Rerouting the School to Prison Pipeline: A Phenomenological Study of the Educational Experiences of African American Males Who Have Been Expelled from Public Schools

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Rerouting the School to Prison Pipeline: A Phenomenological Study of the Educational Experiences of African American Males Who Have Been Expelled from Public Schools

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Education Administration

By

Jennifer Elaine Grace

B.S. Louisiana State University. 2005
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May, 2016
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the most important influence in my life, my mother, Mrs. Donna Grace Francis. You have been my inspiration, my strength, my hero, my cheerleader—my everything. A thousand tongues could not thank you enough for all that you’ve invested into me. Thank you for your love, guidance, and most of all, your patience. I love you and I hope to continue to do work and to live my life in a way that makes you proud.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my loving family, Tennille Grace Harrison, Louis Francis Jr., Louis Francis III, Aubrieaunne Lyons, Luciana Barnes, Shirley Davis and Nicole Davis— who have supported and encouraged me through these difficult years. I am nothing without you. Thank you for your love and support.

Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation in loving memory of Darvell Barra and Jasilas Wright. Your young lives were cut short entirely too soon. You are never far from my thoughts and my heart. My time as an educator in your life made this work that much more meaningful. I am forever thankful for that experience. I will continue to work in the lives of youth in a way that honors your memory. Rest well angels.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to give all thanks and praise to God for blessing me through this work and this journey. This dissertation would not have been completed without the guidance, and support of others. I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to those who have contributed to this journey in one form or another. I would like to express my gratefulness for my dissertation chair, Dr. Alonzo M. Flowers III, for sharing his expertise, his guidance and patience. I would like to thank committee members Dr. Brian Beabout, and Dr. Christopher Broadhurst for all of their guidance, support along this journey. I am in awe of your expertise and contributions to my development as a scholar. I would also like to give a special thank you to committee member, Dr. Rashida Govan who has been a critical part of my development as a scholar, and as a woman of color. Thank you for your expertise and insight along this journey. Next, I would like to thank Dr. Steven Nelson for helping me to process this journey along the way. I am proud to call you colleague, and honored to call you friend. I would like to offer a special thank you to Cory Greene of H.O.L.L.A.!, for helping me to process some of my ideas for this study. Thank you to Dr. Jade O’Dell and Dr. Donalyn Lott for your expertise and contributions in finalizing the document. I would like to thank the faculty, staff, and students of School X for allowing me the opportunity to work with you. Thank you to my past and current students and colleagues who have graciously supported me during these past five years. Lastly, to my wonderful family and friends who have prayed with me, cried with me, celebrated with me, and given me tough love when I needed it----Thank you! Thank you! Thank You! Special thank you to Dr. Pat Austin, Derrick Nesby, Charlene Leal, Benjamin Morgan, Reginald Douglas, LaTia Brown, Valencia Wilson, Dr. Kelli Joseph, Sparkle Fuentez, J’Vann Martin, Dr. Dottie Martin, Chadwick McElveen, Joy Bundy, Terese Bundy, Tara Sterling, Tasha Huston-
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ABSTRACT

The present study consisted of a phenomenological investigation of African American males who have been expelled from traditional educational settings in New Orleans, LA in order to provide educators with information geared towards increasing academic achievement in African American males. It has been noted that one of the reasons that Black males graduation rates are so low is because in addition to other factors that lead to non-completion, black males are more likely to be expelled from school. In this study, I used a Critical Race theoretical framework to gain experiential knowledge of these excluded young men, what they perceive as barriers to their success, and their sentiments on the relationships they have had with educators and peers whom they have encountered. Based on the participants’ responses, seven categories emerged from the data including: (a) Race and Racism, (b) Self Perceptions, (c) Family Expectations and Support, (d) Male Role Models and Mentors, (e) The School Environment, (f) School Discipline, and (g) Alternative School. Study participants described the totality of their education experiences by opening up about what they felt were key factors at play. The stories of the participants provided a deeper context of the nuances of racism and how it impacts their day to day educational experiences overall. The results of this study provides data that may enable educators to begin steps to dismantle the school to prison pipeline by ensuring at-risk students are supported and successful in school without having to be removed. This information serves as a catalyst for future inquiry into additional nuances that effect the academic achievement of African American male students in K-12 schools.
Chapter One: Background and Statement of the Problem

