting mainly of Blacks and Latinos (Lipman & Haines, 2007). With the mission of improving schools, reform efforts often ignore the needs of the communities in which these schools reside. So closing and/or restructuring schools does not alleviate the problems faced by the students and families residing in the impacted school districts. Structural inequalities in these neighborhoods are constant and reform efforts are lacking when they ignore factors that exist for families outside of the school (Galletta and Ayata, 2008).

Smyth (2006) argues that recent reform efforts are actually recycled “recipes” from previous efforts. These practices include: longer school days, more time on task, longer school year, more qualified teachers, national standards in core subjects, etc. In every new rendition of school reform efforts, many of these tasks are part of the formula but are given different names to stress the “newness” and potential of the next edition of reform efforts. In order to create a program that actually has a chance for success he calls for reformists to consider programs that include the lives, cultures, experiences, family backgrounds, and aspirations of the students. Without this focus, reform efforts are at the outset, doomed for failure. “In other words, we need to explore them from the standpoint or ‘positional lenses’ (Glazier 2005) of the existential experiences of young people, and from there, begin to construct more feasible reform platforms from which to pursue forms of school organization, culture and leadership that acknowledge those important
realities,” (Smyth, 2006, p. 288). This is key as we attempt to understand how and why some students succeed in school and why others fail in school, why some students disengage, and why some resist the structures of schooling. Centering the students and their voices is needed for reform efforts to allow students to be empowered and invested in the educational process. This practice of centering also allows students to be seen as partners in their educational success and not as “bundles of pathologies” (Smyth, 2006) that need our assistance to be fixed and made whole.

The existing qualitative studies on school reform often emphasize struggles and problems related to the experiences of students and families, yet few studies have examined the experiences of students impacted by the closing of urban schools (Kirshner, et. al., 2010). The studies that do discuss the experiences of students displaced by school closure tend to focus on the experiences entering a new school or a restructured school after one year. I was not able to find any studies that dealt with students being displaced and then later called back to be educated in their former school space as a left over population of students. They were not placed in smaller academies or sent to a higher performing school. They were "left over" displaced and replaced due to lack of space. They existed in the school as unwanted students in a building that used to be their educational home. This research tells that story through their voices and my observations in this dismantled space.
The Definition of a Dismantled School

“To deprive or strip of apparatus, furniture, equipment, defenses, etc.’
“To disassemble or pull down; take apart.”

“To take to pieces; to destroy the integrity or functioning of...”

The above definitions are key to understanding the state of the Arnita Grace Academy. This school, as a part of district efforts to “reform and revolutionize” education, was dismantled in the midst of remaining open to educate students during a year of transition. AGA used to be a middle school and was later transformed into a K-8 school during a time of fiscal tightening and bold views of innovative educational strategies. A few years later, the students of AGA were again victimized by the notice of another school closing…their own. As previously described, the students in AGA were dispersed throughout the Lincoln City School District until they ran out of space to house the students leaving AGA. In an effort to ensure students had a place to call their educational home, it was decided that the 7th grade students in AGA, would remain in the building to complete 8th grade in the coming year. In addition to these changes, the specialized high school, STEM High, was temporarily relocated to the building formerly known as Arnita Grace Academy, while their building was being renovated. In the end, the AGA building became a high school, with a “leftover” population of 8th grade students being educated in a small section of the building…their building. Experiencing this setting, and the constant maneuvering, is what led me to describe this school as a dismantled educational space—not for all students—but mainly the students from AGA
that were left behind. Most of the old furniture remained, but the operation of the school was halted, taken apart, and reshaped into what was a quasi-middle-high school. In reference to one of the above descriptions of “dismantled,” this school was “taken to pieces,” and the school’s “integrity and functioning,” was destroyed as it related to the residents in 8th grade. All of the signs on the outside of the building were labeled, “Arnita Academy,” but on the inside all posters, office signs, student and teacher descriptions, and announcements all referred to the school as “STEM High.” Even with the 8th graders in the building, who were not considered students in STEM High, none of the announcements acknowledged their presence in name. They were not part of the high school and their former school did not exist. These students existed and finished the academic year in a perplexing state of educational and spatial limbo.

The Writings on the Wall: Articulations of being dismantled

When first deciding on a term to describe the educational space, I struggled with using “dismantled” as a descriptor. Was the place really taken apart? Was it stripped down to its bare bones? Even though, after my observations, I sensed the students were not necessarily nurtured in the building and seemed like left over problems, I was not sure if the students or teachers I interviewed would see things in the same light. I knew what I was seeing, but I was not sure if my processing of the behaviors was accurate or far-fetched. While talking to Ms. Gusto, one of the main eighth grade teachers, my observations and initial assumptions were confirmed. My thoughts of seeing the school as a dismantled space was not a far-fetched understanding, but rather a shared understanding in agreement with some of the other adults in the building, even though
they used a different terminology to describe the space. During one of my conversations with Ms. Gusto, she vividly described a space that was similar to my idea of a dismantled space.

The murals were painted over. Their pictures got taken down. It was as if the students were not wanted in this space. I felt it and I’m sure the students felt it. They are not dumb. They are very perceptive. They knew why they were left in the building and they could sense how people felt about them by the ways they were treated. The students knew what was going on and that they were not welcomed. We all knew it.

As one of the teachers who spent a great deal of time with the students, Ms. Gusto was well aware of what had taken place in the school. Her description of the murals is a shining example of the former identity that was removed from the school building. Imagine leaving your house and coming back to see your family portraits replaced with portraits of another family now living in the same place. Not only are their pictures on the wall, you are now told that you have to live in the basement. This is what the students were facing with the painted over murals, pictures removed; relegated to a small place, their identities in their former building had been destroyed. As stated by Ms. Gusto, the students were very aware of their treatment. The students were extremely perceptive and were able to articulate their feeling related to these actions of being taken over. These students, although not viewed as adults and often pushed to the side as “immature adolescents” were very insightful in their perception of their treatment in this space. They often talked about not being respected and not feeling wanted in their school.
All attachment to their place of learning was severed and students came to school every day “just trying to make it” and finish the year.

During an interview, Ms. Gusto reflected on her first experiences with meeting the students at the beginning of the school year when she started as one of their main teachers. She was thrust into the space, with little training and expected to work miracles with the students. The previous teacher had left and about two weeks into the semester, Ms. Gusto was called in to serve.

I came in and I was getting full-time teacher pay but technically I was considered a long-term sub. A long-term sub for the year. I started a week into the school year. There was a teacher they had the week or two before me but that didn't work out. She left. I think she was fired…In the first week. It didn’t go well with her and the kids. Well she wasn't really fired, she was removed from the class and relocated to a different position. I saw a lot of good in the kids. There is no such thing as a bad kid. There is such a thing as bad school environments. And that was a very bad school environment. And this was a very bad deal that they had been cut. Not just that particular year but throughout their whole schooling experience. A lot of them had been to other schools that had been shut down. This was supposed to be their last year of middle school where they were going to be the oldest but that didn't happen. They were shoved into this little corner of their own school. And it was very clear that they weren't wanted. They weren't wanted there.

This is key to understanding the environment in which the students were educated. Ms. Gusto’s description of the students “not being wanted” was in line with what I witnessed.
For example, I didn’t sense an ethic of care or love when I saw the interactions of school officials and the eighth grade students. There were times when students were aggressively questioned to ensure they were not breaking any rules. This usually happened when a student was walking down the hallway. When students arrived, they were greeted with adults in the lobby telling them where they needed to be. Students and teachers did not exchange greetings in the morning. Instead, students were greeted with early morning directives. From my observations, it seemed as if the students were in fact mostly just tolerated as during the school day. In addition to their treatment in this school, it is also important to understand her concern with the past educational experiences of these students. Again, this was not the first time they were faced with a school closing. They had been exposed to educational disappointments throughout their time as students in this school district. As a result, many students lacked a sense of trust when dealing with adults in the school. Without trust, it proved difficult for many of the adults to build positive relationships with the students.

Ms. Gusto also points out that the students who remained in the school were forced to take classes in a small section of the building. The former K-8 school had been transformed into a high school and the 8th grade students existed in limbo. They were not part of the high school and their former school was shut down and removed from the district website and brochures. So if the students were asked what school they attended, there was no real answer that they could give. They could only describe the situation to give people a sense of where they were attending school. During my observations and after understanding all that happened leading up to their 8th grade year I assumed all of the chaos would have an impact on their psyche. Much of the reform had been focused
on cost saving measures, but the emotional state of the students involved in the administratively driven reform was not taken into consideration. Many of the decisions seemed to show little concern for the students and families impacted by the mandated change in their home school districts. Ms. Gusto reflected on the impact the reform efforts had on the students in her classroom:

I think it [dismantling/reform] definitely has a severe psychological impact on the students. More so than we can probably comprehend. I think that it probably hurts them a lot. I mean for a lot of them, school is their strongest identity that they have. Whether they like it or not, particularly that's part of it. I mean, having that ripped away from them so many times it has to be confusing to them. I mean it's got to be really traumatizing. A lot of it came out in their behavior. I think a lot of that stuff had to do with it. I think they wanted that structure but it was taken away from them. They really only had well, two full-time teachers that were their teachers. But halfway through the year their math teacher started teaching in the high school. He was replaced by a sub. And so that had to be hard for them. I understood the decision [to close the school] but I think that was hard for them.

One of the key points articulated by Ms. Gusto is the impact all of the change had on the students’ behavior. During my observations, I saw many of the students “acting out” in class and spending numerous hours in the main office or suspension room. You would find students having loud verbal outbursts toward teachers. Students would often leave the classroom without permission after getting frustrated with a teacher. It is hard to fathom that much learning could take place when students were spending large amounts
of time outside of the places for instruction. For some students, doing something to get kicked out of class was seen as a good thing because it allowed them to leave the class and roam the hallways before being caught by security and escorted to the principal’s office. The school was a chaotic space and the setup did not function well. Students would find any reason to leave class so they could roam the hallways. Most classes started 10-15 minutes late after teachers were able to get classed settled. The students were attentive to the chaos and aware of the lack of organization in the building. After picking up on the spirit of the building, the students acted accordingly. Students behaved in ways that were allowed to take place. When they participated in certain behaviors and realized that they were always allowed back into the classroom space, the behavior continued. When nothing is done to enforce a civil environment, it is as if the school accepted certain behaviors students exhibited.

From my initial observations, (a few weeks into the school year) I wanted to know if the behaviors I witnessed were any different when the school year started. In response to my inquiry, Ms. Gusto reflected on her entry as a teacher for the 8th grade students.

I will probably never forget that day. Because the kids…when I walked in it was the biggest chaotic mess I have ever seen in my life. They weren't sitting in their seats; they were throwing things. They were pushing desks over. You would've thought I walked into a movie. And so the first thing I said was are you guys for real? I couldn't believe that it was real. Like the movie “Lean on Me” or something. (Laughing). Because they were just out of control. I mean eventually I got them in their seats and ready, but, yeah. And literally I walked in, in the
morning and I got the key from the principal. And he said good luck. He said good luck. He told me that he thought I could handle it and good luck. It was interesting. I mean I have a lot of respect for him. And I'm not saying anything bad about him. He's a great principal. I guess I think he knew I was up for the challenge and that I would do whatever it took to be successful. Yeah I survived (laughing).

Another supporting example of some of the chaos that existed is on any given day, the start of class will always be delayed. For instance, in a 40-50 minute class period, at least the first 10-15 minutes was spent on getting everyone settled and searching for students remaining in the hallway. There was continual interruption from students knocking on the door to look for friends, and from the overhead speaker used to play announcements and to page students to come to the main office. At any given time, an interruption could take place that would halt the lesson and require another 5-10 minutes to get everyone focused again on the task at hand.

**Student Responses to the School Closing**

As previously stated, the students were not involved in the decision to close the school and were not notified of the changes in their school attendance plan until the start of the school year. I wanted to understand the process by which the students were notified as well as the impact the new schooling setup had on the boys. In this section, I describe the young men’s responses to questions about when they found out about their selected school and their thoughts about the process. They were open about their disappointment with how things were handled in addition to how they were treated in the school. One of
the students, Wallace, begins by describing how he was notified about where he would attend school.

We thought we were going to the other school because we had to pick out a choice of what school you want to go to. They didn't tell us...I didn't even know I was coming back. I didn’t know what school I was going to until the day before classes started. The day before school started we didn't know what school we were going to. The only way we found out was because they sent us bus schedules and we looked on the bus schedules and it said the school we were going to! So that's how I found out what school I was going to. That's how I found out that we were going back to the same building!

Wallace displayed anger and frustration when discussing how he found out about the school closing. Throughout the year, the students heard rumors of their school being closed but they were not sure if it would actually take place. As Kenny describes, once they were informed the school was closing, students had to submit registration paperwork and pick from a list of schools in the district that were in close proximity to their place of residence.

In the summer, we got a letter to decide what school we wanted to go to for the eighth grade and stuff like that. After we filled it out and sent it back, we then got a letter right before school saying we would need to return to our old school. I had three choices: Lenny, Rucker, and Duke. So I chose Rucker. I thought I was going there. So right before school started and I heard I had to go back to Arnita I decided to go there. I didn’t really want to start over at a new school.
The school selection process was not carried out in an expedient nor efficient manner. The students spent much of the summer waiting and wondering what school they would be accepted to for their last year in middle school. Some of the students were nervous because of the implications of going to a new school for the last year of middle school. In addition to being in a new place with limited social connections, students were concerned about issues related to neighborhood turf battles. In the city, there were lines drawn in many places. These territorial lines depended on where a person lived or spent most of his time. They determined if he could go to certain sections of the city and be safe. There was a history of violence between people from different sides of town and the transition to a new school could complicate the lives of students facing a potential move. What happens if the only space available is on a rival side of town? What happens if a student has to travel through a rival neighborhood to get to his school? These were real issues facing the students as they waited to be notified about their placement in the school district.

According to the students, there was not a real plan or timeline for them to use when deciding on where they would attend school. The students were “shocked” to be returning to the same building, but were somewhat relieved when they knew some of their friends would share in their last year in middle school. Some of the comfort was lessened when they entered school for the fall and realized that although they were in the same school building, much of what they knew about the school had been changed…a new high school was sharing the space with them for the remainder of the year.

In response to the question about being informed about the closing of the school and finding out he was returning to the same building, Jeffrey echoed a similar sentiment
to Wallace. He too was surprised by the notification that he would be attending the same school.

We all thought we were going to different schools! So from the time we left seventh grade we didn't know anything. Yeah. And then we ain’t even know that the other school moved in! We didn’t find out that it was gonna be another school there until we showed up at school.

Jeffrey’s concern about school placement was similar to the other students. They all thought they were going to different schools and had no idea that coming back to the same building would be an option. After coming back to their former building, the students then realized that what they knew as their school was no more. The place had been refashioned into a temporary high school in which their former middle school did not exist. Students were expecting one thing, but were met with something totally different when the year started. Many of the students struggled in this new environment and I will discuss more about their struggles later in the chapter.

During one of our interview sessions, I asked students if everything was done in what they had described as a secretive manner. I wondered if their parents had been notified earlier and just may have not shared the news with the students. They were adamant that “nobody knew nothing” when it came to the school closing. They were not notified and their parents were not privy to any information about the school reform plans until they started the school year. Wallace shares his views on the people who had information on the school plans:
I'm sure other people knew but not the students; we just showed up and there was another school in the building. I mean they already knew there was a school coming there but they just didn't say it to us! They just kept telling us that we were leaving and weren't coming back so we weren’t supposed to be here. We were supposed to be at some other schools. But then they told us at the last minute that we had to come back!

Again, students and families were kept out of the loop when facing their educational future that rested in the hands of administrators carrying out reform efforts. The district administrators knew what would take place, but this information was not transferred to the students or their families. In addition to the students, the families were also impacted by the ways in which the notifications of reform plans were disseminated.

Sweeney, one of the more outspoken students, voiced his mixed concerns about the school closing. According to him, he cares, but really does not care about what happens to the school. In response to a question about his feelings related to the school closure, he responded:

I don’t really care. The school closed but it don't matter. A school is a school. It don't matter! But it does make me mad sometimes that people just always think they gonna just come here and run stuff when this is our school. Like the eighth grade students, this is our school; we was here last year. They were not here last year; their school is somewhere downtown. The name that's imprinted on this building is [Arnita]. It does not say [STEM High]. This ain't their school, this is our school. I think it bothers some students. Because nobody likes them [high
school students, teachers, and administrators] because they came in our building.

They treat us eighth graders like little kids in this building. I mean, I don’t know.

Honestly I really don’t care what they got to say because this is my building.

Sweeney often displayed mixed emotions about the school closing. There were times when he seemed as if the school closing did not make much of a difference to him, but then there were other times when he reflected on the process of the school closing and became upset with the current situation facing the students. His saying “I don’t care” seemed like a distancing strategy. He talks about the building with a sense of ownership, “…this is our school.” This feeling of belonging ran throughout the interactions with the students. They were looking forward to being the oldest students in the building and finishing the year as the older, more popular students of the eight grade graduating class. However, they came back to a new school, in their old building, and were knocked down plenty of rungs on the social ladder. Although Sweeney stated that he did not care about the closing, his body language and affective disposition often told a different story. During the discussions about the school’s closing and the impact on students he often raised his voice, shook his head from side to side (as if he was disappointed), and he became animated when reflecting on what “used to be” his school building. At times he struggled with his emotions and hid his hurt behind his “tough guy” persona, but during days when we walked through the halls and he complained, he was clear about the fact that he thought he and his fellow eighth graders were not being treated well in the building.

Sweeney is a brilliant young man who always had interesting things to say about a number of topics. It took a while for him to let you in, but once he trusted you, he was more open about his feelings and his aspirations. He did well in most of his classes, but he
also tended to get in trouble in school. Respect was very important to him and when reflecting on the process of the school reform he experienced, he did not feel he was respected. “How they just gonna come up in the building and act like this ain’t our school?”

For him, the new schooling process revolved around a lack of respect for him and his peers. He figured, things would have been handled in a different manner if they respected them. For those in the building that knew Sweeney, they understood that he did not stand for being disrespected. It did not matter if you were an adult or one of his peers, if you disrespected him, you needed to brace yourself for what was to follow. He was not a student who was afraid to voice his opinions and depending on the day, he would very freely share his opinion in whatever way he deemed necessary. From our discussions, I sense that he did not like to feel as if he was not worthy of respect. Again, he felt the school changes were signs of disrespect and was not afraid to let others know about it.

**Changes in Student Behavior after the Announcement of the Closing**

Previously in this chapter I discussed how the students found out they would be returning to their former building. In the following section, I will focus on the stories the students told about finding out their school would be closed. When I first met the students, they were in seventh grade looking forward to their last year in middle school and making the transition to high school. I first met them through a manhood training program that was created and directed by a high school gym teacher in the district. Clark was a white male and attended school throughout his life with people of color. He had served as a gym teacher and coach for a number of years in the school district and was dedicated to ensuring that students finished high school. He saw what was happening to young black men in the school district, and he developed his program to combat the obstacles facing men of color.
in public schools. Most of the teachers working with the program were white males, but he felt it was important for students to see men of color in community and leadership positions. In an attempt to introduce students to men of color in the community, he held “vibe sessions” once a month when men of color would come in and conduct a workshop with the students. This is how I met the students. I was asked to give a presentation on my journey to and advanced education. I agreed and told the students my story. I spoke to them about my struggles, insecurities, near death experiences, and the loss of friends to death and prison. I shared with them a few of the strategies I used to stay focused that helped me see beyond my obstacles. A few weeks after my presentation, I ran into Clark and he asked me to come back to work with the young men. He mentioned that he never saw them so engaged and taking notes in the past. He thought I really connected with them and that I could be a great model for the young men. I agreed and went back to work with them on a few occasions. This was my entry into the lives of the students.

After the announcement of the school closing, I noticed a change in behavior of many of the students I connected with during the manhood program. Students that were once considered by teachers to be the “good students” were now acting in ways that did not fit their previously ascribed status. In one of the interviews with students, I talked to them about the behavioral shift that I noticed in an attempt to see if they witnessed any changes after they received the announcement the school would be closing. I also wanted to see how they understood the reasons for the school closure.

According to Jeffrey, “I heard it from somebody and I didn’t believe it. They said it but I didn't think that it was truth. Then I saw that they weren't playing around [about
closing the school. And I was mad! I liked [Arnita].” Another student, Wallace reflected on the reasons he was given for the school closure.

They told us they was closing it because of our test grades. Then they said it was because of the budget. But then they said some schools had to go and then they looked at the schools with the lowest test grades and then they said it was us, [Arnita] we had to go to.

Jeffrey reflected on how people from the outside, looking in probably viewed the school closing.

When [outside] people heard that the school was closing, they probably would be like look at those bad ass kids. I don't think that [outside] people were shocked that it was closing because people probably look at the school and was like look at those dumb kids. “Those are dumb kids” so they probably thought that we should have a closed.

At this point, students were not told what would happen to them and where they would attend school for their eighth grade year. They just knew the school was being closed and they would need to select another school. They also were not given a reason as to why the school needed to be closed. Some students thought it was because of the budget, while others figured it had something to do with their academic performance level in the school. Nothing was very clear for the students. This would prove to be a very confusing and eventful close to the current year and beginning of the next year.

As mentioned before I noticed a behavioral shift for certain students and this shift correlated with the time that the notice of closure was given. One of my most noticeable
observations came from Sweeney. He seemed to be affected by the decision to close his school. For him, after he knew the school was closing, he just “didn’t care” much about what happened after.