Introduction

A persistent and much-discussed problem in American education is the academic performance gap between students of color and white students (Nasir, 2012; Paige & Witty, 2010; Schott Foundation, 2014). The achievement gap is evaluated mostly via standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college readiness and access. For example, the national high school graduation rate of African American males is 59%, while the overall graduation rate for white males is 80% (Schott Foundation, 2014). Noted in recent research (Kim, Losen and Hewitt, 2010; Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, and Tobin, 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson, 2002) is that one reason for low graduation rates among African American males is that they are more likely to be expelled from school during the K-12 years. Further points made throughout the literature (Smith, 2009; USDOJ, 2007; Zeiderber and Schiraldi, 2002) are the staggering outcomes of those African American males who do not complete high school such as being more likely to be arrested before their 30th birthday. For example, in a 2014 report, the U.S. Department of Justice noted that 18 and 19 year old African American males were nine times more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers. This is indicative of a pressing need to reevaluate practices in educating African American males in K-12 schools. More specifically, in Louisiana, where the overall state graduation rate is 72.3%, African American males graduate at 53% percent (Schott Foundation, 2014), which requires a closer look at school system practices in Louisiana.

Historically the notion of students of all backgrounds receiving an equal opportunity in education has been a popular narrative in this country. For example, *Brown v. Board of*
*Education* (1954) is widely considered one of the most important milestones in American education in the 20th century. This civil rights decision prompted an onslaught of desegregation mandates in K-12 school systems and higher education institutions across the country. In her explanation of Critical Race Theory, Ladson-Billings (1998) noted the dominant theme of equal opportunity is a concept that was supposed to be addressed by decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education*; however, it has continued to elude the school system. She noted, “this notion of equal opportunity was associated with the idea that students of color should have access to the same school opportunities, i.e. curriculum, instruction, funding, facilities, as whites” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.17). But, nearly sixty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, inequalities in educational attainment, school punishment and discipline, intellectual expectations, and larger systemic factors, such as historical racism and capitalism, are leading many African American males through what has been coined as the *school to prison pipeline* (Smith, 2009). Policies and practices within the educational and criminal justice systems work together in a manner which results in students of color being disproportionately pushed out of school and into prison. Wider scale systemic factors directly influence what happens in school systems. Privatized prisons can be run for profit and serve as an incentive to increase prison populations (Kim, Losen, and Hewitt, 2010; Smith, 2009). Similarly, standardized testing has become big business as it has increased competition amongst school systems, teachers, and administrators. Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, and Booth (2011) reported that schools face punitive consequences for low test scores, which also serve as incentives to push lower performing students out of school. An inequitable distribution of educational resources make students less likely to achieve academically, less likely to contribute to the workforce, and more likely to end up in prison (Alexander, 2010; Kim, Losen & Hewitt, 2010; Smith, 2009). Much like
Alexander’s (2010), *The New Jim Crow* assertion that the criminal justice system is not concerned with crime prevention and punishment but rather the management and control of the cast outs, the U.S. public school system is plagued with elements of stratification that act as control mechanisms and barriers for African American males, as opposed to focusing on ways to foster their success.

While *Brown vs. Board of Education* attempted to provide for equitable access to schools for students of color, today it is often *schools themselves* that act as barriers to successful matriculation of African American adolescent males. Specific school-based challenges identified by scholars include: over representation in special education (Connor and Ferri, 2005), under representation in advanced placement courses (Corra, Carter and Carter, 2011), low expectations (Hucks, 2011), and disparate discipline policies (Gregory and Mosely, 2004; Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera, 2010). School based challenges often work in concert to impede educational success for students. For instance, systemic cultural incompetence (i.e., teachers and administrators who lack understanding of students’ cultural norms) has led to an overwhelming overrepresentation of African American males in special education programs (Conner and Ferri, 2005; Monroe, 2005). African American students are more likely to be referred to special education programs for behavioral problems than for academic concerns (Ford, 2012). There are many preconceived notions about qualifications for the label of disability, especially in-terms of behavior. Donna Ford (2012) insists that “whether or not a behavior is deemed “appropriate” is heavily influenced by the person who is observing the child’s behavior and his/her/their sociopolitical and cultural background” (p.395). In addition, cultural incongruence (classrooms that are incompatible with the cultural context of students) also has been identified as a factor contributing to low levels of academic achievement for minority youth because educators from
different backgrounds are more likely to have lower expectations for poor black students, and less likely to fully understand and meet the needs of minority students (Harper, Terry, and Twiggs, 2009; Singer and Educational Resources Information Center 1988).

Aside from practices that act as barriers to education for some students, innate features such as teacher expectations and belief in students also act as barriers to success. If a teacher perceives a student to be outside the dominant culture due to nonconforming behaviors or codes of speech, or to be of average or lower intelligence, there is a higher possibility of academic failure (Rowley and Wright, 2011). Thus, teacher expectations and relationships with students are also important to investigate when seeking to understand what expelled students experience and how they impact systems that keep them progressing in school.

Organizational policy factors also contribute to the school to prison pipeline. Zero Tolerance policies (school policies that result in automatic suspension or expulsion for behavioral infractions) have also contributed to African American males’ push out in schools. Data from federal and state agencies indicate reliable patterns of disproportionality in school discipline concerning African American males over the last three decades (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera, 2010). African American males are nearly three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school when compared to their white peers (Kim, Losen, &Hewitt, 2010; Skiba et al, 2011). Best described by Tuzzolo and Hewitt (2006), “In the last decade, the punitive and overzealous tools and approaches of the modern criminal justice system have seeped into our schools, serving to remove children from mainstream educational environments and funnel them onto a one-way path toward prison.” (p.61). Smith (2009) described the school to prison pipeline as a pervasive trend of pushing disadvantaged students out of school and into the criminal justice system as seen in Figure 1.
After years of study and dialogue, the American public education system still struggles to produce results as it relates to African American males’ successful matriculation through the K-12 system (Jenkins, 2006; Rowley & Wright, 2011; Skiba et al, 2011). Additionally, the effects of not completing school for this population has also been heavily documented and include continuation in the poverty cycle, and increased participation in crime (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Jenkins, 2006; Smith, 2009; USDOJ, 2007). Schools have the potential to serve as a mechanism which changes societal trajectories for these young men, but this is often not what we see occurring. Previous researchers suggest exploring these concepts from the perspectives of
students affected (Lafargue, 2007; Monroe, 2005; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Ruck & Wortley, 2002). That is the approach taken here.

**Statement of the Problem**

The Schott Foundation’s (2014) annual education report asserts that only 59% of African American males are graduating high school. As mentioned above, this is due to a host of institutionally racist factors including inequitable access to quality instruction and curriculum (Bailey, 2003; Connor and Ferri, 2005; Lee & Bryk, 1998; Toldson, 2008), and harsh discipline policies (Gregory and Mosely, 2004; Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera, 2010) that function as barriers to successful school matriculation. A measured focus on African American males is needed to redirect the current educational route for African American males (Schott Foundation, 2010).

Furthermore, outcomes for this population after not completing school are also staggering. Zeiderberg and Schiraldi (2002) suggest that just over half of African American males who do not complete high school have been incarcerated at least once by the age of 30. Moreover, 68% of male prison inmates did not graduate from high school, with 35% of prisoners reporting behavior, academic problems, and academic disengagement as the main reasons for not obtaining their high school diploma (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Alexander (2010) argued that “the fate of millions of people—indeed the future of the black community itself—may depend on the willingness of those who care about racial justice to re-examine their basic assumptions about the role of the criminal justice system in our society” (p. 16). One would venture to go a step further and argue that it is just as critical to re-examine the role public schools play in contributing to the school to prison pipeline. As Alexander noted, “many offenders are tracked for prison at early ages, labeled as criminals in their teen years, and then
shuttled from their decrepit, underfunded inner city schools to brand-new, high-tech prisons” (2010, p. 101).

One of the documented paths to prison includes having been expelled from school and assignment to an alternative school setting (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). If we are to re-route African-American males from this well-worn path to prison, it is critical to gain an understanding of the educational experiences of these young men in order to make schools (traditional and alternative alike) places that make it less, rather than more, likely that African American males become incarcerated. This study will allow practitioners to view the problem of African American male non-completion of high school from a student perspective and, in doing so, opens a critical dialogue about factors that may not have been considered in previous dialogues.