I was like “F” [AGA] I don't like them anyway. So students’ behavior started to change. People start getting out of hand when we found out that the school was closing. They said I was bad so I was doing everything (getting in trouble/misbehaving). So when we found out that we will be closing we would be like ‘yo let’s go out like we started off.’ We wanted to just go out like if they say we started bad we wanted to go out bad. People were just cutting up.

His description of the behavioral changes he noticed and participated in seemed somewhat reactionary to how they were perceived in the school and in relation to the closing of the school. He admits to noticing more students “getting out of hand” after the announcement of the closing, but also articulates that he felt some students were already getting into trouble. For him, it seems as if the decision to close meant the people did not care about the students and since adults did not care, they would not care. Sweeney and some of his peers attempted to “go out with a bang” and make their last year in the building a memorable one. For instance, when asked about his views on student behavior after the announcement, Jeffrey reflected on what he thought were the issues at hand.

As it relates to behavior, we was doing everything we weren't supposed to do. That's what they were doing. People was just breaking all the rules. Stuff that we weren't supposed to do that's what we were doing.
Jeffrey saw the behaviors as a reaction to the notice of the school closing. Another student, Kenny, reflected on his views of the changes in student behavior. He not only referred to the end of 7th grade, but he felt that the “bad behavior” carried over to the dismantled year. Kenny was one of the students who got sent out of class on multiple occasions, but most of the teachers reported to me that he was a smart kid that just did not put forth a full effort most of the time.

After we heard about it and they told us we would be the last class, that’s when all the bad stuff started happening. We knew, either way, there wasn’t gonna be much people to fail the grade. ‘Cause it was the last class they wasn’t really gonna do nothing to us. They wasn’t gonna fail nobody or hold them back since we were the last class. Pretty much we were told that we were gonna pass anyway. So once they told us that, nobody was really worried about their work and stuff. They just came to school for a party every day. That’s why it’s so much trouble in Arnita. Nobody really concentrated on work cause they already know they gonna get through to the next grade.

Since they thought they were not coming back to the building, students reported to me that they had nothing to lose by disrupting school for the last few weeks of seventh grade. In addition, students had an idea they would not get left back, so for some, schoolwork became irrelevant. There were days during my observations where I saw students take a worksheet, write their name on it, and then leave it on the desk. They left it there without an attempt to complete the assignment. Although the students reported they did not care, these behaviors did not have a positive impact on their treatment in the school building. Later in the dissertation I address the discipline policies that were implemented at the end of the 7th
grade year and during the eighth grade year when they returned to the building. It seemed as if the rules they faced in the dismantled school were created in reaction to the ways in which the students decided to end their seventh grade year. For instance, Jeffrey’s comments give us insight and foreshadow the perceived reasons surrounding the harsh disciplinary environment these students faced upon entering the school for eighth grade. In the text below, Jeffrey reflects on how the reputation of the seventh grade exploits followed them into the eighth grade.

A lot of eighth graders got in trouble. They just weren’t playing with us. Well they had a bad word on us last year about our records. About what happened [at the end of seventh grade] and stuff so that followed us. So they tried…they started to treat us how they thought we would act. Ever since this generation of kids started in the seventh grade, it just seemed like that was the group of kids that continuously got in trouble at that school. Even when we got new teachers a new principal and stuff like that we were always seen as a bad group of kids in the grade.

The disciplinary practices during the eighth grade year seemed to have been based on the students past behaviors. According to a few teachers, the new administration came in ready to deal with potential disciplinary problems. According to Ms. Gusto and other teachers, they did not want the kids to think they were going to “run the school.” The administrative team prepared for the students and ruled with an iron fist. They were ready to squash any behavioral problem in an effort to avoid a repeat of the disarray experienced during the final few weeks of the seventh grade after students were informed of the school’s closing.
Although some of the students mentioned having fun during the end of seventh grade, students were not being academically prepared for the eighth grade. Since they had an almost guaranteed promotion to the next grade, students reported a lack of academic focus. For Kenny, he did not feel prepared to be successful in the next grade. Kenny goes on to describe the outcomes and educational impact the unstructured space had on student learning.

Most of the stuff in school [from seventh grade] I couldn’t even remember. It was because of behavior. Most of the time because of behavior we were never really able to learn anything. None of the important stuff we were supposed to learn for the next grade and stuff like that. Really, we were not well prepared.

During class sessions with all of the yelling, running around, students going in and out of the classroom at random times, much of the time allotted for teaching was used trying to calm everyone down and get them in their places. Once this task was accomplished, although not always successfully, the remaining time in the classroom flew by and from what I noticed, very little tangible learning was taking place. The structure of the school was not conducive to the educational success of the students. The notice of the school closing and the behavior that ensued, created a dysfunctional school environment that spilled over to the eighth grade academic year. As a result, administrators and teachers focused on discipline while students continued to struggle and regress academically. Relationships were strained and students resisted the rules of the school. I will discuss more of this in the second data chapter. With all of the daily turmoil, students struggled to find ways to survive in the chaotic atmosphere of the school. In the next section I discuss one of the survival strategies used by a group of students.
Strategies for Survival: The “Wolf Pac”

Wolves are an extremely social animal. They exist as a social unit called a pack. Wolves travel and hunt in a group and perform almost all other activities in the company of fellow wolves. The pack, the basic unit of wolf social life, is usually a family group. It is made up of animals related to each other by blood and family ties of affection and mutual aid.

http://animals.nationalgeographic.com

“Man, those are my dudes. It’s always us. We gotta look out for each other. If one of us is slipping we make sure we get them to pick it up. We stay on each other. Those are my boys. That’s all I hang out with” states Wallace. In order to survive in school three of the young men in this study formed a group and refer to themselves as the “Wolf Pac.” The group started with four members, but one of them left to attend a different school. This is a crew they created to stay on top of one another in school and ensure everyone is doing what he needs to do in order to be successful in the school environment. The group was formed in response to their treatment in the school. It also served as an accountability group to keep the group members from falling into the behavioral practices of some of their peers. Out of the group, Sweeney was the one who had a disciplinary past, so the group also helped to keep him out of trouble. According to the students, they bonded to serve as a place of safety in the midst of an uncertain environment. They had experienced a school closing as well as a school dismantling. Students mentioned not knowing what the next issue would be. They had a teacher leave in the beginning of the year who was replaced by an inexperienced long-term substitute. A few months later, one of their math teachers was relocated and they were given another long term substitute without any plans of getting a permanent replacement. With all of the changes, students did not know what to expect as it related to the functioning of the
school. Students mentioned feeling uncertain about what would happen for the remainder of their eighth grade year. The Wolf Pac was one of the ways the students dealt with the uncertainty of the school.

All of the students in the group knew one other in the past, but the alliance was forged during their time in the dismantled school. This group of young men spends time playing games, sports, and “chillin” at each other’s house. After one of our weekend meetings, I was driving the young men around to drop them off at home. When we got to Sweeney’s house, after he got out of the car, Wallace yelled out, “yo what’s up with those polos?” I didn’t think much of it. When I was about to pull away, they asked me to wait a minute and Sweeney ran in the house and a few minutes later emerged with three long-sleeve, multi-colored polo/rugby shirts. He gave them to Wallace, proceeded to do their intricate handshake, and then went back into the house. I asked Wallace if he had left his shirts at Sweeney’s house and he then informed me that those were shirts that Sweeney didn’t wear any more. The shirts were a “gift” to his fellow Wolf Pac member. Wallace said that he didn’t have a lot of clothes, so Sweeney was just “looking out for him” and gave him some shirts. This was one of the first times when I found out about the group they formed. I knew they were cool with one another and spent time together, but I had no idea they had named a group and established rules for it. They practiced tough love with one another. If one of the boys started to slack off, the other two members had no problem with letting the “slacking” member know that he needed to get his act together. For instance, they would constantly check on Jeffrey to make sure he did his homework. When they found out the he was not turning in assignments, they would constantly pressure him to get the work done. They spent plenty of time hanging
out in school, joking and making fun of each other, wrestling, and protecting one another. They were the closest friends in the group. They were friends with the other young men in the study, but they were especially fond of those in the Pac. When asked why they formed the group they told me it was done in order to ensure they all would be successful and make it to high school. Sweeney is credited with naming the group and below he talks about why he decided on the name for the group. He was inspired by the three doctors from New Jersey that made a pact to stay together and become doctors. All of them were successful and went onto become successful doctors.

Well I based the name off the book [We Beat the Streets]. Because I wanted to be successful. We all wanted to be successful. We knew each other, but we all got closer during football season this year and last year. We kinda chilled before, but we got a lot closer. Like one day we were all together and I was just like, we gonna be the Wolf Pac. Yeah. It stuck, and now we always together. We always together.

Wallace also elaborated on the idea behind the Pac.

Wallace:

The purpose of the Wolf Pac is so that we can all progress and go somewhere in our life. If there is one person that is slipping up, there are three more people to make sure we get back on our feet, you know? If the Wolf Pac didn’t exist, not only would I not know Sweeney and Jeffrey, but Jeff would probably have gotten left back, and Sweeney probably would be in a detention center or juvenile hall or something. I probably would have transferred or something by now. That’s
about it. If it wasn’t for the group, we would have fell apart. We would have been lost in the shuffle.

For the students, the Pac was more than a group of friends. Wallace’s description of the group points to a much deeper need for the formation and the close ties among them. They were well aware of the circumstances they faced as well as the experiences of other students who were not as lucky to have a system of peer support. At times this group served as a “resistance regulatory machine.” One of the group members, Sweeney, had a pretty short temper. He did not have a problem reacting to teachers and letting them know how he felt and what he had on his mind. He was a good student and received respectable grades, but his temper got him in trouble on numerous occasions. He had been kicked out of class, referred to in-school suspension, and had been out of school for multiple days of suspension. The boys in the Pac always tried to calm him down and get him to think before he reacted. At times their harsh words of warning worked and at other times, he did not listen and ended up in a worse position.

When Wallace stated, “Jeff would probably have gotten left back,” he understood that by them pressuring Jeff to complete his assignments, they were able to ensure he made adequate progress and didn’t get lost in the shuffle of existing in the school. In the exchange below, the Pac talks about how they help Jeff stay on top of his assignments:

Sweeney: If somebody needs help, we help them. If things are going wrong, we try to fix it.

Jeffrey: They always making sure I do my homework. Making sure I got my classwork.

Wallace: He be lying sometimes though.
Jeffrey: Yeah. Like I never used to do homework. A lot. I never used to do my homework. I just didn’t do it. I do it now. Now I do the work. Now it’s like I try to stay on track. They keep me on track cause I get off track easy.

Wallace interjected with a statement on the importance of education for the group.

We stay focused and help everyone out. Like I’m in this program called Affirmative Ed. They were talking about colleges and stuff so I bring them with me. It’s an academic thing. It’s a college preparatory program. You have to be invited. I got invited into the program, so I just bring them along with me.

This is one example of how they work to ensure that they are not only doing well socially but academically. When I asked for another example of the Pac in action they reflected on a time when Sweeney would have been kicked out of school for fighting if the Pac had not intervened. Wallace stated:

Like if Sweeney is about to fight someone, we cool him out. Like one time at lunch, this guy knocked down Swee’s girlfriend’s tray and Swee told him to go get another one. Then another boy jumped in and said “you don’t gotta get that bitch anything” and then Sweeney just went crazy. Jeff was there, I wasn’t there.

So he saved him and kept him from fighting.

In addition, he knew that their protection of Sweeney and helping to control his temper, kept him out of trouble and out of a juvenile detention center. Their bond was needed in order for the students to be able to face their harsh educational realities.

Their tight bond also helped them in building relationships with certain teachers in the building. Even though they were always together, they were not viewed as a group of troublemakers; even though individually some of them received multiple disciplinary
sanctions. Some of the adults knew the boys protected one another, respected the bond and used it, at times, to reach members of the group. Wallace describes ways in which the principal has used the group to communicate messages to individuals.

‘Cause my whole thing is this, other people know the wolf pac. Teachers, students, coaches. We not just some random group of boys. Because of the wolf pac, teachers know us. There are times when Mr. Principal will say to me, “go talk to Sweeney, he’s not having a good day.” Or he has asked me, “Hey Wallace, can you call Jeff? He wasn’t here for first block.” And I’ll be like alright.

These young men worked to ensure the success of all group members. They were not being educated in the most ideal situation, but they still found ways to try and push through the mess towards success. These students were resilient and defiant. They decided to take action to preserve their futures. The story of brotherhood, survival, resilience is a testimony to the fire burning inside of them to see beyond their current circumstances. Even with seeing despair all around them, these young men still had hope. They had hope for a brighter future and it did not matter if they had outside help. As long as they had the Pac, that is all they needed to survive.

**Closing**

In this chapter I highlighted the experiences articulated by a teacher and the young men as it related to the closing of the school. The teacher articulated the impact the closing had on the students and the resulting changes in their behavior. It became increasingly difficult for the teachers to reach the students as a result of the way the
closing was implemented. The students articulated their frustrations with the school closing and the reasons for their behavioral shifts. The students mentioned feeling hurt, ignored, and disrespected as a result of the takeover of their school. The environment created in the school was not conducive to the success of the eighth grade students remaining in the building. If students are not successful in school, the chances are little for them to be successful in life.
CHAPTER 5

“ALL EYES ON ME”: DISCIPLINE, SURVEILLANCE, AND THE CONTROL OF BLACK MALE BODIES

“Let’s go! Keep it moving. It shouldn’t take that long to get to class. Stop clowning around. Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go. Move it. Out of the hallways and into class. The bell just rung and yall gonna be late. Let’s go.”

“Why are you in the hallway? Do you have a pass? Well go get a pass and then you can go to the bathroom. How many times you gotta go to the bathroom?”

In this chapter I argue that the intense focus on student behavior and classroom management creates an environment where student learning becomes secondary to good behavior. Rather than focusing on student needs in the classroom, a considerable amount of time is spent on the controlling of the student masses in attempt to ensure they “stay in line” and submit to the authority structure in the school. This adversarial relationship between students and the adults that worked in the school often caused conflict for students who resisted. Students were policed and harassed inside and outside of school, but school served as the space where students felt they had the power to resist. This resistance in a sense represents self-dignity, yet often put students in a subordinate position when dealing with the consequences of their actions of resistance. Many students spent a large amount of time out of class, thus negatively impacting their educational progress and attainment. More descriptions of observed incidents as well as articulations from student will follow to situate my analysis of the relationship between the students and surveillance in the school space.
The Perfection of Power: Panopticons, Punishment, and Pupils

This section of the chapter is an analysis that draws on Foucault, of the experiences of Black adolescent males and the surveillance and control of their bodies in a dismantled educational setting and beyond.

“Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so...It is an important mechanism, for it automatizes and disindividualizes power...The panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power.

(Foucault, 1995, pp. 201-202)

The traditional view of the panopticon as a tower that oversees all inmates, students, madmen, etc. does not exist in the same manner in the school setting. When I think of the surveillance in the school, it is not in the sense of a tower with a guard. The guard in the tower is supposed to inflict upon the inmate the idea that there is no private moment and is always being watched. Not only should the inmate think she/he is being watched when someone is in the tower, but they are to have the idea that they could be under watchful eyes even if they do not know for sure if a guard is present in the tower. The panopticon is used to represent actual and perceived surveillance in a way that the watched will change behavior and submit to the power structure and control.

Traditionally in a schooling context, the “inmate” is the student and takes on the role of the masses that need to be watched and controlled. I focused on the discipline and control of the student’s bodies, but as I observed actions in the school, it became
increasingly clear that the students were not the only ones in the building under constant surveillance. The teachers, who watched over the students, were also victims of surveillance. Teachers were concerned with administrators coming into their classrooms and getting an idea that they didn’t have control of the classroom. This fear of being watched and judged by administrators created an environment where patience was short and discipline was swift for any student that would make the teacher “look bad” in the eyes of the administrative surveillers. In this environment, the students and the teachers are regulated under the disciplinary gaze.

The school building was not set up with a central tower nor traditional cells as described above. However, the same result was accomplished. The panopticon was placed centrally to give those under its guise the impression of being constantly watched. Those being watched did not necessarily know whether or not the tower was occupied, but the simple fact of its presence results in people feeling as if they are watched. This knowledge of surveillance or the possibility of surveillance places the individual in a state of self-regulation in attempt to act according to stated policies or mandates from those in power. As it related to the students, the panopticon existed throughout the building. The principal’s office was not the only place students were watched. They could run into guards (adults) at any point of the day during their normal travels. During the break between classes, most teachers opened their classrooms doors and stood in the hallway to ensure traffic was moving at a reasonable pace and that students were not hanging or playing around and not getting to their next assigned station. Some teachers, with a free period, roamed the hallways and stairwells during class switch breaks. There were also security guards and a police officer stationed in the main hallway to ensure
students were doing what they needed to be doing and getting to where they needed to be going. So at all points in time during the school day, the students were constantly under surveillance.

There were not many places to hide in the school building as a result of the adult placement through the school. Even on occasions when students were in class and I was walking through the hallway with a student I was shadowing for the day, I would see students looking around, making sure they weren’t being watched. In the beginning of my time in the building, if a student was horse playing and they noticed me, they would stop and react to me as if I were one of the employees of the district. After some time in the building, the students realized I was not a teacher or administrator, and observed me “hanging out” with some of their peers they stopped reacting to my presence in the same way they did in the past. Unknowingly at the time, I attempted to practice what Nancy Mandell (1988) calls the “least-adult role” when conducting research with young people. She states this role, “suspends adult notions of cognitive, social, and intellectual superiority and minimizes physical differences by advocating that adult researchers closely follow children’s ways and interact with children within their own perspective,” (pg. 464). Some would “calm down” if I was around, but they didn’t react to me in the same manner I observed them reacting to other adults in the school space. They would continue to act up and run through the hallways, but the students that I had a relationship with would try to “chill out” when I was around. I served as a reminder that they could get into trouble at any moment. I do not think I served as part of the surveillance team, but I would remind them that people are around the corner waiting for them to get out of line. My intention was to ensure that the students did not get punished for their behavior,
but my interactions with them, serving as a reminder, could actually be described as being part of the panoptic structure in the school building.

My use of the term “panopticonics” is derived from research by Foster (2003) in which he analyzed the lived experiences of elite Black female track athletes at a NCAA Division I school through the lens of Foucault’s theories on discipline, power, and control. Ultimately, in his project he argued, “rather than ultimately subjugate the bodies of student athletes, the program provided the means for their empowerment and perfection…this greater surveillance also contributed to graduation rates among black female student athletes that often surpassed those of the nonathlete black students and the student community as a whole” (Pgs. 301-302). His view departs from a “typical” analysis of discipline, power, and control, thus maintaining the view that there is the potential of a latent positive effect to the panopticonics experienced by these athletes.

Few could argue that increased graduation rates of historically underrepresented woman is a negative outcome…even though these accomplishments came as a result of racialized practices of control and uneven/unequal power distribution between the system (the school, athletics department, policies, etc.) and the female athletes.

One of the differences between my work and Foster (2003) is that I take a different approach and argue there are little to no latent positive outcomes as a result of the discipline, power, and control experienced by the boys in my study. This is not to say that some students could not flourish in this type of environment, but from the experiences of the young men in my study, any potential benefits were not easily visible. The result of being educated in a controlling, discipline heavy, and carceral educational setting usually resulted in negative outcomes for the students subjected to this
environment. Punishment was handed out swiftly, and a disinterest in and retreat from educational excellence was the result for many of these students. For example, if a student talked excessively they were asked to leave the classroom and spend the rest of the period in the main office or suspension room. In addition, students were given “time outs” and asked to leave the classroom for at least ten minutes to calm down if there were upset about something during class. Students began to abuse the “time out” policy and would use it an excuse to antagonize the teacher or peers because they knew they would get kicked out of the classroom. There may have been students that thrived in this controlling environment, but I didn’t come across many in this current study. The environment in the Arnita School, although structured, was no comparison to the type of structure given to elite female athletes in Foster’s study. Some could argue that the women in his study are exploited to bring about success and recognition for the university’s sports programs, but from his descriptions, although some of the interactions were guided by racialized assumptions, the essence of hate seemed distant from their practices of discipline and control. In these instances, discipline is used in a way to bring about a high level of results in sports performance. It is used to get these women in shape and reach their highest level of athletic potential, even if only for the benefit of the school’s athletic program. For the boys in my study, and others in the school, this was not the case. The in-school suspension room was often filled with Black males who were kicked out of the classroom for various reasons. While they were in the room, little work was completed and students fell behind academically. Students were punished for dress code violations, having music ear buds or cell phones visible. Although the clothes and technological products had nothing to do with a student’s ability to learn, they became
reasons for students to spend time out of class for violating school policies. I argue that the form of discipline they experienced was not meant to get them to perform at their highest levels, although I am sure some feel it is, but instead was used to be punitive and exclusionary. These practices are harmful and are counterproductive to academic success. Deficit discourse and thinking situate the problems as coming from the students and their families with the need for schools to ensure discipline is a high priority in urban schools. We must resist this framing and analyze the systemic effects of policies and social institutions in the creation of these problems. The school system plays a role in exacerbating some of the issues faced by students in underserved areas.