The researcher’s intent was to provide educational practitioners with deep insight into the American public education system through the eyes of those who have been directly impacted by what is being referred to as the “crisis of the Black male” (Jackson & Moore, 2006; Noguera, 1997; Pluvoise, 2008). This research explored the educational experiences of African American males, leading up to disruption in the traditional educational process and in the current setting.

**Research Question(s):**

The primary research question is:

*What are the educational experiences of African American males who have been expelled from public school settings?*

Sub questions include:
1. What do African American males perceive as barriers to their success in traditional educational settings?

2. How do these students describe their relationships with their teachers and administrators?

3. How do African American males in alternative educational settings describe their relationship with peers in the traditional educational setting versus the alternative educational setting?

4. To what degree do African American males perceive the roles of race, and racism in their educational experiences?

Conceptual Framework:

Critical Race Theory

For the purposes of this study, Critical Race Theory (1989) most appropriately explained the underlying dynamics of African American male interactions with their educational environment and the lifelong implications of said interactions (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Smith, 2009). However, it is helpful to understand the origins of Critical Race Theory (CRT), as these theories aid in explaining this phenomenon. Both personal and environmental factors can come together to create a continual cycle counterproductive to successful school matriculation of African American males.

In order to fully understand the dynamics of the problem of education and the African American male, one must have a deeper understanding of the impact that schools have on the individual and society as a whole. Early sociology in education theorists concerned themselves with social class, social status and power, and how “education, as a mechanism for the development and transmission of knowledge, is an important social institution in this
stratification process” (Saha, 2011, p. 300). Early sociological theorists laid the groundwork for more contemporary neo-Marxists theories, critical theories, and their offspring theories such as Critical Race Theory (Lauen & Tyson, 2009). Lauen and Tyson (2009) assert that these theories explain the purposes of education, the effects of schooling on an individual, and how school facilitates societal goals as it relates to transitioning youth to adult roles. This means that, “the theories, methods, and the appropriate sociological questions are used to better understand the relationship between educational institutions and society, both at the micro and macro levels” (Saha, 2011, p. 300). Two tenets of CRT were used to provide a context for this study: racism as pervasive and counter story telling. The perspective of this study allows for the participants to tell their stories and their perceptions of how racism has influenced their educational experiences.

One of the major tenets of CRT is that racism is about institutional power, a type of power in which minorities have never had control of (Ladson-Billings, 1998). How one is identified in terms of race and how race intersects with gender and class can sometimes determine the direction of one’s life. While overt racism is prevalent, it is the subtle, and covert racism that still has lasting impact on people of color. Racism has expanded from the days of publicly displayed hatred and bigotry (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Esquilin et al, 2006), to a form of racism that is harder to identify. Alexander (2010) wrote that racism no longer manifests itself in the way in which Americans are used to; with images of lynchings and “Whites Only” signs, but rather in a manner in which it functions invisibly, embedded into societal systems. Institutionalized racism, by definition, is when an institution directly or indirectly discriminates against certain groups (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Alexander, 2010). Key examples of this is the way in which racism permeates in public school systems; such as
disparate discipline policies, biased standardized testing practices, overrepresentation of African American males in special education programs, lower teacher expectations, and lack of access to quality educational programs. Rumberger and Thomas (2000) argued that while school completion rates are impacted by student characteristics, nearly half was due to factors under the control of policy makers; such as student teacher ratio, teacher quality, school size and attendance policies. Lee and Bryk (1988) identified other factors that impact educational experiences for individuals, including: curriculum, school size, and student-teacher relationships. Much sociological interest (Dreeben, 1968; Swidler, 1976) in education is centered on what curriculum is taught, to whom, and its impact. Academic stratification such as teacher quality, curriculum inequalities, and ability tracking intersect to produce an ineffective educational experience for many African American males and fits perfectly in line with the CRT lens and view of the problem.

Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that “our society owes minorities a decent education that will enable them to succeed academically, and we owe this because of the economic, social, and moral oppression minorities have suffered throughout U.S. history” (p.6). Because of an internalized belief in racial stereotypes and the influence of the social label of “Black man-as-villain,” many teachers, White and Black, hesitate to engage and interact in a close and nurturing way with African American males and often fail to provide them with equitable educational services (Noguera, 1997). Darling-Hammond (2006) noted that “international assessments reveal that America’s schools are among the most unequal in the industrialized world in terms of spending, curriculum offerings, teaching quality, and outcomes” (p. 13). As highlighted in the review of literature through inequitable instruction and disciplinary practices, African-American males are on the bottom end of most of these measures. Critical Race Theory provides a
framework to understanding institutionalized racism that serves as an underpinning as to why these disparities still exist despite literature and research from the past few decades that explores the negative impacts of such disparities.

According to Xanthos (2008), along with navigating the physical and emotional issues that are present during adolescence, adolescent African-American males are faced with unique social and environmental challenges; they must learn to cope with racism and its associated stressors, including family stressors, educational stressors, and urban stressors. Critical Race Theory explains that some of these stressors come in the form of microaggressions. Sue et al (2006) provides the following definition: “racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). Racial microaggressions can be experienced in schools through instructional practice and discipline practice (e.g. the assumption that African American males are unmotivated to learn or African American males are aggressive). The these notions influence the way African American males are treated in school and as a result, are internalized by African American males who ultimately disengage from the schooling process (Noguera, 2003). Jenkins (2006) asserted that “the marginalization that boys experience in the classroom, when compounded with the intense social issues that they are facing, makes the educational arena yet another system that fails to understand and adequately serve young Black men” (p.146). This study explored the educational experiences of young black men in the New Orleans area to gain more insight. The researcher sought to gain understanding of the experiences of the participants in the study. By becoming more aware of perhaps unconscious acts of racism, those acts may begin to decrease
and educators can re-examine common policies and practices that impede high school completion for African American males.

The absence of discussion about racism leads to denial of difference, or a colorblind approach to education which proponents of CRT warn against (Alexander, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998). This lack of dialogue around race leaves teachers and administrators unable to address their various privileges and how those privileges may affect their ability to educate all students effectively. Critical Race Theory recognizes that race matters even as some deny its importance and fail to recognize many manifestations of racism (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). These unrecognized manifestations perpetuate an educational environment in which students from marginalized communities are systemically subjugated. The qualitative nature of this study from a CRT perspective, allowed for such discussions to take place in an effort to understand how and why alternative school students were unwilling or unable to remain in their regular schools.

**Significance of the Study**

A phenomenological investigation of African American males who have been expelled from traditional educational settings might provide educators with invaluable insight. I explored the educational experiences of these young men, what they perceive as barriers to their success, their sentiments on the relationships they have had with educators and peers whom they have encountered, and the role they believe race has played in their experiences. The young men selected to participate in this study were recruited from alternative school settings. Alternative school settings are described as one of the paths to prison (Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Skiba et al, 2011). Participants who fit the criteria of having experienced educational disruption due to placement at an alternative setting may provide rich data that may enable educators to begin
steps to dismantle the school to prison pipeline by ensuring at-risk students are supported and successful in school without having to be removed. I hoped to discover new prevention and intervention strategies that educators can implement in order to increase graduation rates in African American males because after all, “Despite all of the negative life experiences that Black boys may encounter, many do want to learn and seek relevant and realistic alternatives to the negative options confronting them daily” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 20). This research was intended to be a catalyst in seeking those relevant and realistic alternatives to the negative options that threaten African American male youth.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

1. **Critical Race Theory**: An academic discipline focused on a critical examination of society and culture, through the intersection of race, law, and power. (Alexander, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

2. **Achievement Gap**: The achievement gap refers to the disparity in academic performance between minority and low-income students and their peers. (Rowley, R. & Wright, D., 2011). Academic performance is measured by standardized-test scores, course selection, and high school graduation rates, often highlighted with substantial performance gaps between Black and Latino students, at the lower end of the scale, and white peers. In addition to racial disparities, there are similar academic disparities between students from low-income families and students from higher income families. (Paige, & Witty, 2010; Nasir, 2012).