Subjecting the Self to Surveillance: My experiences while observing the school

“A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. So it is not necessary to use force to constrain the convict to good behavior, the madman to calm, the worker to work, the schoolboy to application, the patient to the observation of regulations...He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.” (Foucault, 1977:202-203)

Arnita is a community school and is situated in the middle of a residential neighborhood. Walking towards the school, you pass a few houses and lawns and in just a few steps, you are next to the multi-purposed athletics field for the school. As you move on, you pass a teachers parking lot with reserved spaces on the side of the building, away from the front entrance. I noticed that teachers who park in this lot go through one of the side doors to enter the school building. The grass along the side of the building is usually filled with dog poop. There seems to be a number of dogs walked on the block,
but picking up after them doesn’t seem to happen as frequently. There were times when I had to navigate a dog poop maze on my way into the building. As you pass the teachers lot, you walk into a larger lot in front of the building there is another teachers’ lot with a few spaces for visitors. The lot holds about 20 cars and usually isn’t filled to capacity. During certain times of the day, students tend to hang out in the front parking lot during breaks or when waiting to be picked up from school.

Before entering the school, the two large doors with dingy security glass windows are usually locked. To the right of the door is a button to alert the office you are waiting outside. After pressing the bell, a ringing sound, similar to a phone begins. The surveillance camera, above the right side of the door is activated and you need to face it in order for the office assistant to see your face. Before opening the door, the office assistant asks, “How can I help you?” before you are buzzed into the building. If you give a satisfactory answer the first time, no more questions are asked before you are allowed to enter the building. The above description of the ritual of entering the building, only takes place if students are not standing on the other side of the door. On occasions when I visited and students were standing by the door, they usually looked through the door window, to check me out and usually let me in. When I walked into the building, on some days I was met with a security guard standing between the entrance door and the steps that went to the second floor of the building. I was familiar with the building so I didn’t need to ask for directions from the office. I found that if you look like you know where you are going and you are dressed up, not too many people asked questions when you entered the building.
One of the first things I noticed when walking in the building was the lack of light in the entrance. On a daily basis, students started the day walking into a dimly lit building before heading to their first block classes. I am not a psychologist, but the lack of lighting in the entry hallway has to have some type of impact on the psyche as you get ready to start the day I have gone to other schools, with more resources and in better neighborhoods, where the school’s entrance was bright and cheery. In addition to the lighting issues in the schools entry way, students are greeted with hall monitors, a security guard and a School Resource Officer (armed, uniformed police officer). First there is a depressing dimly lit entrance and then students are met with law enforcement. What impact does this daily morning ritual have on the students? What is the role of the security guard and police officer in the building?

I usually entered the building at least an hour after the school day started so my entry into the school was not mediated by a security officer. As you walk into the school, there is a staircase to the right that takes you to the second floor. If I wanted, I could have come into the building, gone up the steps and roamed around the hallways. I am sure after some time, the main office would have noticed that they buzzed a person in who never came to the office to sign in, although signing into the office was not a requirement. Again, if you looked like you knew where you were going and you were dressed a certain way, no one asked you questions. So for the most part, after I was buzzed in, I bypassed the office and went straight to the classroom I would be observing for the day. The main office was situated some distance from the main entrance. This is a telltale sign that the school was not recently constructed in the environment of heightened school surveillance and security. I assume a newly constructed school would
have a better entrance policy and an office that was closer to the main entrance. There were too many possible directions I could have gone after entering the building. Fortunately the school did not have problems with random people roaming the school hallways.

The school’s main office was situated in a long hallway consisting of lockers, janitors’ closets, water fountains, guidance counselor offices and classrooms. In addition to these rooms, a room used as the suspension place was located across the hall from the main office. This was the room where students were sent when they were asked to leave the class by a teacher for various offenses. Males usually frequented the room. I seldom saw a female student in the suspension room. Before I became a familiar person in the school, as I walked down the hall, some students would stare at me to see who I was and what my business was in the building for the day. Later, when I started to work with the boys in this study, if seen walking with one of them students would ask, “Robinson, is that your dad?” Other than the police officer and the occasional parental visit, Black male adults were rarely seen in the school. So my presence triggered a number of responses during my time in the building.

**Avoiding the Gaze of the Panopticon**

During the day, no matter how loud the students would be throughout the hallway and stairwells in the school, they often stopped and calmed down for a second as they walked past certain classrooms. From my observations and discussions with students in the hallway, certain teachers were more likely to come out, patrol the hallway, and look for troublemakers. Students were continually navigating in an attempt to find spaces
where they could avoid patrollers. If they found hotspots of patrol, they adjusted their behavior accordingly. As soon as they passed the “danger zone” they continued whatever conversations they were having or games they were playing in the hallway. For short periods of time, students knew where the “eyes” were and talked about constantly being under surveillance. Students searched for spaces where they could briefly escape the gaze of the surveillance. Students would sneak to the upper floors of the building where the high school was located to avoid their teachers in their section of the building. The high school floors in the school did not have adults continually patrolling the hallways. However, once the eighth grade students started to get caught on the upper floors, administrators started to do sweeps between classes to ensure eighth grade students were not hiding in the high school section of the school.

Administrators in the building were also finding ways to counteract the planning of the students. On a daily basis administrators tried to stay a step ahead of the students by makings sure they patrolled different areas at different parts of the day. This maneuvering made it difficult for the students to find ways to circumvent the building surveillance tactics. No matter what happened in other parts of the building, the one space students always tried to avoid was the outside area of the main office where the principal was located. Many of the students I worked with visited the office frequently as a result of getting sent out of the classroom. However, if they were not being sent there, they wanted little to do with that space. Students tended to correct their behavior as they passed by the office door. It did not matter if the heavy wooden door was open or closed, students ensured that the noise levels were down and the “clowning around” was at a minimum when passing the space outside of the office.
These “self-regulated” behaviors conjured up the image of Foucault’s description of the panopticon.

“Bentham’s Panopticon is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open on to the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed then is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy” (Foucault, 1977: 200).

The supervisor in the context of the school was the principal in addition to his teachers and other administrators. The students (schoolboys) were those to be housed in cells (classrooms) and under the watchful eye of the tower. Foucault understood that the surveillance or sense of control created by the existence of the panoptic tower, was not relegated to only the controlling of “madmen,” “patients,” and “workers.” There was a complicated analysis of the school serving as a place of control and unequal power dynamics.

**Experiences with Control and Discipline in a Strange Place**

"In exchange for an education, students are expected to obey the rules and norms that are inoperative within school and to comply with the authority of the adults in charge. Like the social contract that serves as the basis of order in most democratic societies (Durkheim, 1961; Rawls, 1971), students are expected to relinquish a certain degree of individual freedom in exchange for receiving the benefits of education" (Noguera, 2003, p. 343).

The Arnita School was a “strange” place to the students. Prior to the announcement of the closing, many of the students looked forward to being the eighth graders in the building. They would be the oldest, most popular students in the school
building. They looked forward to “running the building” as they made their transition into the real world of high school. Through all of the turmoil associated with the summer transition, the soon to be eighth grade students were notified that the school would be turned into a high school and they would be remaining in the building. This is not what the students had in mind for their eighth grade year. In the new scenario, they would not be the oldest students in the building, instead, they would be living in the shadows of high school students and administrators who viewed them as left over problems. The eighth graders sensed the changes and how the newly relocated older residents of what used to be “their school” viewed them. The Arnita School was gone, and so was the seniority the eighth grade students hoped for in this final transition year of middle school.

During some of my discussions with the students, we talked about the state of the school and their feelings about existing in a place that once was their own that was now considered a high school with a few “left over” eighth grade students. In an interview, Malcolm mentioned:

In this school you hear people say we hate these dumb eighth graders. If something happens it’s always those eighth graders. They refer to us as them eighth graders…not students. They act like we don’t belong. This is our school to. It was our school first. They act like they never played around in school.

Malcolm’s sentiments were shared with other students. He mentioned always having “eyes on him” just waiting for him to do something wrong. Since he and his peers were continually watched, any missteps were caught and handled swiftly. Similar to the hyper policing in urban areas, if there are people watching, someone is bound to be caught.
Since the eighth graders were often caught, they were labeled in the school as the “dumb eighth graders” who were immature and could not stay out of trouble. They were outsiders in their school and were treated as such. They were the focus of the patrolling and seemed as if they caught the brunt of the disciplinary machine existing in the school. The setting was not like any other in the district at the time. The Arnita School didn’t exist on the Lincoln district’s website, but the students existed and were being educated in a small section of their former building. As seen in Robinson’s response, he and other students did not feel they mattered in this dismantled space. He articulated feeling constantly watched and policed by adults in the building. Students felt as eighth grade students, they were targets in this new setup. Robinson and his peers struggled with this new second class status in the building.

Robinson:

Everyone is waiting for us to do something. The cop [teachers and security] is always in the hall. If we even drop a wrapper on the floor or make a mistake and bump into a chair in the cafeteria we get in trouble. You always getting in trouble in here.

Students mentioned being repeatedly yelled at and having to deal with harsh school policies. Many of the students in this study had been suspended multiple times throughout the school year for various offences. For example, Robinson had been suspended at least three times for arguing with teachers, while Malcolm was suspended a number of times for fighting or letting his temper get out of hand when dealing with a teacher. Noguera (2003) states, “schools also punish the neediest children because in many schools there is a fixation with behavior management and social control that
outweighs and overrides all other priorities and goals” (p. 342). Discipline and behavior were at the forefront of Arnita, and at times it seemed if student learning was a secondary concern. With all of the time students spent outside of the classroom, it was difficult for them to remain up to date on classwork. Students were punished for a variety of reasons. Most of the students were suspended for fighting, being disrespectful in class, and playing around in the hallway. The “sentences” handed out to the students seemed to be excessive. For example, if students were caught “rough housing” in the hallway they could be sent to the in-school suspension room for at least one full period. Again, the more time they spent in the room, the less time they spent learning. On one day while observing, I saw two students get a one-day, out of school suspension for throwing pennies at each other in the hallway. Events like these were a common occurrence in the school.

Since they were continually under surveillance and punished, students talked about their distrust for authority in the school and how they did not feel comfortable dealing with adults in the school. Some of the students in my study were more prone to resisting and breaking school rules and because they violated the rules more often, they were more likely to be sanctioned in a harsh manner. When they were sanctioned for their resistance, they were labeled as “problem students” and they were treated accordingly. Similar to what Casella (2001) found, these students, being victims of exclusionary discipline practices, were more likely to be impacted by a self-fulfilling prophecy that resulted in a cycle of “anti-social” behavior.

In a discussion of their experiences with discipline in the school, students reflected on past encounters with adults. Some of the students were more likely to get in
trouble than others, but a number of the students in my study were very familiar with the disciplinary practices carried in the building.

Wallace:

I couldn’t do anything I swear I couldn’t do anything it was like they will always find some wrong no matter what…you mean I can’t get up and go and try get a calculator from the back of the classroom? But he'll just say “sit down!” and I’m just going to get a calculator. But if someone else gets up in the class goes to the back then he doesn't say anything…only to me. I try not to let it bother me but it irritates me sometimes.

Wallace reflected on his interaction with one of his math teachers who he felt picked on him. Wallace was not one of the labeled students, but most of the friends he had happened to be the ones considered “trouble makers” in the building. Unfortunately for Wallace, he was guilty by association. Once people got to know him, they realized that he was not a frequent member of detention or Saturday school. He was a likeable, quiet kid that connected with some students who were not afraid to voice their opinions and overtly resist school rules. When reflecting on the treatment of students, he was able to offer another angle on being singled out by adults in school.

Wallace:

I mean I don't always feel that I am singled out in the bad way. I feel I get singled out in a good way a few times. This one teacher thought I was skipping so she told the principal that I needed to go home and then the principal said, “Oh I know him. No, he's one of my good students.” So he doesn't know some of the
other students but he knew me and said I was one of his good students. I have charisma. I don't get in trouble a lot in school.

He was one of the “good students” so his word held weight with the principal. When he said he was not skipping class, he was taken at his word because the principal knew him and he was allowed to finish the rest of the school day. On the other hand, many of the students were not as lucky. If it was another student being accused of cutting class, I cannot say that the result would be similar. I witnessed students pleading their cases in the hallway to no avail. For instance there were times when Malcolm would walk through the hallway and get questioned about his presence. Rather than listening to the reasons he gave for being in the hallway, the administrator would walk Malcolm to his class to ask the teacher if she knew he was in the hallway. Unfortunately for Malcolm and other students, if you made one mistake in school, it followed you. There were not many opportunities for students to redeem themselves in the eyes of some of the administrators in the building. There was a lack of trust in the building and this lack of trust influenced some of the negative interactions that took place on a daily basis.

Kenny, was one of the students that received mixed reviews depending on who was describing him. For some, he was a good student, while others would classify him as a problem. Kenny often talked about the heavy-handed approach used on the eighth graders in the building.

Kenny:

A lot of eighth graders get in trouble. They [administrators] just not playing with us. Well they had a bad word on us last year about our records; about what happened and stuff so that followed us. So they started to treat us how they
thought we would act. Ever since the generation of kids came up here when we started in the seventh grade and stuff. It just seemed like that was the group of kids that continuously got in trouble in school even when we got new teachers, a new principal, and stuff like that it was always a bad group of kids in our grade. During the above exchange, it was evident that Kenny had internalized once of the labels given to the students in his class. His language showed that he bought into the idea that the students were bad. He did have issues with the structure of the school, but he seemed to also focus on the behavior of the students as if it was not necessarily related to the school structure. Kenny had a number of trips to the principal’s office, but for some reason, he was not seen as one of the “troubled” students. He was smart and usually got into trouble when he did not feel challenged academically or when he hung out with certain groups of students. There were times when Kenny would finish his work and then bother other students. During one of my observation days in the English class, Kenny finished his work, and walked across the class to talk with a student about who had the best waves in their hair. Students would continually brush their hair, use hair grease, and wear doo-rags in order to create tight spiral wave patterns. Students often bragged about whose waves were “spinning” the most. When asked to return to his seat, Kenny continued to talk which led to him being kicked out of class. When responding to a question about the reasons for frequent interactions with the disciplinary system students provide interesting analysis of the reasons.

Kenny:

For me I think at certain points it depends on the group of kids I’m with. Other times it’s the surroundings I’m in. And when I'm in stuff that I enjoy…like I
enjoy writing poetry and stuff. But when I do something for a long period of time and something I'm not interested in I just lose interest and that makes me lose focus and once I lose focus that's how I end up getting in trouble.

Malcolm:

My behavior is average. Sometimes I can be bad or I can be good. It depends.

But I don’t fight a lot no more in school. Unless somebody push me to my limits. I fought this year. I’ve been suspended like five times. For being late, for referrals, for play fighting, and real fighting. About five times, three were major ones and two were regular ones. Like major ones you get a week or more. The regular ones you get sent home for a day or two. I haven’t had no hearings.

Malcolm mentioned not having hearings related to his suspension. If a violation is serious enough, students had to attend a formal hearing with the principal to see if they would be expelled from the school. Although Malcolm was suspended a number of times, none of his actions were deemed serious enough to require a hearing. As we continued the conversation about his judicial record, I asked Malcolm what happened during his many suspensions. I was concerned that if he was spending so many days out of the classroom, he would be falling further behind each successive time he was sent from school.

Malcolm:

I used to just sit home. I used to just get suspended Mr. Sawyer and be home, but then my mom changed all that. I used to just stay home and play games and wait to come back. Now she be coming in and getting all my work. Then she’ll make me talk to my father, but he would tell me to fight. Well not just go and fight, but
if someone put their hands on me I could pop them. Don’t start nothing, but just defend yourself. He just recently got out [prison]. He did 5 ½ and then 2. He was in for my than half of my life. He just got out.

Malcolm was one of the students labeled as “troubled” and was under the watchful eyes of adults in the school. It seemed as if trouble found him. During the day I shadowed him, it seemed that Malcolm tried to do the right thing, but had a short temper. During a shadowing day with Malcolm, we walked through the hallway after lunch, headed to one of his classes. During our walk, one of his peers mentioned something about him “always wearing that dingy white v-neck.” Malcolm did not have the latest fashions and was being teased for repeatedly wearing a white, v-neck, t-shirt. Malcolm tried to brush it off by saying, “whatever nigga,” but the other student kept cracking jokes. They exchanged a barrage of insults and then Malcolm became upset and started cursing at the other student. Malcolm did not have a great reputation in the school with the adults. However, spending time with him, he began to share things with me about his hopes and dreams. Malcolm was wise beyond his years and often offered interesting commentary on world events. With his father being away, he assumed a lot of adult roles and I think this took a toll on him. He was at times quick to “go off” in a situation. He may not have started trouble, but he sure would finish it. Noguera (2003) states that students who get into trouble are not passive victims and actually understand the consequences for resisting school rules. He goes on to say that at times students begin to believe the labels that have been given to them as they begin to see the results of school disciplinary practices on their educational chances. Malcolm was behind in his schoolwork. He was
14 in the eighth grade and had spent a number of weeks out of school as a result of suspensions. He knew his situation was not looking good. He aspired to be a sports commentator and knew he would have to work very hard to overcome his reputation as well as the academic work he missed. Malcolm was a smart boy, but he did not show this side of himself too many people. During one of the interviews he said, “Mr. Sawyer, I can talk to you. I can talk to you like my father.” When I heard of his dreams and hardships, I saw a young man that was trying to balance his dreams with his reality. Unfortunately, he had reputation of being up to no good, and his reputation preceded him. It often seemed as if his treatment was based on his reputation and not on the situation at hand. In some ways, Malcolm did not have the opportunity to be successful in school and is a living example of the problems with the exclusionary discipline practices in schools.

**Understanding Trouble with and In School**

“Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an ‘aptitude’, a ‘capacity’, which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection” (Foucault, 1975, p. 138).

In this next section, many of the young men speak of their interactions with adults in the building and how they feel constantly policed in the school space. Here students discuss their experiences with guards in the building. In a conversation with a few of the students about officers and security in the building, they reflected on the tactics of the
school in keeping a “safe” environment. At one point in the conversation, the students shifted to speaking about how they are also policed in public areas outside of school.

Wallace:

Here we don’t really have too many police in the school. We have two security guards and then we got one police. We had another cop but I don’t know what happened to him. I mean they be doing searches and stuff like that. They search us when you walk through. Like you can’t go through regularly on these days. You have to go to the gym and get searched. I mean so far we had like one or two searches. I mean now we don’t get checked every day but is about every two weeks or every three weeks or sometimes once a week and then sometimes is once every month.

Wallace is referring to the randomized searches that were done in the school building. These sweeps were done in an effort to catch students with drugs, weapons, or any other contraband be brought into the school building. These searches did not result in a high number of student violations, but the possibility of being searched was seen as a good deterrent for students.

Kenny:

At times it’s a good thing [to have police in the school] but there's really no point to it. It seems like nothing don't really happen in our school where police are really needed like that. The only thing they ever do is like if there's a fight they break it up but besides that it's nothing for them to do.
Sweeney:

But they never caught anybody. I mean they found a girl with like you know, those like toenail clippers with a bunch of pieces on it. They took that from her but they do the random checks but they don't catch nobody doing nothing man and man Mr. Yudo ain't here.

Mr. Yudo was a teacher who had a positive relationship with many of the boys. He was supposedly transferred from the school after being investigated for not reporting a student with a weapon. I never received the “official” story, but this is the story that was shared with me by a teacher who new Mr. Yudo. Sweeney, was the student related to the case, but he did not realize that his incident was the one that caused the investigation. During one of our meetings he talked about how Mrs. Yudo (the wife of Mr. Yudo) treated him harshly and he could not understand why. When I told him about the investigation, he was shocked.

Sweeney:

Ohhhhhhhhhh. No wonder she doesn't like me. That’s his wife so she be looking at me funny. I had a small pocketknife thing in school on me. Because when I had it right, like if I'm staying after school and I have to walk home late and I'm not taking the bus I have to walk through these neighborhoods. I carry something only from over there by the school. So my coat had a lot of pockets and so I guess I just left like a little pocketknife in one of the pockets for when I'm walking home late at night but on that day I guess it was in one of the pockets in school. So I went to go take off my coat and then it was like clink clink, the knife hit the floor and I was about to go pick it up. So as I was picking it up I looked up and he was
right there, and so that's how I got caught with the knife. I was walking home it was mad dark outside. You think I'm going to just walk home without having nothing on me. So when I'm walking home and it is late at night and dark outside I carry something with me. Whether it’s my pocketknife or something, or a stick I carry something with me so yeah.

Sweeney did not always have the pocketknife with him. He mentioned carrying it on days when he had to stay after school and would walk home alone. He would leave the knife at home on days when he did not have to stay after school. Unfortunately, on one of the days where he would not usually have his knife, it fell out of his pocket.

Some of the teachers took issue with the constant searches and the disciplinary tactics in the school building. Mr. Yudo was one of these people. He knew that the student would be suspended for having a pocketknife in his possession on school property, but it seems as if he also understood the student’s reason for carrying it. So, although he confiscated the knife, by him not reporting it, he was in violation of the policy and thus was subjected to disciplinary procedures in place of the student. For teachers that go against the stated policies, their jobs and livelihood are put in jeopardy. The teacher in this situation faced a serious dilemma. Being a witness to a student entering a school building with a weapon, no matter how tiny the knife was, and even though he knew this student was not a violent person, did not disrupt zero-tolerance practices. He knew that if he reported the incident to the administration, the student would have a mandatory suspension for being in possession of a weapon on school property. The teacher decided to take the knife from the student and not report the incident to the upper administration. I am not judging whether or not the teacher was
right or wrong, but this incident highlights the difficulties of dealing with zero tolerance policies in schools, even if an educator is opposed to the tactics. In a sense, the carceral space that is the school not only has an oppressive impact on the students, but also has an impact on the staff in the building. They too are oppressed by the abundance of regulations and policies that exist. I do not believe that the teachers I observed came into the field of education with the plans of being the highest disciplinary referral giver. Like the students, through a process of oppressive tactics and control, teachers became docile bodies. The only difference is the fact that in the hierarchy that exists in schools, the teachers are not the most oppressed. Although principals and district policies control them, they continue to serve as agents of the system and inflict punishment on those students that resist their own oppression and fight against a structure that seems determined to push them out of the school into a life of second-class citizenship and a relationship with the criminal justice system.

**Being Policed Outside of School**

In addition to the regimes of control in the school the young men also faced policing in their neighborhoods. Most of these men were from urban, underserved areas of the city, which were made up of primarily working class people of color. Some of their neighborhoods had high crime rates, gang activity, and hyper-surveillance by the police force. In this short section the data are pulled from conversation when the young men were reflecting on their treatment as young Black males in and out of school. From discussions with students it seemed as if they could not escape the disciplinary gaze. Their lives were continuously regulated by authority figures that saw them as
“problems.” As Black males, they were seen as “trouble makers” both inside and outside of school.

Jeffrey:

See when they see us they don’t see no smart young man. They see some young Black gang member or something. Some gang member or like some idiot or something like that. They stereotype us. I'm not saying that everybody's racist or everybody's out to get us but that's how they see us. They stereotype us because that's the way they were raised.

Jeffrey was describing how he always feel watched and judged. He talked about the balancing act. He was dealing with how he saw himself while also dealing with the reality of how he was seen by others. He experienced what W.E.B. DuBois classified as a double consciousness. The young men knew they were not always viewed in a positive light and at times these negative perceptions dictated they ways in which people interacted with them.

Sweeney:

Like if I'm at the mall right and the cops walk up to me and pull me to the side and so they always look up my name. This one cop was like “oh I know who you are. I know you. I put your dad in jail. I know who you are.” Cops say that all the time to me because they know my dad and he went to jail and we have the same name. I have the same name as my dad so they pulled my name up they see that my dad is in jail and one officer was like boasting that he put my dad in jail. So
the cops just be saying some stuff. They be saying some stuff for real they do that because they got that badge on.

Sweeney never really hid the fact that his father was in jail serving a long sentence. He did seem troubled when telling the story of being apprehended by his father’s arresting officer. Why should this young man have to deal with a police officer bragging about putting his father in jail? Sweeney and the rest of the students in the study dealt with many issues that often times went unnoticed in the school. It seemed as if people were not concerned about how these students’ outside life impacted their performance in school. Sweeney talked about feeling picked on and singled out. He had a tough persona and would often put on a front as if nothing mattered and nothing affected him, but his body language and the changes in the tone of his voice, and the ways he altered his gaze during some of the conversations spoke volumes of the pain he felt as a result of some of his lived realities.

In this same conversation, others shared stories of interactions with police officers outside of school.

Wallace:

So one of my neighbors is a police officer. A black police officer. So he would tell his daughter everything that was going on and so they would tell my mom about stuff that these white cops would say about how they were like arresting these kids and happy that they were arresting all of these black youth.

Wallace highlights the discourse surrounding an excitement and joy for arresting Black youth. He mentioned having “inside” information about how cops viewed young Black males. If police officers were happy about arresting youth, my participants were
vulnerable and likely to have negative interactions with law enforcement. During this discussion, Sweeney jumps in to discuss another interaction with law enforcement. The story of police officers being happy about their negative interactions with black youth sparked a recent memory for Sweeney. I previously heard a rumor from a teacher that Sweeney had been tazed by a police officer at one of the shopping malls. I had not heard it from him until he shared during this session. He had a verbal disagreement with someone outside of the mall in the parking lot. He mentioned it was a white male and his daughter that called the cops on him during the argument at the bus stop in the parking lot.

Sweeney:

I remember when I got tazed! And one of my little cousins got tazed with me at the store. So they came up and was like “be quiet or I’ll make you be quiet.” So I kept talking and talking. Then it hit my leg. Then I fell out not only down but I hit my leg. It wasn't the kind of tazer that all those things come out. They shot my cousin with that one.

I interrupted briefly in an effort to try and understand why they would taze him. I asked if he felt he was threatening to the officers at any point.

No I didn’t swing I wasn't doing nothing. I was just talking. And so like what happened was after a party in the mall we came outside and it was this guy this white guy talking about you know he would do stuff to us and we said stuff and the girl called the cops. As soon as they came as soon as the cops came they came toward us right. They just came straight to us. They ain’t ask them nothing, they came straight to us. When the cops pulled up they didn't even know what was
going on fully and they came to us asking “what's the problem what's the problem. Since you don’t know we know you the problem.” So after they tazed us, they took my cousin downtown to jail. I mean all of this happened because we were going back and forth with the cops. We didn't do anything wrong. That was it. They were trying to hold my cousin on the floor but he kept on moving so they shot him in the butt he was screaming and stuff. They always using that excessive force. The cop was in his face like “If it wasn't you, you could be quiet.” But he kept on talking and then the other cop grabbed him. And then the security guard came in and grabbed him. And he kept moving and that's when they shot him in the butt. Tazed.

After he finished telling the story, I felt horrible about asking him if he did anything to deserve the treatment. It was if I was searching for a way to justify the treatment of the officers. This is highly problematic and I had to check myself immediately after asking the question of Sweeney. Reflecting on my question briefly I apologized for asking such a question. I then asked if his family filed a complaint.

Sweeney:

To file a complaint? To file a complaint? What we gonna say? What we gonna say? What would with the complaint say? Man, what can you do? You know how many people filed complaints and nothing happened? This is a waste of time. I mean we young Black men. This is gonna happen it’s just that. It happened, but that's the way this is gonna be. It’s like is nothing we can do about it. It’s nothing we can do about that. They see us at the mall and they say something to us. Then they see these 13 year old white girls, wearing lipstick and
all that stuff, they'll say nothing to them. They say stuff to us. We get kicked out of the mall they don't. We get kicked out of the mall.

Wallace:
It's preparing us for life. That’s how it’s gonna be in the real world. Some Black people don't know that. They don't know the real world. Here, it’s like the real world. You gonna be treated a certain way by cops. If you get racially profiled that's just how it is. I mean think it's terrible. But what can you do about it what? What can we do? It’s just how it is. We do all we can to stay out of trouble. Like if you stereotype me I'm gonna work twice as hard to prove that stereotype wrong yeah.

To me it seemed as if the students were hopeless when thinking about their interactions with police. At times they seemed defeated and accepted the fate of being harassed by officers. I was as if being policed was a natural occurrence that came along with being a young Black male. They knew a double standard existed and being a Black male had consequences in their daily existence. For them, these micro and macro-aggressions constituted the realities of their worlds. Even at such a young age, they were all too familiar with experiencing unequal treatment.

It was disheartening for me to hear the students express a sense of hopelessness with how they were viewed and treated based on those perceptions. I cannot imagine what it is like to be 13 and tazed by police officers. I struggled with anger during this conversation with the young men. They saw I was visibly angry when hearing about their treatment and, at this point, there was really nothing I could do. I just did not want
them to accept the fact that “this is how it’s gonna be” and act as if the treatment should be expected. They had the right to be treated as humans like any other teen, but they knew that equal treatment would not always be a reality for them. I am not sure if I was in “fatherly protection” mode, but I wanted them to know that this treatment was unacceptable and that they did not have to view it as reality. I wanted them to hear this, but they were very clear in letting me know that this is their reality and these things did happen to them. They were well aware of the unequal treatment, but felt that some of the fighting would be useless because other people in their lives have been treated in a similar manner. They understood that the system was wrong, but did not want to spend their energy trying to change it. They knew the issue was larger than them and they made the decision to focus on the areas were they felt they had control. For many of the students, the school was the place where they felt they could resist. They were not able to resist how they wanted to with police officers, but they felt empowered to do so in school. So, some of the energy directed at school resistance was not all created because of school practices. The school was part of a larger system of oppression faced by these young men and it just so happens that they felt empowered to resist in the school space. The school was the site of resistance to the oppressive structures inside and outside of the building.

A Reflection on Discipline in a Dismantled School

When thinking of the Arnita School and discipline, power, and control, I view it in a more traditional punitive sense as it relates to the boys in my study. In his study looking at ways in which school use disciplinary practices, Yang (2009) sees the
possibility of discipline and self-control in a positive light. He urges us to move away from practices that use discipline in a punitive manner and rather find ways to view discipline and a self-driven process of personal excellence. He compares his liberatory view of discipline to the ways in which elite athletes discipline their diets, sleep habits, and workouts in an effort to reach their highest levels of athletic excellence. He calls for us to find ways to envision a discipline that is inclusive and benefits the students. This inclusivity would allow students to be disciplined in a way where they were not treated as outcasts and can maintain their relationship and connection to the larger community. He also pleads for us to create disciplinary practices that uplift, support, and increase academic achievement levels of students in hostile educational environments. This view allows us to envision a discipline that produces positive results by increasing intellectual prowess rather than the traditional view that results in pushing students out of school for a life of second class citizenship in the criminal justice system.

While grappling with Yang’s (2009) view of the possibilities of emancipatory discipline practices, I wonder if these practices could have worked in the Arnita School. He asserts that not all school have the resources to follow these involved practiced and as describe previously, Arnita had extremely limited resources set aside for the 8th grade students. All of the disciplinary practices I observed could be viewed as punitive and exclusionary practices. There was nothing positively transformative about the practices of control and discipline in the school. I say “positive transformative” because there were transformative practices, but the transformation that occurred could not be viewed as a positive occurrence. Students existed in this space as “left over” problems to be
dealt with for the year until next school year, where they could be released into other high schools in the district.

Similar to Yang’s view of students who understood that they had the ability to be punished, students in my study often transformed into docile bodies in the school space. Many students in the school tried not to get in trouble. They tried to avoid being seen and heard in order to stay in the classroom and out of the office. There were also the students that resisted at every level. I saw these students become transformed into the “bad kids” as they were labeled in the building. In the beginning of the year they came in with a clean slate, but by the end of the first half of the year, as a result of their existence in this dismantled space, their views of education and their roles as students continued to be transformed and challenged. Students sensed that they were not cared for, were not wanted, and were not trusted in the school space. The students paid attention and understood their surroundings and were able to articulate how they felt about being educated in this dismantled school.

I repeatedly witnessed students being sent out of class, asked to leave class, and being escorted outside of the class. I often wondered how much could they actually learn when a great deal of their school day was spent waiting to talk to the principal, being sent to the next door classroom, sitting in the suspension room, or waiting to be picked up by an angry parent to be taken home because of suspension. The disciplinary practices were overtly exclusionary and many students suffered as a result of these practices.
An Observational Note of Symbolic Violence

In addition to some of the exclusionary practices and experiences I discussed in this chapter, I think it is important to end with an observational field note from an interaction between Malcolm and a couple of adults in the school building. This incident highlights the problematic treatment of students in this school space in that it shows how some adults directly and indirectly lower expectations, treat students in a despicable manner, and reproduce racism and inequality in school. It also shines as an example of how students do exist in a space that is “beyond love.”

Today, I was in the suspension room with one of the students, Malcolm. He was kicked out of class… I think it was English class and he had a worksheet he needed to complete for the remainder of his time in the room. He went in the room, sat at the one desk in the room and started to do his worksheet. I just sat in the room because I couldn’t interview him at the time. I didn’t want to distract him from his work. He had about 45 minutes remaining in the period and he had to stay in the room until it was time for him to go to his next class. After about 10 minutes, the gym teacher walks in and says, “Hey Malcolm, you’re in here again!?” Malcolm then replies, “Mister, why you always got something to say? I'm doing homework.” The gym teacher then responded, “Man you are not doing any work, you never do work in here.” These back and forth slick comments take place for approximately 10 minutes. They continued to take jabs at one another. The student was making fun of the teacher and the teacher was making fun of the
student. However the during all of this, Malcolm’s work is not getting done. 
Also, the jabs do not seemed to be delivered in a joking manner. I just sat there 
listening and observing while trying not to look shocked while typing on my iPad. 

A couple of minutes later, the school police officer comes in and he says 
the same thing, “Malcolm, you in here again!?” And without wasting time, the 
verbal insults began again. They go back and forth exchanging clever verbal 
assaults. And again while they’re going back and forth doing this, the student is 
not getting any of his work done. Approximately15 minutes of his time in the 
room were dedicated to going back and forth talking about one another with the 
gym teacher and the police officer. After the gym teacher and police officer 
finished their personal conversation for the moment, they interrupted Malcolm 
once again to inquire about what high school he planned to go to. “What high 
school you going to because you know we ain’t keeping you here?” (The eighth-
graders in the building were not guaranteed a spot in the high school. They had to 
apply and participate in an interview in order to be considered for admission into 
the high school. So the fact that they were in the building already didn't matter. 
The administration wanted to make sure that they weren't taking any of the 
“problem children” into the school. Since Malcolm visited the suspension room 
often, it was believed by the staff that he had no chance to be admitted into the 
high school.)
The officer then stated, “You know you ain't getting in here so have fun at your new school. Graduate here then go.” Malcolm responds, “How you know I'm not getting in here? If I wanted to get in here and come to the school I could. But I'm not. You always got something to say you want a piece of me?” The gym teacher responds, “I don't want you. You can save that for when you go to jail.” They were carrying on with this conversation of back-to-back verbal insults as if I wasn't there.

Even after the jail statement, they continued. “If they see you coming this way next year, you know they will lock the doors. You keep talking with your dirty clothes on.” Malcolm then responds, “I'm always clean. You want to do something?” The gym teacher then responds, “I guess I don’t know clean. They’ll have you locked up in a room with bars.” While all of this is going on, Malcom is still not getting any work done, because he is going back and forth with these verbal insults or assaults however you might want to characterize it but the work is not getting done. Malcolm then says to the officer and gym teacher, “I'm moving out of town. I'm moving down south with my father.” The officer responds, “I will bet you $50-$5 that you will still be in [this town]. You ain't going nowhere. You probably don't even know where your father lives. You probably don't even know what your father's name is. If I was going to live with my father, I would at least know what his name is.” Malcolm sits there and shrugs it off as if the statements didn’t bother him. I have to believe that these verbal insults and assaults have taken place before and must have a cumulative
impact on him. After the period was over, I looked at Malcolm’s paper and the only thing written on it was his first name.

After reflecting on witnessing the suspension room incident, I was reminded of the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) on symbolic violence. In schools many focus on physical violence but there are other forms of violence that are just as dangerous.

Symbolic violence is an almost unconscious form of domination that occurs in schools and society. The actions related to this form of violence include patriarchy, classism, and racism. The symbolic capital possessed by a dominant group is used to impose their beliefs upon dominated groups. As a result of the pressure the dominated group takes on the beliefs of the dominant group as if they are right and just (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). These beliefs are internalized and maintain/reproduce the social order. Symbolic violence can be seen as more dangerous than physical violence because it rests in the minds and beliefs of the subjugated populations.

In the school setting, one would assume that the adults in the building have students’ best interests at heart. When we view the school building as a social world infused with a static system of hierarchy, it becomes clear that adults (teachers and administrators) operate and function in the role of the agents of dominant order and the students in the building, although the primary customers for educational spaces, exist as the oppressed and governed population. The students are pressured to release all forms of agency and resistance to have a peaceful existence under the written and unwritten rules of the dominant order. Any move to resist the status quo is met with harsh opposition, and the students are reminded of the hierarchy through the means of school disciplinary policies. These practices are not only used to punish the students whom
resist, but are also used as visible deterrents for any others that are tinkering with the idea of resistance. It is assumed that students will think before attempting to resist, that is, if they want to steer clear of the repercussions as a result of student insurrection.

When I think about symbolic violence and the ways in which these dominated groups take on the thought processes of the dominant order we can think of students in this way. The students are perceived as broken and having deficits in areas of their lives. If the students are being perceived as broken, they are treated in a manner that matches this characterization of their existence. So, how are students whom are treated in this manner supposed to react? Students then start to take on these identities of “brokenness” and actually believe that there is something wrong with them. And when they’re treated as broken individuals, they start to behave in a certain way and in essence they take on and accept the dominant views of who they, what they can be, and what they are worthy of receiving in life. Some of their identities are molded by the discourses of the dominant and I argue that this is a violent act, even if only symbolic. Many times we think of urban schools as violent. The types of violence describe are usually physical forms and at times verbal…usually between students. I think we need to start thinking about violent school spaces outside of the realm of the typical physically and verbally violent descriptions, but also through the lens of symbolic violence.
CHAPTER 6
THE 3 R’S IN A DISMANTLED URBAN SCHOOL: RELATIONSHIPS, RESPECT, AND RESISTANCE

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the articulated experiences of the students and the themes of relationship, respect, and resistance. These themes guided the students’ experiences in school. Relationships were important and based on reciprocal respect. However, when respect was not given, turmoil was the result. Resistance was used as a tool of survival and protection from the controlling space of school. The layout of this chapter is guided by the themes derived from my analysis of the data.

During one of my classroom observations, as I was sitting on the side of Ms. Vera’s classroom, I noticed a group of boys playing around, wrestling, and pushing each other. The bell had sounded and the students were getting ready to have some hallway fun before heading to their next class. One their way out of the classroom, one of the boys got slapped in the face. It all seemed to start off as two people “clowning around” but when the sound of the slap was heard, everyone paused to see what would happen. Everyone turned around yelling out, "oooooooooohhhh." From this point forward, you could sense a change in the energy of the situation. "You gonna let him do that?" people yelled trying to instigate a fight. The boy who had been slapped, his face turned read and also showed what seemed to be a look of confusion and nervousness. I cannot say if he was nervous because he couldn't fight, or because he knew he had to fight in order not to be perceived as soft. It seemed as if everything was happening in slow motion as he stood there looking around at the crowd. He knew that if he fought, he would get
suspended, but he just stiffly stood there as if he was weighing his options before he decided on an appropriate response. I saw what was going on and walked over to the spot where everyone was standing. I was hoping my "adult" presence would be enough to diffuse the situation. I thought to myself, that if I went over and broke it up, he would not look as soft because an adult in the building had intervened. As I walked over, everyone stopped and left the classroom. After everyone left and the tension died down, I pulled the kid over to me to talk with him about what I saw. "I didn't want to fight, but if I didn't they would think I was soft. I didn’t want to fight, they wanted me to fight. If I did, then I would get suspended. I think it was an accident. I don't feel like getting in trouble."

The student above was put in a dicey situation that could have resulted in his suspension. He was just going through the day and playing around as many of the students did during the time between classes, but one misguided swing landed on his face, made a loud noise, and created a situation where students expected him to defend his honor. For me watching, I saw it as an accident between two classmates that could easily be squashed and have the two parties move on with the day as if nothing had happened. However, for the students in the building, the incident took on a different meeting in their world. Even if it was an accident, the fact that you were slapped loudly in front of everyone was a sign of disrespect. It didn’t matter if the two involved were friends, sat at the same lunch table, and traded video games; for them, the embarrassment of the slap changed everything. When existing in a space where there is not much under your control, respect is a highly valued currency. If respect is not given, it has to be earned. In this case, the slap “proved” that the young man didn’t respect the guy he
slapped and the student that was slapped would now need to earn his respect and the respect of all of the onlookers by fighting. The slap took less than a second, but it changed everything in that short moment. Neither of the students wanted to fight, if so, the slapper would have continued to slap the student instead of looking shocked that his hand hit his “friends” face. If they were alone and no one saw the accidental slap they would have probably moved on, but the fact that it was witnessed meant something needed to happen in order to satisfy the crowd. Sensing this, I walked over hoping to calm the storm and it seemed to work. I am not sure if people pressured them to fight after school, but they both were back the next day, so I assume all was well.

The above story illustrates the complexity and importance of respect and relationships in the school setting among peers and with adults. On a daily basis, students navigate a terrain that changes rapidly and they have to be prepared to deal with any changes in the rules of their social worlds. This chapter will begin with a discussion of respect as a form of currency among students in their social world. I will then discuss respect as it relates to students and teachers and the importance of the formation of positive student-teacher relationships on the academic outcomes of students. Lastly, I discuss how a lack of respect and negative student-teacher relationships lead to student resistance. This resistance increases students’ involvement in the disciplinary system and often results in academic disengagement.
Understanding Respect in School Settings

"Although there were no clear winners in battles for respect, there were unmistakable losses." (Hemmings, 2003, p. 417)

"Traditionally, authority has been studied in terms of the types of authority enacted by parents and teachers, considering the balance between discipline, power, control, and emotional warmth ... Yet such typologies rarely acknowledge the interactive nature of authority, and the ways in which adults’ use of authority depends upon youths’ participation in that authority..." (Deutsch and Jones, 2004, p. 669).

Respect is a highly valued commodity for students in schools, and not just schools in urban areas. Places where students come from underserved neighborhoods and have little power in other areas of society rely on respect in a way that replaces other social forms of capital. Respect draws people into relationships and these relationships govern their lived realities in a particular social setting. The students in my study considered respect a valuable currency in their counter-cultural space. For these students, respect is seen as reciprocal and cannot be given if it is not received and becomes difficult to give if the individual does not have a sense of self-respect. If policies and practices are viewed as disrespectful, the victims of these systems can feel disempowered (Hammett and Staeheli, 2011). The authors continue further and state that when individuals feel respected and empowered, they can be voices for change to fight injustice in schools. They saw respect as a marker of citizenship as well as a tool to be used in the struggles for this ideal. In their research on respect and responsibility in South African high schools, they found that respect was a major concern for the youth. Adults viewed respect as something that should be instilled in youth so that they would know how to behave in society and exist as respectful and respectable citizens.
Respect was used as a tool for discipline and social reproduction with particular views on what a good society should be and how citizens should behave in this society. They also found that youth tended to resist these “proper” notions of what it meant to be respected and respectful and began to redefine notions of respect on their own terms in the context of their current society. Similar to the students in my study, alternative cultures were formed in school that contained their own rules and practices. Even in these alternative sites of existence for the students, respect remained a key factor and was used as the currency of choice.

I witnessed battles for respect during my time spent with students and navigating the school. Initially my focus was not on respect, however after talking with students that were sent to the office repeatedly, I realized respect was important to understand as the currency of choice in their worlds. When I asked students who were disciplined for fighting about the reasons for the altercations, Kenny and some of his peers repeatedly told me, “They were being disrespectful.” Even though students knew fighting would lead to suspension, they were not willing to get disrespected in the building and they were willing to fight to earn high levels of respect. Hemmings (2008) discussed a project where she interviewed high school seniors that all told her stories of how they had to navigate discourses of respect even if it involved fighting. These students told stories about how they won, loss, and avoided fights for respect in their school spaces. The notion of respect is valued with youth and although the consequences for attempts to gain respect seem strange to school administrators, the benefits often outweighed the risks for students fighting to be respected. For instance, on one of the days I was scheduled to shadow Kenny, as I entered the building, I saw him walking into the hallway looking
upset and holding his wooden beaded rosary in his hand. A little while after he arrived to the office, his father entered, signed some papers and said, “Let’s go!” When his father left the office I asked Kenny what happened.

Kenny:

I was in the hallway and Malcolm was playing around. He kept looking at me and saying stuff. I asked him if he had a problem. He walked up to me and grabbed my rosary. I said stop playing and he kept laughing I told him to let it go and he wouldn’t so I pushed him and he pushed me back. Then he grabbed it again and this time he popped it. You know I always wear that rosary. He disrespected my property so I chased him and threw him against the lockers. He ran and I ran after him and I was cursing and I was the only one that got caught. He hid from the teacher and then they told me to go to the office and they said I had to leave.

The lines between play, disrespect, and conflict are very thin. In one instance, a situation can transform from “horseplay” into a physical altercation. Kenny and Malcolm had an interesting relationship. If there was one person that could get Kenny upset, it was Malcolm. On most days they were cool and hung in the same crowd. Then there were days when these two needed to be separated. On this day, Kenny had enough of the “playing around” and decided to react physically Malcolm because disrespected and broke his property. Kenny knew the rules of the school. He had witnessed people getting suspended for fighting and he always tried to stay out of trouble. However, he
understood the code of respect and the fact that his property, as an extension of him, was disrespected and he could not let that happen. If word got around that his famed rosary was popped and he didn’t do anything, it could impact his social standing. Clearly there were other options that did not include fighting, but they did not hold the same weight with his peers. Kenny could have walked away or told an adult, but these actions are not valued in his social world. So rather than dealing with a reduced social standing, he felt the need to have the altercation even though he knew suspension was a very real possibility. For some of the students, respect meant survival. The more respect you gained, the less you would be “tested” by others. So having a substantial amount of social respect made it somewhat easier for students to navigate their days in the school.

Students were aware of the fact that their peers were being removed from school after fighting for respect. Some of the fights for respect resulted from being disrespected in person, on Facebook, text messages, and a number of other social media outlets. If the violation happened outside of school, the business of resolving the situation was often carried out in school. Here Jeffrey reflects on the reality of the fights and the suspensions and expulsions of his peers.

Jeffrey:

Truthfully I really don't know what happened to them I don't know if they dropped out or what. I know I don't know anybody who just dropped out but I know they got kicked out and expelled but other reasons than that I don't know. People got expelled for fighting repeatedly. Like they would fight, get suspended, come back from suspension, then a week later, fight again. They would give them another chance, then suspend them. Then they come back then they would fight again and
then that was it. People always like fought over little stuff. Like if somebody says something over Facebook that they didn’t like, they feel disrespected because they got confronted or whatever. They feel some type of way. And so they want to fight. Like if you get kicked out all the time you don’t know what’s going on in class so you can’t be learning.

Jeffrey was able to articulate the problematic cycle of fighting for respect in school. These fights resulted in multiple suspensions. One of the issues surrounding the suspensions is that the school did not always work with the students to resolve the issues. When students returned, with issues still unresolved, tensions would rise and end up leading to another altercation which in turn leads to additional suspensions. With this cycle, students involved were being left behind academically and were most likely not going to be able to catch up with their peers.

On another day while in the school, I noticed Kenny in the office waiting to be sent home. This was not common for Kenny, so I assumed something major happened. When I inquired about his stay in the office, he notified me that he had been in a fight and was getting suspended for multiple days. His description of the fight suggested it occurred because he was disrespected in front of his peers. Below, Kenny describes the events leading to his suspension.

Kenny:

Well we were good friends and stuff before. And we were playing basketball and he kept going crazy VIOLENT on people and then he grabbed my shirt. He ripped it and I got mad. And after that I was like why you keep looking at me and stuff like that and then he got mad. And eventually he pushed me and swung and I
ducked and I just came back up. The teachers were scared. They was scared. Ms. Gusto and Mr. Ell. You could never count on them to break up a fight. It’s like they were scared we were fighting. Mr. Ell told us to break it up, I told him to move and he backed off. We were fighting until all of the gym teachers came and one of the teachers picked him up and put him on his shoulder and walked him out. And the other teacher just told me to walk away. So I just walked. So I got suspended for a week…five days. It’s just a school week.

These students were not enemies and had hung out with one another throughout the year. However, interpersonal relations change when an individual feels violated and disrespected. Ironically, Kenny was fighting again because his property, as an extension of him, was damaged. The first fight was a result of his rosary being snapped and this most recent fight was related to one of his favorite shirts being ripped. Kenny knew the consequences, but again, the risk of getting suspended was outweighed by the benefits of maintaining high levels of respect among his peers.

For me it was clear that respect had varied meanings, especially as defined by adolescents and adults. “It is typically used to refer to feelings of admiration, consideration, or attention towards another person,” (Deutsch and Jones, 2008, p. 670). Race for some is an important aspect of negotiating relationships. Many marginalized populations, in this case African Americans, have a storied history with oppression and disrespectful treatment in this country. When there were limited job options, housing options, and other resources, people strived to maintain their levels of social respectability. Respect is part of a legacy of slavery in this country where Blacks had to be subordinate to whites while also trying to maintain their dignity (Deutsch and Jones,
Disrespecting a person can have serious consequences when they feel their dignity is all they have and can control. As late as 30 years ago, educational researchers found that respect was an important part of classroom practices and relationships for Black students (Deutsch and Jones, 2008). With few areas of control in their lives, the struggle for respect became an important site to maintain a sense of humanity and dignity for these marginalized students.

It is important for teachers to understand the importance of respect in the lives of their students. “Discourses of respect govern relations of authority. Individuals who garner respect can command authority in ways that allow them to assert or challenge social controls in their relationship with others. To lose respect is to become powerless, subordinate, and vulnerable to abuse,” (Hemmings, 2002, p. 302). In the counter-culture where the students exist, respect is important to make it through the day without incident. Students understand that without respect you are vulnerable and open to be tested. If you have respect, the tests do not come as often, but if respect is lost, youth enter a constant battle to regain respect and their position in the hierarchal order. These fights for respect are not just taking place with students of color in urban schools. Manninen, Huuki, and Sunnari (2011) found that even Finnish schoolboys engage in battles over respect in school settings that often include violence. The violence exhibited during their study did not necessarily lead to popularity, but increased amounts of respect.

“As school boys’ struggle to gain peer group acceptance creates constant pressure to maintain the prevailing order, violence is sure to be present…Power is not freely available but is protected constantly by respected students who foster and maintain the threat of violence as a side effect of their social play. This ethos…”
so common that violence, hidden behind humor or having fun has become normalized and therefore unrecognized” (Manninen, et al., 2011, p. 344).

As they argued, this fight for respect is not born in the schooling context but is often the result of students being disrespected by the state, so they resist norms of citizenship and act out alternative methods of gaining respect in their own social worlds. These students existed in spaces where very little was under their control. They were constantly watched, (mis) judged, disciplined, etc. and often times felt powerless to control these realities. So, respect for them was priceless. It is a necessity for survival in their alternative places of existence.

Students in my study not only wanted respect from their peers but they also expected to be shown respect by adults in the building. For these students, respect was transactional. “If you give me respect, I will give you respect. If you don’t respect me, I don’t respect you.” Deutsch and Jones (2008) point out that respect is “bidirectional” and that students will not respect the teachers just because they are adults. If the teachers give respect, they will get respect. Adulthood does not guarantee receiving respect from students. Again, respect is a mutual relationship and is not guaranteed based on your level of status in a given social setting.

“Traditionally, authority has been studied in terms of the types of authority enacted by parents and teachers, considering the balance between discipline, power, control, and emotional warmth...Yet such typologies rarely acknowledge the interactive nature of authority, and the ways in which adults’ use of authority depends upon youths’ participation in that authority,” (Deutsch and Jones, 2008, p. 669).”
Respect can also be talked about in a similar way as referenced in the above quotation. Authority and respect in schools between youth and adults have to be understood as a complex bi-directional negotiation of space and roles. In the classroom, teacher authority is not a given and is negotiated on a moment-to-moment basis (Deutsch and Jones, 2008). During my fieldwork I noticed how respectful relationships took on different forms on a day-to-day basis depending on the mood of the people involved. Teachers and students had tough emotional days and these fluctuations impacted the ways in which authority and respect were negotiated. For instance, there were days in certain classes where the teacher worked well with the students, everyone seemed to have a limitless supply of patience, and there were not many interruptions during the class period. However, there were a number of days where patience from teacher and student was thin and many interruptions took place. These were the days where majority of the student outbursts would happen, people would feel disrespected and challenge authority, and students would end up being sent to the office. The relationship between respect and authority in the school was complicated and weighed heavily on student-teacher relationships. Not only did students fight for respect in their social worlds, but teachers were also embattled with a struggle for the respect of their students in order to maintain some form of classroom authority.

**Student-Teacher Relationships**

The fight for respect and complexity of student-teacher relationships are important for the daily experiences of all involved. The nature of these relationships impacted the experiences and educational outcomes of students. A number of studies exist documenting
the importance of teacher-student relationships in school settings (Baker, 1999; Davis 2006; Chong, Huan, Quek, Yeo, and Ang, 2010). Previous research also documents the experiences of black males in urban school settings (Beachum and McCray, 2011; Davis, 2003; Ferguson 2001; Lopez, 2003; Noguera, 2008; Noguera & Wing 2006). The importance of relationships and how students are treated were themes repeatedly mentioned by the young men in this study. Students discussed the importance of teachers whom they had positive relationships with and their satisfaction with schooling experiences. For the students in this study, all mentioned the same teacher, Ms. Vera (all names are pseudonyms), as one of the only teacher they had a good relationship with and who cared about them.

Ms. Vera was one of the teachers I got to know relatively well during my time in the school. Ms. Vera was a White female teacher who held the respect of many students in the school. She grew up in the suburbs and never really had many interactions with people of color during her youth. When she decided to go into teaching, she wanted to be placed in an urban district. She mentioned her desire to use her privilege to work with and fight for marginalized youth. Some of her friends felt she was crazy for going into urban schools when she could have an “easier” time working in the suburban schools. Many people expected her to work in urban schools for 1-2 years, gain some experience, and then head out to the suburban schools. However, that did not happen. Ms. Vera, at the time we met had spent at least 10 years in her current district. When I first started working with the young men I would often see her, but she never said anything to me. She would just watch us, nod her heard, and keep moving. I was not sure if she liked me at first. A few months passed and she approached me in the hallway to ask if I had time to meet. I agreed and we
met later that day. During our meeting she shocked me by thanking me for the work I was doing with the students. She mentioned that she loved the students I was working with and that she felt they needed a positive Black male role model. Ms. Vera was dedicated to these students and as I watched her interactions with the young men in my study it became clear that she had gained their respect and was allowed into their lives in ways that no other adult in the building was successful in reaching.

As stated previously, many of the students mentioned having a positive relationship with Ms. Vera. Sweeney, discussed the reasons why he respected Ms. Vera:

Sweeney:
Teachers are stubborn. To tell you the truth, the only teacher I have a good relationship with and who I can talk to is Ms. V. She listens. She understands us. She know where we be coming from. Like the stuff we be trying to tell teachers, and they don’t want to listen, we just tell her. She listens. She knows how to listen to students. She realizes our experiences and what we go through. They don’t never wanna listen to us. She knows what’s fair and what’s not fair. She just knows what to do.

The students felt that Ms. V. “represented” and “had their backs” in the school environment. Irizarry (2009) discussed the importance of “representin’” and its impact on student views on effective teaching practice. His concept of representin’ moves beyond just voice and speaking up for students. It involves action on the part of the teacher. “Teachers who represent ground their work in a larger sociopolitical context and work to address and combat issues of oppression in their classroom and society at large” (p. 500).
These teachers are fully aware that they can face consequences from administration, but understand that their work is needed for the benefit of their students. For the young men in this study, Ms. V. stands as a shining example of how they feel teachers should represent for them. She represented for them in school by fighting continuously to get resources to develop programs for the “forgotten” 8th grade students.

Out of all the students, Sweeney probably has the closest relationship with Ms. V. He loved Ms. V and always spoke highly of her. Other adults in the building knew Ms. V. had a great relationship with Sweeney and when he would get in trouble, they often called upon her to calm him down. They knew she could get through to him. Below, Sweeney discusses his track record with Ms. V. and getting disciplinary “write-ups” in school.

Sweeney:

She always says good stuff about me because I never get in trouble in her class. I have never gotten a write-up from her or nothing never. I never got in trouble in her class. Every other teacher I get written up but not Ms. Vera. I've gotten written up by every teacher I have except for Ms. Vera. I do not know why. I mean I guess I could have been written up but she gives me second chances or something.  

Me: How is your behavior different in Ms. Vera’s and Ms. Gusto’s class?  
I mean it's like I just can't stand her (Ms. Gusto). That's it right there if you don't really like somebody and you around them all day. I don't know. My emotions change. One second she'll be cool but the sometimes I just be like yo I really don't like this lady. It seems like when I step into her class a whole different me comes out. Like some changes I don't know. I feel like I just don't want to be in her class. I don't know why I feel that way but sometimes I just be feeling like yo I really hate
this class like. I don't know if it's the class or if it's her or the people around me. I just hate that class. And like when I have the class I just don't want to be in it. I don't know why but I don't like that class.

Me: Are you treated differently in the two classes?

I just like Ms. Vera class better I don't know. I don't know if I'm treated differently. I just like that class. I just think she's a cool person and I always thought she was real cool and I feel comfortable in her class. But like English there’s something about her that I just don't like and I mean it's just too boring. I just be trying to leave. I guess that's how I got in trouble one time. I just got up and left. It was so boring. We don't do nothing in that class. And then I always get kicked out. She always kick me out. She kicked me out for talking or just not doing nothing. Word. [a statement of affirmation] If I just sit there and just look. She will kick me out. I just be sitting there. I'll say I just don't even feel like it Miss. Then she say but if you don't feel like it just get out. That's what she tells me. Like I'll just be sitting and she be like do your work and then she'll say well if you don’t feel like doing the work just get out. She'll send me to a timeout. But sometimes she'll write me up or kick me out. Like during her first couple of days she came to the school I got suspended in her class. And then I came back. She kept talking and talking and talking and I was like okay okay and I got up and pushed the desk and it hit the table. The table shook and the coffee cup fell and broke so then I got suspended for that.

I asked him about his behavioral differences because I noticed how he acted in Ms. Gusto’s class. He mentioned being written up by all of his teachers other than Ms. Vera, but I
would argue that most of his write-up came from Ms. Gusto. He could be having a good day, but for some reason, in Ms. Gusto’s class, Sweeney’s behavior would shift. He did not respect Ms. Gusto. From my observations, it seemed like she attempted to gain his respect, but the harder she tried, the worse their relationship became. She could not get through to him. Sweeney admitted he was wrong for some of the things he did in her class and I often challenged him if I found out he did not have a good day with Ms. Gusto. We talked about the importance of making it through the year and how to deal with difficult situations. He still would get in trouble in her class, but he did attempt to reduce the number of “run-ins” he had with her. For me it was evident that since he always got in trouble in her class, he felt she did not like him. For Sweeney, if there is a sense that the teacher does not like him, there is no reason to try to remain in their good graces. Even though misbehavior leads to participation in the disciplinary process, if students felt disrespected, they were willing to deal with the consequences of their resistance.

Jeffrey, another 8th grade student mentioned how Ms. Vera listened to him and was his favorite teacher. He also mentioned some of the issues he had with other teachers in the building. He talked about some positive behaviors from teachers as well as what he viewed as negative behaviors from teachers and other adults in the school.

Jeffrey:

I know you a teacher and a grown up and I’m not supposed to disrespect you. That don’t mean you can just do whatever and walk all over me. Some adults in this building just see themselves as [slave] masters. Treat your students how you like to be treated. Be fair. They need to know what we like and dislike so they can have a good relationship. You just gotta know where we coming from. Just listen to us.
A number of other students shared these same sentiments and talked about their struggles navigating and developing positive relationships with adults in the building. These relationships are important for the academic success of students. Research has found that positive student-teacher relationships are associated with improved academic achievement, motivation, and academic engagement (Baker, 1999). Even though students were very open about their feelings towards teachers, they were also honest about how they treated teachers they felt didn’t care about them.

Sweeney:

I admit. I get in trouble. I get in trouble a lot, I ain’t gonna front. I always get in trouble for disrespect…yelling, quick temper. Yelling at teachers. Teachers are stubborn. They get in my mind. I get in trouble for like, saying something to a teacher, or like just doing stuff. Messing with teachers basically. They annoying. So annooooying. Just ride you all day. Just talk and talk and talk at me all day.

But I’m a good student. I’m a good student.

Sweeney made sure to remind me he was a good student. It was as if he wanted me to know that his behavior did not define who he was as a person nor his academic potential. Students stressed that they knew what was right and wrong and what was considered acceptable behavior in their school. They were quick to point out that they only “disrespected teachers that don’t show no respect” to them and their friends. If they felt a teacher cared and listened, they were willing to do the work and meet the guidelines the teacher set. Even if they didn’t always agree with the teacher, but they felt they cared, they would do what was asked of them. Sweeney saw himself as a good student even though he was very familiar with the principal’s office. Outside of his participation in the
disciplinary programs at school, he did well academically. He did not fail any courses and excelled in a number of areas. He was a complex person, still growing, and trying to find his voice in the school space. During this period of growth he challenged plenty of boundaries as well as the levels of teachers’ patience, but for the most part, he stayed focused academically.

Another student, Jones, had a positive relationship with Ms. Vera as well. Jones was more reserved and quiet, but at times did not complete his assignments. He did not really get in trouble in school. He was very talkative and may have been asked to be quiet from time to time, but I do not recall him getting suspended, fighting, or being kicked out of class. He usually did his work, but at times, he needed to be pushed. For him, Ms. Vera served his motivational spark.

Jones:
She cared about us she was unlike all other teachers. If you don't do work that's too bad. She was gonna help us. Like if we had a trip and it was on the day of her class and we might not get back in time for class then she might not let us go on the trip because she cares about us and our grades. In the past she did that to me because my grade in that class was around a 50 and then in the last marking period it went to like a 90 something. I just listened more in class instead of talking. I would focus on her and not on the other people. Those looking mainly to get kicked out. She gives them a lot of chances and stuff. I started focusing more and did my work. I finished the homework that no one did and then there was this thing she was also doing in class. So she made people do their homework and she made them do the paper in class. I finished the paper and I finished other packet. Finished that and
had to watch a video in the other classroom because everyone was doing homework. So by the end of the class I was like five things ahead of the class. What she do is she wants kids to pass instead of just fail. She called my mom and stuff. She cares about us. She wants us to go forward. She called her to tell her my grades were lowering. Now she suddenly called my mother for the good things. She pushes us. Ms. V. is nice and aggressive.

Ms. V had high expectations for the students and Jones, for one, appreciated it. Her sternness was not a turnoff for Jones. He seemed to view her actions as examples of the amount of care and respect she had for him and his peers.

Another student, Kenny, reflected on his relationship with Ms. Vera.

Kenny:

She made everything in that class interesting I had about a 98. I never had a problem with that lady. I never got in trouble in her class never had a problem with that lady. She didn't take it. She didn’t take it. [She did not take any crap from the students] She always likes to use games and stuff to help us learn stuff. She made us understand the subject and learn techniques and stuff like that. She always kept stuff interesting and fun in that class. Yeah that's one teacher that you can always go to for not only Spanish problems but for any other problems that you may have outside. You can always go to her.

Ms. V. was not the only teacher in the school to have great relationships with the students, but she was one of a select few. Wallace, unlike some of the other students in my sample,
was easy to get along with and had a positive relationship with most of his teachers. Again, he was not a student who got in trouble a lot, and he was better at navigating the system.

Wallace:

In school I usually don't like my teachers but this year I like my teachers they are more dedicated to me. Like before in the sixth and seventh grade I had good teachers but they would just teach me but my teachers now a couple of my teachers this year they care about me they want to see me successful. And they want to help me achieve that. They want me to be successful. They say it. We have talks and like real talks about life like if I get a bad grade or something. Like Ms. Zep, I have I have her in my first block and I have a tendency to be tardy to school sometimes. And so she was telling me like she was keeping it real. If you always gonna be late to school it's going to be like a habit. Then you'll be late to work then you'll be late to that job interview and then they're not going to hire you. So I was like I understand that. She tells me about life. I have a good relationship with all my teachers except for one.

Since Wallace was one of the students who did not get into a lot of trouble, I wanted to know more about his strategies for staying out of the disciplinary system.

Me: How come you don't get into trouble in school?

Wallace:

Man it's because I'm smart. And that's what I think it is. Some of these kids. Like Sweeney. He says like the dumbest stuff at the dumbest times. Like he has this little voice that he does in school. And I'm like yo shut up family. Doing this is like
your seventh strike. Like if a teacher get mad at me, I’ll be like okay I'm done. But some of these kids just like to push teachers. Because. I don't like to push teachers because that's my grade right. They have my grade and that's my future. I think it's just the way they react. Well I don't know – it doesn't end positive for them but I don't know why they still do it. I can't say for like everybody. But some of them don't know the consequences of what's really happening. And how they grades are really getting messed up. I mean some people lack the ability to see that is not getting them anywhere. And to me I don't get in trouble because I'm smart because I have my limits. I mean I do stuff but I have a line that I won't cross. Is not that like I'm afraid of my mother or anything but I just don't want to disrespect her. She's taught me to not to disrespect adults so. She always tells me to respect adults so I don't try to disrespect my teachers. I mean I respect my teachers and stuff like that because they are adults.

Wallace believes he is smart. Not only does he do well academically, but he is also smart in how he relates to adults and navigates school. He also discusses his views of respect, for him he was told by his mother to respect adults and that is something that guided his approach to teachers in school. From discussion with the parents of the students in my sample, it was clear they had high expectations for their children and wanted them to respect authority. However, after feeling disrespected on multiple levels, students did not feel respect needed to be automatic when it came to adults. Their respect had to be earned by a showing of respect from the adults. For Wallace, because he had good grades and a personal limit, it seemed a bit easier for him to earn the respect of adults in the buildings.
Since adults treated him in a respectful manner, he in turn was free to return the respectful gestures.

Jeffrey was similar to Wallace as it relates to his standing in school. He was not seen as a troublemaker in school and was not one who was repeatedly disciplined. He was suspended once, but I am not sure it was related to fighting. During one of our conversations, he gave a detailed description of his experience in school and the ways in which he interacts with teachers he feels care for him.

Jeffrey:

I mean like the teachers in here always believe the teacher and I hate that. There’s two sides to the story but teachers always believe other teachers and only hear one side. They think we just kids and we don’t know what we talking about. I mean we are just kids but it's not always the simple fact that we don't know what we talking about. Or that it's our fault. Like for good example I got kicked out of class on Friday because somebody told somebody something and she thought it was me and she kicked me out. She’s on the other side of the room and she kicked me out. Like my social studies teacher she knows I'm a good kid she had me last year. All these teaches know, I try to be a good kid. Like they know they had my brothers before and so they know my older brothers. On a scale of 1 to 10 I would say I’m a six or a seven. I mean I'm not the best student but I try. I try hard. I come to school on time I do my work. Sometimes I slack off and don't do my homework but I'm a good kid.

One of the interesting things about Jeffrey is that it seems as if he feels he has to let people know he is a good kid. He repeated it often. He knew he was not a perfect student, but
always felt the need to justify his goodness to others. Students were not given the benefit of the doubt and felt judged, so it was a tactic to preserve some dignity and ensure others did not view them in the same negative ways as some of the adults in the school building.

Jeffrey:

The strongest relationship I got is with my English teacher and my social studies teacher. I don't know why I connect with them. Because like they care about me. They want me to be good. They like want me to do well. They see I can do well. Say if I come in one day feeling sad not sick but like depressed or like I don’t want to be here. So I just don't do no work. I just sit in my seat. I don't talk to nobody I just put my hoodie on. She will walk up to me and say like “Is everything okay? What’s wrong?” And I’m like, I'm mad right now Miss. So I don't like talking about it right now but thank you. And then she'll be like okay “Can you please do this work and then we can talk about it later. If you want to you can talk to me about it.” Not all my teachers don't do that though. My first three block teachers they always ask me. I'm happy kid, jokester. I always joke around. I always got a big smile on my face all the time. So if I come in and I'm in that mood and I'm not laughing and him not playing and they see something is wrong with me they want to know what’s wrong.

Jeffrey enjoyed these teachers because they saw his humanity. They were concerned about him as a person and not just as a student. Jeffrey felt respected by these teachers and he talked about the importance of having people he could talk to in the building. Students had
complicated lives and it was comforting for them to know that people were willing to support them in school and not just judge them.

Jeffrey:

Like if I come in class one day and just sit down and throw my bag down all mad just not talking my social studies teacher walks up next to me to ask if everything is alright. She will let me know I can come after class. Sometimes I be so mad I don't go after I leave. And then once I calm down I realize that I was mean to someone who's always a good to me. And so I go back and tell her I'm sorry I was just mad. And once I go back she asks what I was mad about and what was wrong. And then I'll tell her why and then I feel better because I can talk to somebody about it. I want people to relate to me like as a human like not like if it’s their job. Not because they have to, but because they wanted to. Just because they're nice people like that. I mean it's not really that I do better in classes with people like this. I don't know. I try in all my classes. I mean I try in all my classes but social studies is one of my favorite classes. It’s my favorite class. I know a lot about social studies. She can really see that I be trying and I mean know what I'm talking about.

Howard (2001) discusses the importance of caring teachers to students in urban schools. Students in his study mentioned the importance of teacher care in whether or not they would connect with the teachers. “Care, as an ethic in teaching, includes explicitly showing affective and nurturing behavior toward students, which can have a positive on student desire to learn” (p. 138). The students mentioned that caring teachers reached out to them and had their best interests in mind, even if teachers were stern at times. Their
favorite teacher, Ms. Vera was stern. She was not a push over by any means. For outsiders, her sternness could be misunderstood. Through my observations I saw her exhibit caring more so than just sternness. She called students’ homes. She visited their family members in hospitals. She went to sporting events, funerals, and court dates for students. She challenged her students and supported them as well. She represented.

Students were concerned with respect, caring teachers, and being heard. They continuously mentioned the imbalance of voice in the school. “Teachers never let us talk.” Students were struggling to get their voices heard, but felt no one listened to any of their concerns. They resisted the silencing efforts by rebelling against the system of voiceless classes, even though they were disciplined repeatedly. They felt strongly about being heard and knowing their voices and opinions mattered. As one of the students stated, “If only they listened like they tell us to listen…teachers don’t listen to students, but we gotta listen to them. It’s not fair.”

**Teacher-Student Relationships and the Classroom Environment**

Another major area of concern for the students was their experiences in the classroom. Initially, I did not think the classroom environment was tied to the students’ notion of respect until I reflected on some of my observations. I noticed a number of students getting in trouble when they were bored with the class material, when they were not being challenged, and when they thought the material was too challenging. I noticed bored students disrupting the class time which often led to them being removed from class. These removals from class were seen as a form of disrespect by the students and colored the relationships they had with the teachers. Some students used the “boredom”
explanation for multiple reasons. There were some students who were bored because they were not being challenged by the class lessons. These students were usually given extra assignments to keep them engaged. There were also students who were “bored” because they were not grasping concepts. Some of these students were offered additional assistance, but some just slipped through the cracks and stayed at their current academic levels.

The classroom was a complicated space and it often seemed as if levels of academic performance impacted relationships. Whether or not a student was “on level” seem to impact the type of relationship they had with certain teachers. If they were doing well academically, it was more likely for them to have a positive relationship with teachers. If they were not doing well academically, it often manifested in a negative/poor relationship with teachers. For example Wallace did well in school and had positive relationships with teachers. Malcolm, on the other hand, struggled academically and had strained relationships with teachers. The teaching style of teachers and the ways in which they ran their classes had an impact on the relationships they had with the students.

When asked about the school environment and relationships they had with teachers, students mentioned the need for the environment to be fun and for the material to be relevant to their lives. If the material and teaching style do not draw students in, it is more difficult for them to stay focused and produce quality work. Culturally relevant pedagogy is needed to create an environment conducive to learning for students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2000; Lynn, 2006; Milner, 2006, 2008, 2010; Howard, 2003). Students called for practices that would link their everyday living with course content. Ladson Billings (1995) outlined three criteria for pedagogy to be considered culturally relevant.
“Students must experience academic success; students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (p. 160). Youth culture was important to the students and they called for educators to use what was culturally familiar to students in an effort to make learning and class time fun. If the students felt that learning was fun, they were more willing to take academic risks. In the “fun” classes, students were able to bring popular culture in to their educational environment. For example, in one of their math classes, they were able to use baseball and basketball statistics to learn mathematical concepts. In spaces where the learning was not considered fun, were the places where strained relationships often existed.

Students also wanted to be consulted about class content. Multiple studies point to the advantages of involving youth in the creation of culturally relevant practices with a focus on urban youth culture (Ginwright, 2004; Irizarry, 2009; Morrell 2007; Sealey-Ruiz and Green, 2010; “Rarely, if ever, are urban youth viewed as possessing knowledge from which teachers can benefit (Irizarry, 2009, p. 510). When asked about their feelings about classroom content and their relationship with teachers, students had varied responses, but most of them focused on a desire to feel engaged, respected, and heard in the classroom.

Sweeney:

Teachers have to talk less. Put some fun in your class. We can do work, but nobody wanna just sit there and just look at you or just write stuff down all the time. Or do worksheets all day. That’s not fun. We wanna have fun. I think 8th grade is supposed to be fun. I think 8th grade and 12th grade should be your funnest years
in school. Because you are going on to the next level. I know teachers are supposed to talk. But that don’t mean you gotta talk the whooooole class.

What interested me about this statement is that it is evident he is willing to do the work when it is fun and engaging. Other students talked about how they often “got bored” sitting in the class and just listening to the teacher. In some of their class sessions, the teacher would give them worksheets to take up class time. As one of the students stated, “That ain’t learning.” They expressed a desire to make learning fun and taking an active role in their education. One student shared his experiences in one of his favorite classes:

Jones:
I have fun in my history class. He know how to talk to students. We don’t just sit there and do book work all day. He knows how to run a class. He runs a class like a smart teacher. We get to talk. We always have fun in his class. He’ll let us talk a little bit. He’ll get mad if we talk a lot, but we can talk. He understands. He talks about what’s on TV and teaches about how stuff relates.

Another student echoed a similar sentiment when discussing a sports class he took this year. He discusses how this class is not the same as his other classes and why he looks forward to this class every week.

Jeffrey:
We learn reading, writing, and math, but through sports. We learn writing skills, reading skills, and math skills. But we do it in a way that we like it. In a fun way. I don’t have many changes [to be made to school]. Just the classroom. School is
not whack. It’s just the classroom. The classroom environment is just…not fun. They [teachers] need to be more open minded. Our whole day would be good, the school is fun, but not the classes. Just some.

Kenny:
For me I think at certain points it depends on the group of kids I’m with. Other times it’s the surroundings I was in. And when I'm in stuff that I enjoy…like I enjoy writing poetry and stuff. But when I do something for a long period of time and something I'm not interested in I just lose interest and that makes me lose focus and once I lose focus that’s how I end up getting in trouble. Like Mr. Enon, I mean I got along with him we had a relatively good relationship it was just that the class wasn’t as interesting to me. It was just plain. Just boring. I would like to see him like apply it to everyday things like everyday life or something. He would just give us worksheets and worksheets and worksheets one after the other. He was never really free to ask him how to do this or that or whatever basically I just learned all of the stuff by myself.

For these students, school needs to be relevant and interesting. They understand that fun is not the most important thing for teachers, but feel it is needed in order to keep students interested in school and education. “You have to make it relate.” Students expressed their desire to know how what they were learning related to what they were going through. According to these students, education should not only be fun and flexible, but relevant to their daily lived realities. Engagement proves difficult when the students in my sample did not see a connection to their daily lives or the potential benefit of what was being taught.
Student Resistance

In conversations with students about their repeated run-ins with disciplinary sanctions and school administrators as well as their relationships with teachers, they often discussed the need to resist because they felt they were being subjected to unreasonable and unfair policies. Many students felt the teachers did not care while teachers often articulated the fact they felt students did not care. When briefly speaking with teachers about the reasons for some of the poor teacher-student relationships in the school, many pointed to what they perceived as a faulty youth culture that promoted academic disengagement and a lack of respect for authority. They pointed to “that darn hip-hop and rap music,” as one of the major causes of the creation of disrespectful students that were difficult to connect with and build relationships. When I told them about my interests in hip-hop and the fact that I taught a sociological course on hip-hop, most assumed I shared their same negative views of the culture and its existence as the sole reason for the current state of youth. I do think the teachers had some strong arguments for the some of the negative themes in the music, but I did not view hip-hop as the sole cause of student resistance. There were plenty of other issues facing students that created an environment where resistance was necessary for survival and self-preservation.

In one of my favorite songs, “You Must Learn,” KRS One raps about the problematic structures of the schools and how students are being indoctrinated instead of educated. He goes on to stress the importance of students taking control of their own education and resisting the “nonsense” being spewed in schools. He raps “What do you mean when you say I’m rebellious? ’Cause I don’t accept everything that you’re telling
us? What are you selling us? The creator dwell in us. I sit in your unknown class while you’re failing us. I failed your class ‘cause I ain’t with your reasoning. You’re trying to make me you by seasoning…” He speaks of student resistance and how Black students are labeled as rebellious because they do not accept the white supremacist propaganda of the school system. Students are repeatedly shut down and labeled for resisting what they can clearly see as nonsense. Why would they not resist?

Student resistance in the form of acting out can be viewed as a struggle for identity and defining one’s self. This identity struggle does not often match school environments with many policies created to ensure student conformity. As an act of agency and self-determination, students resist the structures that seek to squeeze them into the box of conformity and thus create their own identities in subcultures that resist hegemonic culture (Czymoniewicz-Klippel, 2011).

Sweeney:

I mean I act the way I act no matter what but there is people around me that act worse than me. I’m gonna keep being me regardless of who I’m with, just keep on doing what I do. I'm not gonna switch up to be snobby or do whatever just to get in with you. I'ma do what I need to do and what I want to do. The teachers know it. Even if I’m gonna go for a job I'm going to be the way that I'm gonna be. I'm gonna be me just me I'm not coming in to kiss nobody butt. You have to decide. I'm just going to be me.

Above, Sweeney discussed his need to be who he is without trying to impress or fit into another person’s idea of who he is or who he should be. It seems as if he speaks in this manner in an effort to resist in the school setting. He seems to be distancing himself from
hurt, judgment, and disappointment. Sweeney was one of the most outspoken students I worked with and his outspoken personality didn’t always gel with administrators in the building. Other students struggled with defining themselves within the school and also ran into the systems of punishment and conformity.

During one of our group conversations, I asked students about resistance and how the teachers viewed student behavior. I mentioned that teachers though hip-hop impacted student behavior and was one of the main reasons for students having behavioral outbursts in school.

Robinson:

My behavior is not impacted by hip-hop! You can’t judge us. We listen to different music and go through different stuff and have different values.

You can’t judge us. How they gonna say that hip-hop does stuff. That’s what I got to say…Rap doesn’t have an impact on my grades…bad impact. Hip-hop made me get good grades in school. I tell the truth. I say what I got to say. I write poetry and raps for the school and they say it’s nice and give me good grades. It motivates me. Work wise I think I’m a good student.

Robinson voices his concern about the idea that hip-hop controls him and causes him to “act out” in school. He talks about “going through different things” in a way that suggest he does not feel teachers understand what youth go through nor what they value. He points out the different lived realities of the adults that judge the culture and the youth who listen to the music and participate in the culture. The teachers and administrators in
the building labeled Robinson as a “troublemaker” with a temper. Ms. Gusto told me that he was a good writer but was always in trouble. There were times when I was asked, “is everything ok” when I walked through the building with him because he was usually being escorted by an adult to the main office. When asked about how that made him feel, he would usually smirk and shake his head from side to side.

Sweeney also offered his insights on youth participation in hip-hop culture. Most of our discussion focused on the music and messages in the songs.

Sweeney:

Aint nobody got the right to tell me what I can hear or what I can say. Music is made to be heard. If my momz say don’t listen to that song I’m not gonna listen to it, but if she say I can listen to it, I’m gonna listen to it. They lucky I do listen to it. If it wasn’t for hip-hop I would go crazy. I use it to get me in a good mood. Cuz this place, man. This place. [clenching his fist] They lucky I do listen to this music.

Sweeney was animated when he talked about his need to listen to music. When he mentioned people being “lucky” he listens to the music, he seems to be referring to what the music does for him. During informal conversation while walking through the school, we would talk about why so many students had mp3 players in school even thought they knew they would get in trouble if caught listening to music in class. He would often listen to music to zone teaches out and drift off into his own world. One time he was caught listening to his music in Ms. Gusto’s class and was asked to leave. Later when I
asked about his where-a-bouts after leaving class, he mentioned sitting in the suspension room and listening to music.

According to scholars from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), as referenced in (Czymoniewicz-Klippel, 2011) subcultures are groups of people who come together in resistance to what they describe as a society that oppresses them and their interests. In an effort to counteract marginalization these groups create their own styles and cultural codes to resist the views of the dominant culture. In an urban context, this sub-cultural place of existence for Black youth has become hip-hop culture. Students find a sense of safety in this culture and use it as the medium of resisting an oppressive society that sees them as problems and not people.

Hip-hop has musical, linguistic, and cultural roots that go beyond the United States and was born out of struggle during a time of economic and social ruin. Since this time, hip-hop has grown to become the language and culture of young people around the globe. Once thought of as a passing fad, hip-hop culture has emerged into a multibillion-dollar industry that has invaded spaces once opposed to its presence. For the teachers, hip-hop was perceived as violent and detrimental to the lives of the students. They along with others blamed hip-hop for social problems and viewed it as a poison infecting youth culture. Rap has been blamed for youth violence, the rise of gangs, drug use, and violence against women, because of the prevalence of some “commercialized” rap lyrics that contain violent and misogynistic messages (Dixon and Brooks, 2002; Reyna, Brant, and Viki, 2009). In this faulty, one-dimensional analysis, critics fail to acknowledge unjust social policies and forces that create environments of violence and resistance in underserved communities.
As it relates to youth rebellion, hip-hop offered these young men what Prier (2009) calls a counter-space of resistance. This place of resistance provides silenced youth space to analyze and critique their unjust lived realities in an attempt to create a better and more democratic society. Hip-hop culture also served as a space where students were able to struggle with what it means to be raced, classed, and gendered individuals in a capitalistic, race-based society. In addition to allowing youth to create knowledge and realize that their funds of understanding are valued.

Whether at a cafeteria table, in the gymnasium, or in the classroom sitting on desks formed in a circle, students were engaged in freestyle battles and reciting rap lyrics. Walking around the cafeteria during lunch periods, I was greeted with students banging beats on tables while another student recited raps. The students were often reprimanded for banging on the table and being loud, but this did not stop the students. Students looked forward to the lunchroom rap session to see who would come with the best lyrics. No matter how many times people were asked to leave the cafeteria for being too noisy and banging on the tables, students did not stop. For them, the rap session became a space where they were valued for what they knew. Students were in control of these spaces and were not judged by their peers (other than their rhyme skills). They were able to resist the knowledge being presented in classes, and create their own knowledge at the cafeteria tables.

**Reframing Oppositional Culture and Resistance in Schools**

Being a product of imperial domination and mental colonialism creates an environment for students to rebel against a Eurocentric approach to schooling that is not
necessarily a sign of low intellectual ability (Martinez 1997, Ginwright 2004). This view of oppositional culture frames youth participation in creating oppositional spaces as a form of agency. Hip-hop serves as a space where youth define what counts as important and necessary for social and mental survival. Hip-hop is seen as a way for people to resist the dominant culture and create a space for marginalized groups. “Non-European groups…draw on their own cultures to resist oppression under dominant ideologies and, in turn, influence the dominant culture…their music, among other cherished aspects of culture become viable forms of opposition” (Martinez, 1997, p. 268). Enslaved Africans were in constant fear of white retaliation, so they developed behaviors created as intentional tools to deceive the white power structure with coded or covert behaviors which criticized the dominant ideology and power establishment. “Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion…[that] quite often serve as the cultural glue that fosters communal resistance,” (Rose, 1994, p. 100). Black popular culture expression is a form of oppositional culture that stands in the face of perceived discrimination, racism and urban decay (Rose, 1994). This view of oppositional culture is not just a move to exist outside of the dominant culture or school practices, but also a move to create spaces and structures that allow for the defining of one’s own existence without being measured by the ruler of whiteness and supposed normalcy.

Marginalized students in these created spaces are not just victims, but are agents of choice concerning their personal liberation and destiny. These oppositional moves and developments should not be oversimplified and seen as reactionary tactics, but as
revolutionary, progressive action in the face of marginalization and oppression. For the students who listened to rap and participated in other forms of the culture, hip-hop was an extension of their identity. So when they were told to remove their hats, stop listening to music, or stop beating on the tables while reciting raps, they felt personally attacked. When adults demonized their culture, students built walls that made it difficult for teachers to create positive relationships with the students. Attaching youth culture, by extension, was seen as a personal attack, so students resisted. When they were told to shut out parts of their culture from the school, they worked harder to bring more into the building. The rap battle moved from just the cafeteria, to the playground, and in the stairwells. Students were engaged in their culture and were insistent on bringing it into the school space even if it resulted in disciplinary reprimand. Ms. Vera was the only teacher I saw engaging the students in their culture. She would call certain students by the name of rappers, “Lil Wayne, get over here and pick up that folder.” She would have discussions about rap lyrics and the ways that young students danced. They saw that she valued them and respected their culture, even if she did not agree with all of the negative representations of within commercial rap music. Her simple acknowledgement of hip-hop culture held a lot of weight with the students.

Using urban youth culture and hip-hop as scapegoats for the roots of all social ills and obstacles facing young Black males is shortsighted and removes the focus from an educational and social system that has repeatedly failed students, with a higher concentration of this failure residing in urban centers (Oakes 1985, Anyon 1997, Kozol 1991, 2005). Many studies on Black male students in schools have focused on an
analysis of educational outcomes and failure, resistance, accommodation, and reform (Allen, 2010). These studies have highlighted the experiences of Black males in school and the ways in which they are marginalized in the educational system. Students are suffering in an environment that situates them as a problem and is not conducive to their holistic growth and development. Students are continuously bombarded with negatives images, words, and actions. These assaults cannot be disregarded and must be understood as having a cumulative effect on the academic and social outcomes of young black males.

Kim (2010) calls for a transactionalist view of youth resistance. In this way, student resistance is seen in a more holistic way and not only as student insubordination. He argues that this nuanced view of youth resistance sees it in a way that considers its “socio-economic, historical, and racial” context. He also states that this view allows for the understanding and shaping of future encounters between youth and adults in schools. In essence this understanding would allow those in power to view youth resistance as a communicative practice and an act of “meaning-making.”

Students in these interviews had similar opinions about hip-hop and the impact the culture has on student behavior and academic achievement. Students pointed to other obstacles they faced that have an impact on their schooling experiences. For example, many of the students were open with me in discussing their home environments which included: single-mother households, imprisoned parents or other relatives, residing in subsidized housing, caring for younger siblings, and navigating increased amounts of gang related activity in their neighborhoods. These experiences often took time away from their focus on academic performance. As far as the school setting, students talked
about being bored in the classroom, not being able to talk freely in school, and not connecting with the adults in the school building. This disconnect, serves to alienate students in spaces where they should be engaged (Williams, 2009). Students felt there were other issues that had greater impacts on their lives than their beloved hip-hop culture.

It was important to create a space for students to freely share their stories without judgment. Students were able to vividly describe their experiences in school and neighborhood settings as well as their relationship with peers, teachers, and hip-hop culture. Students used hip-hop to resist the structure of schooling and lack of engagement in the classroom. This form of resistance may be beneficial to the students’ development of agency, however in their current educational spaces, these choices put them in opposition to a mainstream academic culture. The mainstream privileges certain ways of existing and behaving and unfortunately hip-hop, the culture of many students, has been constructed as deficient (Williams, 2009).

Closing

Major areas of concern for the students at the Arnita School were respect, relationships with teachers and peers, unfair disciplinary sanctions, a lack of voice, and their experiences in the classroom. In this chapter I highlighted the experiences articulated by students concerning respect and relationships. For the students, respect was a valuable currency that was needed to survive. Students understood respect as a necessity and engaged in daily battles to acquire and maintain respect. Some of their attempts to maintain respect resulted in disciplinary action, but the acquisition was
important enough for students to go through relatively extreme means to maintain high levels of social standing. Students would rather be suspended then to have word get around that they were “punked” or “dissed” by one of their peers. In addition, I highlighted the importance positive student-teacher relationships. When building relationships with adults, respect needed to be transactional. Adult status in the building was not a guarantee of respect. If students did not receive respect, they would not give respect. Students were able to connect with teachers that showed them high levels of respect. Students performed better in classes where they had positive relationships with teachers and did not perform as well in classes where they had adversarial relationships with teachers. Lastly, I briefly discussed the ways in which students used hip-hop to create a counter-space of existence in the school building. Hip-hop was an important part of student culture and students see hip-hop as an extension of who they were.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

This study explicated the ways in which Black eighth grade males navigated the reality of being educated in a dismantled school while living in underserved neighborhoods. My analysis began with a focus on their experiences in the school setting and then expended to their lives outside of school. Through their stories I was able to paint a picture that highlighted the complexities of their existence as young Black males attending an urban school in an underserved neighborhood. As this study has shown, youth have the ability to articulate their lived experiences and can offer sophisticated analysis of their social realities. They are not clueless as it relates to their social locations and their treatment as young men. They are well aware of the ways in which society views them and they aim to resist these simplistic assumptions about their identity and self-worth.

Using a qualitative design including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus groups, I was able to explore the experiences of the students as their shared throughout the process. Having their voices centered, their experiences were able to shine as the focal point of this study. Using my selected methods I was able to build rapport with students and develop meaningful relationships to get to know them beyond just being participants in this study. They were able to trust me and open up in a way that many adults in the school setting would never experience. I was privy to information about their hopes, dreams, successes, struggles, complex family situations and many other areas of their lives. The students in this study became more than participants; they are now my extended family.
Summary

This dissertation focused on the articulated realities of the students in this study. In Chapter 1, I introduced the study and talked about the significance of this work. I situated the dissertation in the larger context of the issues facing students attending underserved urban schools in the United States. In Chapter 2, I highlighted the relevant literature that helped to frame the dissertation project. My review of the literature covered: Black males and urban schools; Black racial identity development; oppositional culture; the school-to-prison pipeline; critical race theory; masculinity; and hip-hop and youth resistance. There were a number of research areas to be considered, however, these topical areas were the most pertinent for this project. In Chapter 3, I highlighted my methodological and procedural choices for carrying out my research agenda. I discussed the theoretical grounding that supported my methods as well as the complications related to using qualitative methods in research with underserved youth in schools. I also focused on the role my identity played within my research. I discussed my role as a researcher and provide a reflexive and reflective analysis of what it meant to be a participant observer and ethnographer working with Black boys in urban spaces who share similar upbringings and cultural understanding.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of the dissertation showcased the data and my analysis from the articulated experiences of the participants. Chapter 4, explored the process and reasons given for dismantling a school. I focused on the experiences of the students and teachers in the dismantled school and centered the voices of the individuals impacted by the top-down reform mandates. I argued that students and families impacted by reform
efforts should be involved in the decision making process but were not considered when reform decisions were made. I understand that it is not likely for students to be consulted in decision about school reform, but we cannot ignore the impact these efforts have on the families involved. With over forty years of reform, we have not seen many positive results. It seem as if year after year, new strategies are considered in an effort to address the plight of American public education. As our system now stands, with No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, we are not seeing any major gains in closing the achievement gap. When educational funding is based on competition problems arise. In a race, there are winners and losers, and this analogy is horrible when used for education. Our education system should not be set up in a manner when we know certain populations will continually win while others perpetually lose. A high quality education should not be viewed as a privilege for some, but as a right for all students.

In Chapter 5, I explored the lack of control that existed in the school space. I critiqued the policies of control, discipline, and punishment in the dismantled school. I argued that students were rendered powerless and were exposed to policies of control that maintained white supremacy and the continuation of a subordinate population. These notions of control and exclusionary discipline practices were complicit in maintaining the school-to-prison pipeline and in essence, the school served as a prison preparatory institution (PPI). Lowered expectations and viewing students through deficits served to reproduce racism in the school building. These lowered expectations combined with deficit views of students combine to maintain the status quo and keep certain populations as a permanent underclass.
In chapter 6, I argued that as a result of limited opportunities to control their educational destinies students found ways to resist and create their own counter-spaces in school. In these spaces, respect and relationships became important and respect served as the currency used in this counter-cultural place within the schooling context. Students demanded respect from peers as well as adults and when respect was not given, or students were “dissed” (disrespected), conflict arose. The data from students show the importance of positive student-teacher relationships on the educational experiences of the Black males in this study.

My analysis of the data gathered during my study revealed student frustrations related to the school setting and relationships with teachers and administrators. Students voiced concerns about respect, relationships with teachers, and the imbalance of voice and power in school. Students articulated feeling more like objects to be controlled than learners to be nurtured. In spite of the measures put in place to control their behavior and even though they were repeatedly disciplined for their opposition to these practices, students continued to actively resist efforts to marginalize their existence in the school building. Students articulated their desire to participate in hip-hop cultural practices as a means to cope with the realities of their social and academic experiences, and not as an academic success deterrent. I argue that these students and others should be read as knowledgeable about their own lives and not seen through the lens of “deficits” they bring to school.

Numerous studies point to the plight of African-American males in the educational system. Many studies also point to the large number of these young men being warehoused in the U.S.A. prison industrial complex. Following Michelle
Alexander’s (2012) analysis of prisons as the new Jim Crow, this project analyzes the practices and experiences in a school building that lead students on a path to be pushed out of the educational system and enter into the prison industrial complex. In essence, urban schools are serving as an additional version of the new Jim Crow. Zero-tolerance policies, exclusionary disciplinary practices, and methods of control in urban educational systems are preparing students to be acculturated for a life of subordination and possibly incarceration. In light of social promotion and lowered expectations for academic excellence, for some students, schools become prison preparatory institutions (PPI) and structure experiences for students to be “pushed out” and primed to enter the criminal justice system.

Limitations

All studies are limited no matter how large of a sample is used for the project. The findings of this study are limited because of the specific focus on 8th grade Black males in a dismantled school. The study only illuminated the stories of seven young men in a particular setting, so the findings are not necessarily generalizable to the larger population of Black middle school students in a more traditional setting. Although their experiences gave insight into what happened in the school, there were plenty other students who could have given similar or different stories. Although I got to know the young men and their families very well, in the dissertation, I can only speak from a limited understanding of the school as articulated by the seven men in this study. There were plenty of other male students who could have had wonderful experiences in the school, but I was not able to get their story. The study is also limited in its analysis of
social locations as of the students in the study came from similar socioeconomic levels and lived in the same or similar neighborhoods. In addition, I only focused on the experiences of males in the schools and did not include the voices/stories of the young women being impacted by the dismantling of the school. Lastly, I could have interviewed more teachers to get their takes on the process of dismantling as well as their views on the educational experiences of the students. Although I included the voices of a few teachers, the experiences of other teachers and administrators are absent from this project. Even though the seven stories may not be generalizable, they are important in adding to our understanding of the impact schools have on the educational aspirations and outcomes of Black male students.

**Future Research**

Numerous projects are needed to continue the work of investigating the experiences of students who are victims of mandated school reform policies. As reform continues and the privatization of education becomes an increasing reality for students across the nation, more research is needed to understand the impact of these policies on the students and their families. More qualitative studies are needed to center the voices and lived experiences of marginalized populations that are often left out of educational conversations and decisions. Their ability to articulate their experiences should push us to center their voices in educational policy decisions and reform efforts. Student voices should not be sensationalized or patronized but carefully considered when making decisions that will impact their lives as the “primary clientele” (Howard, 2008) of schools.
Lastly, more research is needed on the impact of educational reform on the lives of teachers and school administrators. I focused on the experience of the students, but I also witnessed the ways in which teachers were impacted by a dysfunctional school space while struggling to understand the top-down policy recommendations that they had little power to change.

In the future I plan to continue to work with marginalized Black males in schools. One of my main areas of focus is on hip-hop, urban youth, and education. The experiences of the students in this study and their participation in hip-hop culture pushed me to focus on the ways educators can use hip-hop culture in school to reengage students. I am currently running a hip-hop program in an urban school in New Haven, CT that grew out of my work with the students in the dissertation study. The goal of the program is to use hip-hop to reach Black and Latino males at risk of dropping out of high school. Last academic year, I intended to start with 25 students, but after word got out about the program, 45 students showed up on a regular basis. This year we have reduced the number of participants to 15 in an effort to have a more manageable sized group. During our weekly sessions we discuss issues facing males in New Haven, peer pressure, dreams and success, etc. Each week has a theme and the students write raps guided by the weekly themes. Students have articulated heartbreaking and joyful stories through the art of rap. Most of these students were labeled as “non-writers” but they are able to do things lyrically that the most trained writers could not accomplish. I am not sure if their rapping/writing skills will transfer to the Standard English curriculum, but we will begin working with the director of the English program to find ways to get students engaged in traditional writing. This program is not “academic” in nature, in the sense that we are
reviewing school material or offering tutoring, but I have noticed grades increasing while disciplinary referrals are decreasing. We do not offer study skills or tutoring in my session, but students are coming to school on time and excited about our weekly projects. This excitement has flowed into their other classes as we have seen their attendance rates increase. This is a pilot program and we are still working out kinks, but we have seen some positive results in a short amount of time.

**Contributions of the Study**

Although the sample for this study is limited and therefore the results are not meant to be generalizable, the findings still make a contribution the fields of sociology and education. This study adds to the work of scholars concerned with the plight of Black males in urban schools and neighborhoods. The stories from the young men in this study help to resist the dominant framings of what it means to be Black male students in urban settings. Their stories counter the racist and deficit informed framing of their existence. In keeping with the practice of critical race theory, their stories serve as counter-stories, and bring their experiences and voices from the margins to the center. In addition, this work contributes to our understanding of the potential impact of school reform efforts. Proposed changes may look good on paper, but often bring hell upon the people living through these changes. The stories and experiences shared by the students and teachers shed light on the need for us to consider the human impact of reform policies.

Additionally this work helps to reframe the discussion of oppositional culture by removing whiteness as a measuring stick for success. The students in this study showed
that they wanted to learn but were not always given the opportunity to do so in their hostile schooling environment. Students chose to oppose their treatment in school by resisting and creating their own spaces of existence. Similar to Prier (2012) these students created their own worlds, with their own rules, in an effort to guard against victimization as a result of faulty school policies. Hip-hop became the space where they were the experts and the teachers were the outsiders. Through the writing of their own raps, listening to the music, adorning their bodies with the clothing of the culture, hip-hop was the language and practice of choice for the young men in my study. As Black males, they were aware of how they were viewed by society at large. However, the students used hip-hop culture and rap music as a way to tell their own stories and define themselves. In this world, they were in control. Their use of the culture should push scholars to focus on the ways youth use hip-hop to shield themselves from hurt, disappointment, and victimization in school and neighborhood contexts.

This study highlights the practice of self-definition and agency in urban youth. The young men in this study were not “helpless” students to whom things just happened. On the contrary, they analyzed situations and made informed decisions on how to respond. They saw how they were treated and witnessed the negative impacts on their peers. Rather than share the same fate of others, they decided to create their support network. They exhibited agency and control over portions of their lives. The formation of the Wolf Pac serves as a prime example of their agency and self-determination. The students created this group in response to victimization in schools and as a way to create a sense of stability in an unstable environment. Students took it upon themselves to create the group to ensure their educational and social success. Again, adults did not start
this group. Students decided for themselves that the current practices in the school building were not created to benefit them. Rather than remain “helpless” victims, they created the Wolf Pac to work to ensure their own success and to create a form of peer accountability in the school. Students are knowledge producers and able to understand and articulate their lived experiences, while making choices to positively impact their future. Students have hopes, dreams, and desires, but they are often overshadowed by assumptions of what it means to be young and/or immature. Students may not use our complicated vocabularies, but their insights are valuable nonetheless.

Another contribution this project makes is that it forces us to look at what “dismantled” means in the context of Black life writ large. For this study, my focus was on the dismantling of a specific school, in a specific city, for a specific population. However, when we review the literature, an argument can be made that Black students are dealing with dismantling across the country. The idea of dismantled can be attached to the lived experiences of marginalized youth throughout the nation. Unfortunately, this dismantling is not exclusive to the students in this study. In addition, Black students are also dealing with the experiences of being “leftover” populations. The students in this study were leftover in the school space, but other experiences such as their treatment in public spaces highlight how they are leftover and looked over in other settings. Their experiences beg the question of how we understand and deal with the dismantling of the lives of students inside and outside of schools. Students in public schools across the country are not the only people having dismantled experiences. Many Black Americans are also dealing with attempts to destroy/dismantle our communities.
Transforming School Discipline

In what ways can we begin to transform disciplinary practices in schools, with a focus on urban schools? I emphasize urban schools for a number of reasons. In my travels to visit schools all over the country, I notice that most schools charged with educating Black students use discipline as a form of control. It’s almost as if educators feel the students need to be disciplined in order to learn. I believe in discipline in a more supportive sense. When I studied martial arts, I was disciplined by my sensei in an effort to get me to reach my highest level for competition, but there was a sense of love, respect and support that guided his practices. In most instances of zero-tolerance policies, love and respect are not involved in the harsh practices. The policies are created with the understanding that students need to be controlled and discipline in order to learn, but I would argue that most of the practices are based on punishment and not discipline.

Students were not opposed to having order in the school building. They understood that a lack of order in the classroom hindered their ability to learn. However, they wanted order based on a sense of respect. From their point of view they were not respected nor cared for and as a result often fell victim to punishment in the schools.

During my school visits it seemed as if discipline was used and love and respect was left out of the equation. I noticed this in public schools and in charter schools. The schools that claimed to have the greatest results were using the same practices as schools not doing as well. It was like the independent schools were able to control the students and create docile bodies at a much faster rate. The school building was different and often times newer, but the educational practices were similar. It was as if the schools were saying, “These little black kids need longer days, more discipline, more control and
then they can be successful.” Again, love, respect, and even learning are left out of the educational equation. Similar to other schools, the same discourse of troubled Black students that needed to be saved from themselves, disciplined, and domesticated in order for them to be turned in to mindless consumers by an educational system existed. Some of these schools may have seen slightly better results on tests, but at the end of the day, students were being indoctrinated and little learning was taking place. Students were not becoming critical thinkers and were not being taught in environments that respected their humanity. There was nothing truly radical or liberatory about the practices I noticed in the schools that I visited outside of my study site.

“In our school, when they come in, they know what to do. They stand in line, an arms-distance from the wall, and they will not enter the classroom until they are quiet. If they do not remain quiet, we will leave the classroom and start all over again. If the line is not straight, we will start all over again until they get it together. They know how we dress and what is appropriate. They know the rules and we make sure they follow them.” This came from an administrator talking to people visiting her school. She had to ensure that everyone knew she “meant business.” She was proud of the fact that the building was quiet, and that students were in line, but not much was discussed about the educational practices. She was proud of the fact that she could point to docile bodies that knew the routine to practice before being allowed to enter the classroom. For some, this works, but for me it’s problematic. I am happy for the students who survive in these spaces and make it out, but what about those that are not successful in these environments. These practices reify the discourses surrounding the “problem” black child…the student that needs to be controlled before they can be educated…the student
that has a faulty culture with an immoral existence that needs to be purified. This is the student that is seen through the lens of deficits, but never through the possibilities of the greatness that lies within that is often overshadowed by their harsh living conditions.

Discipline is not synonymous with punishment. It is unlikely that discipline can take place in an environment where respect for the student is lacking and a fear of the student exists. Unfortunately, punishment is often the result. Students in the study articulated the need to be respected and cared for by adults. As I previously stated, students were not opposed to discipline and order, if it was handled in a respectful manner. Ms. Vera was very stern with students at times, however they respected her because they felt she cared for them and respected who they were. She upheld their dignity and respected their humanity. Her practices set her apart from other adults in the building and she was able to build wonderful relationships with the students. Discipline pushes us to reach our highest levels of potential. Exclusionary punishment humiliates and damages the individual. Discipline and order cannot exist in a space where love is not present.

**Hip-Hop and the School**

My observations of how the school operated in the daily lives of students highlighted how they use hip-hop culture to resist being dominated in educational spaces. The students are using the culture in the way that they argue is “keeping them sane” in the place that is viewed as resistant to students’ voices. When they listen to this music it goes beyond the lyrics. Their participation in hip-hop culture gives them a sense of an embodied consciousness…a sense of freedom. This freedom is not always experienced in
educational spaces so their sense of freedom in hip-hop culture exists because it represents what they know, what they live, and what they experience on a daily basis. Hip-hop allows students to live through their radical imaginations. Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) describes the black radical imagination as a way to imagine the world, not necessarily through physical eyes but through a mental space. Students imagine a better place of existence rather than focusing on of the desolation that surrounds them in their worlds. Using hip-hop as part of their radical imagination allows youth to “remain sane” and maintain a sense of hope. Being from underserved areas, being Black, being male, being students in a flawed system—these intersecting identities impact their psyche. As a result, racial battle fatigue is key for understanding the daily plight of these students.

Most of the studies on RBF talk about students in college but I argue we can use the same theory to address the issues that are being faced by the students in this study.

Participation in youth culture allows students to occasionally escape their lived realities. Hip-hop is important in the lives of students, so the more that adults demonize the culture, the more difficult it is for them to build positive relationships with youth. They do not see the culture as evil, they see it as space that allows them to resist and live according their own rules. This is what Darius Prier calls the counter-space of resistance. In order to maintain sanity and get through the day in our crumbling educational systems, participation in hip-hop culture allows students to imagine alternative realities to what they are facing. If hope is lost, it becomes nearly impossible for youth to have positive engagements with school culture.

In order to reach youth, it is important for teachers and other adults to engage students in critical conversations about youth popular culture. Andrade (2004) states:
To understand the potential of youth culture as a pedagogical scaffold, it is important to explore two dimensions of it: 1) youth culture as an avenue that can provide teachers with access to knowledge of and relationships with their students; and 2) youth culture as an avenue that can provide youth with access to the broader society’s valued knowledge. A final caveat that is important to include in all discussions of teachers’ accessing youth culture for pedagogical and democratic ends: Nothing said here suggests that the teacher abrogate her or his own cultural predilections or “standards” in favor of what may be, almost by definition, transient styles, language, and so forth. Not all cultural discontinuities can be or should be resolved. Perhaps the most important lesson here is that the cultures present in classrooms and under examination here should be seen as additive, rather than as zero sum (pp. 316-317).

Williams (2009) suggest that educators model Freire’s cultural circles in classroom settings to create spaces of critical engagement among students. The problem posing method in the cultural circles allows educators to guide students along the path to a critical consciousness. This consciousness is not just a goal, but “also a method which serves to humanize both the oppressed and the oppressor by providing both with a more democratic and liberating method of exchanging knowledge. Students who possess this critical consciousness possess the ability not only to ‘read the word,’ but also to ‘read the world’ through a critical lens,” (p. 3). This ability allows students to be situated as experts with valuable knowledge that can benefit educators. This movement shifts the pedagogical experience from teachers viewing students as empty vessels waiting to be filled by the knowledge they view as significant (Freire, 1970) to a more interactive and dialogical process. This is not a call view hip-hop as fully positive. As practitioners of the culture, youth and adults have to be critical consumers and continue to critique and analyze hip-hop. As much as hip-hop allows young males to create a counter-space of resistance, there are major issues that need to be addressed in the culture. Educators and consumers still need to struggle with the increased corporate, global, capitalistic model of mainstream hip-hop culture which includes the narrow and often racist, sexist, and
homophobic notions of what it means to be young, Black, and/or cool and has the potential to negatively influence youth.

For students, hip-hop represents a choice and form of agency that allows them to assert control over their existence. They realize that what the school is offering is not always conducive to their wellbeing, so they resist. They cling to hip-hop and other forms of youth culture, because it is the one thing that gets them through when dealing with a system in which they feel ignored and abused. They can see how the system works and they sense when they are not wanted, cared for, valued, and unloved. The lived realities and experiences of students existing in this dismantled school are important to countering the master narratives and the discourse surrounding being young, Black, and male in urban settings. Students have a complex understanding and realize that in many cases, the system of education is not set up in a way that ensures their success.

A Love Note

At the beginning of the study I highlighted Duncan (2002) and his statement that Black male students exist in a space that is beyond love. Remember, beyond love is “a condition of those who are excluded from society’s economy and networks of care and thus expelled from useful participation in social life…black males are constructed as a strange population… as a group with values and attitudes that are fundamentally different from other students, their marginalization and oppression are understood as natural and primarily of their own doing” (p. 140). The stories shared and the incidents I observed confirm the fact that Black males exist in this space where there are not seen as worthy of love. Their stories also show the possibilities that exist for these young men when their
humanity is respected, and when they are cared for and not seen as a summation of deficits and pathologies. As scholars we must continue this work and strive to create spaces where the voices and experiences of marginalized populations are centered and valued. We must work with these populations and use their stories to counter the dominant narratives of their existence. To all of the students in urban schools who are surviving in these spaces, I close with the words of the late, great rapper, Heavy D., “I got nothing but love for you.”
REFERENCES


Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt:


Dinner Meeting

Greetings parents, my name is Don Sawyer, and as you know, I have been working with your sons over the past year on a project that started at the XXXX School looking at the experiences of Black males in Syracuse middle and high schools. This project aims to challenge the negative views of Black students in urban schools and go against the ways they are often described in the media and other places. This project is about telling their stories. As you know, they have been participating in interviews at school and I plan to continue to work with the gentlemen throughout the year.

In an effort to get to know all of you, I would like to invite you to attend a dinner with your son. I plan to host a free dinner:

Thursday, December 1, 2011 at 7pm
XXXXX University Sheraton Hotel

This dinner will be free of charge and a small token of thanks for allowing me to work with your son. This will also be a chance for me to find out how I can be of assistance to you.

--------------------------------------
Don C. Sawyer III • Syracuse University • 315-443-xxxx
Cell phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Appendix B:

Dissertation Study Flyer

The Social and Academic Experiences of Black Males in Middle Schools

The focus of this research study is the social and academic experiences of Black middle school males. This research aims to challenge negative views of Black students in urban school settings and to go against the ways in which they are often described and seen in educational and social research. Students will be interviewed about their experiences.

One of the interviews will be a photo discussion interview. We will loan cameras to students and ask them to take photos of what they deem important in their lives as Black male students. Students will be informed to take pictures of things the researchers would see if they spent a week with them. These photos will be used during the interview process to spark discussion.

Students will receive a free movie ticket when they return the signed permission form.

Don C. Sawyer III • Syracuse University • 315-443-XXXX • dsawye01@syr.edu
Appendix C
Parental Consent Form
Syracuse University
Parental Consent to Participate in Research Study

Don C. Sawyer III, M.S., M.A.
Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Department of Sociology

Title of Study: A Study of the Academic and Social Experiences of Black Middle School Males

As an eighth grade student in the XXXX School, your child has been invited to be a participant in this research study. Involvement in this research is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. This sheet will explain the study to you. If you have any questions about the study feel free to ask. We will be happy to explain anything in detail if you wish.

Focus of Study:
We are interested in finding out more about the social and academic experiences of Black middle school males. This research aims to challenge negative views of Black males in urban school settings and to go against the ways in which they are often described and seen in educational and social research. Not only does the literature highlight the school to prison pipeline for black boys, but also it suggests that black students do not have cultural resources to draw from to succeed in school. This project also aims to contribute to the scholarship on how urban youth define, understand, challenge and use writing in and out-of school.

Approximately 20 Black/African-American eighth grade male students will be selected to participate in this study. Information will be collected from audiotaped individual student interviews and group interviews; student writing samples and digital media creations; and observations in school. The gathering of this information will not conflict with your child’s classroom/learning time. The information will be gathered during teacher-approved free activity periods during the day. We hope to conduct at least two interviews with your child. The interviews will last between 30-60 minutes each.

One of the interviews will be a photo discussion interview. We will ask the students to take photos of what they deem important in their lives as African-American male students. Students will be informed to take pictures of things the researchers would see if they spent a week with them. A camera will be provided at no cost to you or the student. These photos will be used during the interview process to spark discussion. These photos
will not be released or used in presentations. These photos will only be used in the interview process.

They will be informed about the use of the camera as well as safe practices when handling the camera and taking pictures. All participants will be informed about the use of cameras in this project and about the importance of personal safety. Capturing an image is never worth the risk of physical harm. Discussion and role playing exercises will focus on identifying potentially dangerous environments and methods for avoiding placing oneself in danger when participating in the project.

**Confidentiality:**
Information gathered during interviews and observations are considered data for this study. To ensure confidentiality, the name of your child will be changed or removed from all written data. Only members of the research team will have access to the data. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in the group interviews. Other student participants in the group will hear the responses to questions during the group sessions. While we discourage anyone from sharing information outside of the group, we cannot guarantee that other group members will keep confidentiality. All data from this study will be kept in a locked file and destroyed once the study is completed. The data from this study may be published or presented at conferences, however no identifiable information will be used.

**Risks/Benefits:**
Although there are no known major risks with this study, the possible minimal risks could include discomfort in sharing information about their personal and academic histories and experiences, feeling uncomfortable answering questions related to these experiences in individual and group interviews, and upsetting someone who is inadvertently captured in one of their photos. Should anything unexpected arise, you have the right to decide whether or not your child will remain in the study.

The benefit of this research is that your child’s participation in this study can be used to understand the best practices for educating students and help with forming appropriate education policies that will positively impact your child and other students.

If you do not want your child to take part in this study, you have the right to refuse without penalty. If you decide to allow your child to participate and later no longer wish to have your child participate, you have the right to withdraw your child from the study at anytime, without penalty.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study you can contact Dr. Marcelle Haddix at mhaddix@syr.edu and 315-443-XXXX or Don C. Sawyer III at dsawyer01@syr.edu or 315-443-XXXX. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or questions and concerns you want to address to someone other than the researchers, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.
I am over the age of 18, have read the information provided above, all of my questions have been answered and I voluntarily agree to have my child participate in this study. I understand that my child will be trained on best practices of camera usage and must follow set guideline when participating in the photo project.

☐ I agree to let my child’s interview be audiotaped

☐ I DO NOT agree to let my child’s interview be audiotaped

(If you do not give permission for your child to be audiotaped, the researcher will take handwritten or typed notes during the interview)

☐ I agree to let my child’s participate in the photo project.

☐ I DO NOT agree to let my child’s participate in the photo project.

____________________________________________________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian

____________________________________________________________
Printed Name of Parent/Guardian

____________________________________________________________
Signature of Researcher

____________________________________________________________
Printed Name of Researcher

____________________________________________________________
Signature of Researcher

____________________________________________________________
Printed Name of Researcher
Appendix D

Student Assent Letter

Assent to Participate in Research Study

Don C. Sawyer III, M.S., M.A.

*Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Department of Sociology*

**Title of Study:** A Study of the Academic and Social Experiences of Black Middle School Males

**Focus of Study:**
The focus of this research study is the social and academic experiences of Black middle school males. This research aims to challenge negative views of Black students in urban school settings and to go against the ways in which they are often described and seen in educational and social research. This project also aims to contribute to the scholarship on how urban youth define, understand, challenge and use writing in and out-of-school.

I, ________________________________________________________, agree to take part in this study. I realize that the research is voluntary and it will not impact my grades in school. I know that I am free to stop participating in the study at anytime and I will not get in trouble for my decision. Even if my parent or guardian gives permission for me to participate, I do not have to be a part of this study.

I know that I will be asked questions in at least two interviews lasting 30-60 minutes each and I may participate in a group interview with other students that will be audiotaped. I understand that my answers will be kept secret and that the researchers will be the only people to have access to the information. I understand that my statements may not be kept secret in the group interviews. Other student participants in the group will hear the responses to questions during the group sessions.

I understand that I may be asked to participate in a photo discussion interview. I will be asked to take photos of what I feel is important in my life as an African-American male student. I understand that these photos will not be released or used in presentations. These photos will only be used for the interview. I will be informed about the use of the camera as well as safe practices when handling the camera and taking pictures. I understand that I will also be informed about the importance of personal safety. I understand that taking a picture is never worth the risk of getting in trouble.
As soon as the research is completed, I understand that all information from the interviews will be destroyed. If the information from this research is published or presented at a conference, I understand that my name will not be connected with it.

(You will receive a copy of these forms for your personal records)

I understand that I am participating in this research of my own free will and I will not be paid for my participation. I can stop participating in this study at anytime.

☐ I agree to be audiotaped

☐ I DO NOT agree to be audiotaped

*(If you do not give permission to be audiotaped, the researcher will take handwritten or typed notes during the interview)*

----------------------------------------------------------------

☐ I agree to participate in the photo project. I understand that I will be trained how to use the camera and that I must follow set guidelines when participating in the photo project.

☐ I DO NOT agree to participate in the photo project.

____________________________________________________________
Signature of Student Participant Date

Printed Name of Student Participant

____________________________________________________________
Signature of Researcher Date

Printed Name of Researcher

____________________________________________________________
Signature of Researcher Date

Printed Name of Researcher
Appendix E

Photo Release Form

Title of Study: A Study of the Academic and Social Experiences of Black Middle School Males

Photo Permission Form (Adults)

I hereby grant permission to include my image in photographs. Further, I grant ____________________________ (print name of student photographer) permission to take photographic images of me for use in the photo interview portion of this project. I understand that these photos will not be published or made public without my written consent.

I have read and understood this form and I am 18 years of age or older.
(You will receive a copy of this form for your records)

Date: ____________________________

Model Name: ____________________________ (please print)

Model Signature: ____________________________

If you would like to receive a copy of the photograph that was taken of you, please provide the additional information requested below. This information is voluntary — you do not have to provide this information if you do not wish to receive a copy of the photograph. Your personal information will not be shared.

Street Address ____________________________

Street Address ____________________________

City, State, Zip Code ____________________________
DON C. SAWYER III, Ph.D.
Curriculum Vitae

**EDUCATION**

**2013**  
**Ph.D. Sociology**  
Syracuse University, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse NY  
Dissertation: I Ain’t Do Nothing: An Analysis of the Social and Academic Experiences of Black Males in a Dismantled School

**2008**  
**M.A. Sociology**  
Syracuse University, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse NY

**2003**  
**M.S. Cultural Foundations of Education**  
Syracuse University, School of Education, Syracuse NY

**1999**  
**B.A. Psychology**  
Hartwick College, Oneonta NY  
Thesis: Minorities and Counseling: Impediments and Proposed Solutions for a Therapeutic Relationship Between Counselors and Ethnic Minority Clients

**RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociology of Education</th>
<th>Sociology of Hip-Hop Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociology of Race</td>
<td>Urban Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Youth and Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Qualitative Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Sociology &amp; Critical Media Literacy</td>
<td>Youth Participatory Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ACADEMIC POSITIONS**

**Assistant Professor, 2012-Present**  
Quinnipiac University, College of Arts and Sciences, Hamden, CT  
Department of Sociology

**Adjunct Instructor, 2008-2012**  
Syracuse University, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse, NY  
Department of Sociology

**Graduate Assistant, 2007-2008**  
Syracuse University, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse, NY  
Department of Sociology
SELECTED ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS

**Director**, 2009-2012
Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (LSAMP)
Syracuse University, Center for Graduate Preparation & Achievement, Syracuse, NY
Directed the Upstate LSAMP Program; a three million dollar, multi-institutional National Science Foundation (NSF) sponsored program funded in 5-year phases, designed to increase the number of Black, Latino, and Native American students receiving 4-year degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Managed the Syracuse University (lead institution) LSAMP budget, recruiting, and programming initiatives as well as the sub-contracts of six institutions in the Upstate Alliance (Cornell University, Clarkson University, Monroe Community College, Onondaga Community College, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and Rochester Institute of Technology). Ensured compliance with NSF budgetary and program mandates. Coordinated all reporting and assessment projects. Facilitated process for the successful application for 2 million dollar second phase renewal.

**Assistant Director**, 2003-2007
Syracuse University, Office of Student Life, Syracuse, NY
Managed and advised student organizations, assisted with the planning and development of a center for student leadership and ethics, provided counseling and safe environment for student advisees, organized trainings and other student events and provided on-call crisis coverage for a 2500 member Fraternity and Sorority community.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

**Assistant Professor**, 2012-Present
Quinnipiac University, Department of Sociology
SO 300: Sociology of Hip-Hop Culture, Spring 2014
SO 241: Sociology of Race, Spring 2014
SO 272: Sociology of Education, Fall 2013
SO 241: Sociology of Race (Two sections), Fall 2013
SO 241: Sociology of Race (Two sections), Spring 2013
SO 300: Sociology of Hip-Hop Culture, Spring 2013
SO 101: Introduction to Sociology, Fall 2012
SO 241: Sociology of Race (Two sections), Fall 2012

**Adjunct Instructor**, 2008-2012
Syracuse University, Department of Sociology
SOC 300: Sociology of Hip-Hop Culture, Summer 2011
SOC 300: Sociology of Hip-Hop Culture, Spring 2011
SOC 102: Social Problems, Fall 2010
SOC 102: Social Problems, Summer 2010
FIA/SOC 300: The History and Social Significance of Hip-Hop Culture, Spring 2009
SOC 101: Introduction to Sociology, Summer 2008

(Assisted Teaching Responsibilities)

Graduate Assistant, 2007-2008
Syracuse University, Department of Sociology
SOC 101: Introduction to Sociology, Fall 2007, Dr. Christine Himes
SOC 101: Introduction to Sociology, Spring 2008, Dr. Richard Loder

Guest Lecturer, 2005
Syracuse University, Department of Sociology
SOC 238: Ethnic Inequalities and Inter-group Relations, (two sections) Fall 2005

Publications

Academic Journals


Book Chapters


Submitted


Selected Conference Presentations


Sawyer III, Don C. (2014). “Lights, Cameras, but No Action: Youth Photographers and IRB Approval” Accepted to be presented in February 2014 for the "Research with Children: Managing IRBs and Other Institutional Gatekeepers" Session
Eastern Sociological Society, Baltimore, MD


SELECTED INVITED TALKS/PRESENTATIONS

Invited Keynotes

**Sawyer III, Don C.** (2013). “Voices from Behind the Walls: Planting Positive Seeds for Positive Results” The Black Man Can Institute, Yale University, New Haven, CT


**Sawyer III, Don C.** (2012). “Don't Give Up On Our Youth: Dr. King's Vision and Youth of Color” City of Syracuse Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration, Syracuse, NY


Invited Talks

**Sawyer III, Don C.** (2013). “Defining the Field & Shaping the Language” Panelist, Hip-Hop Education Think Tank III: Cultivating a Global Cipher from the Streets to the Classroom, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NY


**Sawyer III, Don C.** (2012). “In the Cut: Highlighting Issues and Finding Solutions” Presenter, Hofstra University Greek Leadership Conference, Hempstead, NY

**Sawyer III, Don C.** (2012). “What’s Your D@mn Problem? Learning Styles, Group Dynamics, and Understanding the Concept of Team Leadership” Presenter, Hofstra University Greek Leadership Conference, Hempstead, NY


**SELECTED GRANTS & AWARDS**

- University of Chicago Provost’s Postdoc Fellowship 2012 (Finalist)
- Ithaca College Pre-Doctoral Diversity Fellowship 2011 (Sociology Finalist)
- National Grid STEM Youth Outreach Science Grant 2011, Co-PI ($144,000)
- Syracuse City School District Science Outreach Grant 2011, Co-PI ($25,000)
- Institute on Critical Participatory Action Research Tuition Scholarship ($150)
- Syracuse City School District Science Outreach Grant 2010, Co-PI ($23,000)
- Roscoe Martin Dissertation Research Grant, Syracuse University 2009 ($750)
- Graduate Assistantship, Sociology, Syracuse University 2008

**PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY**

The Crossroads Collective, 2012-Present
Wilbur Cross High School, New Haven, CT
Founder/Instructor for Hip-Hop program targeting male students at risk of dropping out of high school. Students engage in participatory research, media development, and writing projects.

Hip-Hop Education Center Think Tank, Invited Member, 2012-Present
Columbia University and New York University, New York, NY
International scholars charged with laying a foundation for the professional and economic development of the field of hip-hop education.

**PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Quinnipiac University

*University Service*

Deep Learning Faculty Interest Group (FIG), 2013-present
Faculty group charged with researching and developing a portal for research and practical activities related to deep learning and academic success for students.
Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Harassment, 2012-Present
Committee charged with developing university policy and protocols to handle reported bias related incidents at Quinnipiac University.

Athletics Council (Liaison to Men’s Basketball), 2012-Present
A joint faculty/staff committee charged with oversight of the Division I athletic program and presenting issues to the university’s athletic director. Meet monthly with team to discuss personal development.

Faculty Advisor, 2013-Present
Black Student Union (BSU)
Quinnipiac University Outreach Through Expression (QUOTE)

Community Engagement
Save the Kids (STK), National Board of Directors, 2011-Present
A national grass-roots nonprofit organization dedicated to establishing a movement that advocates for peaceful alternatives to youth incarceration.

Building Men Program, 2009-Present
Syracuse City School District, Syracuse, NY
Advisor for the program providing academic and social support for adolescent boys attending urban middle schools.

Service to the Fields of Sociology and Education
The Journal of African American Males in Education (JAAME), 2013-present
Review Board

The Journal of Hip-Hop Studies (JHHS), 2012-Present
Editorial and Review Board

The Journal for Critical Urban Education (JCUE), 2012-Present
Editorial and Review Board

Syracuse University

Faculty for Community Engagement (South Side Initiative), 2007-2012
Served on the youth and education committees for the community/university partnership with the aim of revitalizing the city of Syracuse’s south side neighborhood through collaborative planning and program implementation.
**South Africa Meets the South Side**, 2009-2012  
Syracuse University, South Side Initiatives Office, Syracuse, NY  
Served as member of Syracuse University team that travels to South Africa to consult with the University of Fort Hare on building university/community partnerships to revitalize underserved communities.

**iCAN Robotics Program**, 2007-2012  
Syracuse, NY  
Co-Founder of the iCAN Robotics Program- an outreach program designed to introduce youth from underserved communities to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

**Graduate Representative**, 2008-2010  
Elected to serve two-year term as the graduate student representative on the faculty committee.

**The Vision Center**, 2007-2012  
Mercy Works Inc., Syracuse, NY  
Served as volunteer instructor and facilitator for youth in an urban outreach program.

**PROFESSIONAL TRAINING**

**The Future Professoriate Program (FPP)**, 2004-2012  
Syracuse University, Syracuse NY  
FPP provides students with the training and experience needed to excel as faculty members.

**Critical Participatory Action Research Institute**, 2011  
The City University of New York Graduate Center, New York, NY  
The institute is a 5-day intensive PAR training covering the history, theory, and ethics of the approach, as well as in-depth discussions of participatory methods, conditions for meaningful community collaborations, and examples of effective research designs.

**WhyTry Program Facilitator**, 2011  
The facilitator training provides simple, hands-on solutions for youth dropout prevention, violence prevention, drug and alcohol prevention, truancy reduction, and failure reduction.

**The Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR)**, 2009  
Syracuse University, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse, NY
The institute seeks to enable students to create and critique methodologically sophisticated qualitative research designs, including case studies, tests of necessity or sufficiency, and narrative or interpretive work.

**Professional Organizations**

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (ΑΦΑ)
American Educational Research Association (AERA)
American Sociological Association (ASA)
Eastern Sociological Society (ESS)
National Council for Black Studies (NCBS)