3. **School to Prison Pipeline**: The “school-to-prison pipeline” refers to the policies and practices that push students out of schools and into juvenile and criminal justice systems (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Factors involved with the school to prison pipeline
include inadequate access to quality schools, disparate discipline practices, disciplinary alternative school settings and criminal justice system involvement that may act as barriers to returning to traditional public schools (Alexander, 2010; Fowler, 2011; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Smith, 2009).

4. Zero Tolerance: Zero Tolerance policies were originally introduced to school districts as a solution to ensuring safe campuses as it relates to weapons, drugs and violent acts on school grounds (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Over time, however, zero tolerance has come to refer to school or district-wide discipline policies that mandate predetermined, often harsh punishments (such as suspension and expulsion) for a wide range of school policy violations that go beyond weapons, drugs, and violence (Noguera, 2003; Skiba, & Peterson, 2000).

5. Discipline Gap: The discipline gap refers to minority students and students with disabilities who receive discipline referrals and harsher consequences at a disproportionate rate when compared to their white peers (Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011; Townsend, 2000; Welch, & Payne, 2010).

6. Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEP): The Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) provide an educational placement for students who have been removed from the traditional school setting due to weapons, drugs, acts of violence, or at the administrator’s discretion for repeated disruptive behavior, disrespect, truancy, etc. in the regular school setting (Booker & Mitchell, 2011).

7. At Risk: The term at-risk youth is often used to describe students who are at high risk of failing academically or dropping out of school. The term may be applied to students who face other circumstances that could jeopardize their ability to complete school such as
homelessness, incarceration, learning disabilities, low test scores, disciplinary problems, grade retentions, or other factors that could adversely affect the educational performance of some students (Hidden Curriculum, 2014).

8. **Lock Out:** School Lock Out within the context of this study refers to the lack of access to a quality education often faced by minority and low income students (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Schott Foundation, 2014; 2012).

9. **Pushout:** School pushout refers to harsh discipline policies that push students out of school with excessive out of school suspension and expulsion (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera, 2010; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2009).

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation was organized as follows. First, the literature review examined the literature pertaining to the educational experiences of African American males, social factors that impact African American male educational experiences, and alternative school experiences. Chapter three contains a description of the research methodology process for this study including the research design, data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter four is a presentation of the findings; followed by Chapter five discussing the findings of this research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

African American males face distinct, pervasive, and complex challenges in the K-12 public education landscape (Boyd, 2009; Noguera, 2003; Schott Foundation, 2014; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Smith, 2009). Given the current 59% high school graduation rate of African American males (Schott Foundation, 2014), a closer examination of the educational process of these students is needed to reroute the trajectory of the 41% who do not successfully complete high school. This literature review will examine the knowledge base of dynamics related to this study of the educational experiences of African-American males who have been placed in alternative school settings. There are a number of areas reviewed here, including: African American male schooling experiences; social factors such as peer relationships, parental involvement, socio economic status, and the criminal justice system that influences those educational experiences; and institutional racism that permeates in school systems and structures such as teacher expectations, zero tolerance policies, and Discipline Alternative Education Programs (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Harper, Terry & Twiggs, 2009; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Lleras & Rangel, 2009; Skiba et al, 2011; Welch & Payne, 2010). These areas have been selected to be reviewed due to the inextricably tied relationship between the discipline gap and achievement gap, as well as, the way in which social factors influence education for African American males (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Nogeura, 2003; Berg, 2004).

Overview

Disproportionate disciplinary practices have been particularly problematic for African American males who are overrepresented in suspension and expulsion rates (Boyd, 2009; Skiba et al, 2011; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). According to Skiba et al, (2011), zero tolerance policies
have been particularly controversial as it relates to disparate discipline practices. While such policies were intended to increase school safety, implementation has only increased disproportionality in discipline referrals and action with African American males (Boyd, 2009; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). African American male students are regularly overrepresented in out of school suspensions and expulsions (Skiba et al, 2011). Research determined that disproportionality in discipline begins in the classroom with the initial referrals, exists in suspension rates, and also exists in the expulsion process by which children are sent to alternative schools (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002; Smith, 2009). Little research has been conducted from the perspective of those students who disproportionately ultimately end up matriculating in alternative school settings (Dalghren, 2012; Roderick, 2003).

The achievement gap is a disparity worth noting given the disproportions in the discipline gap with African American males and their peers (Berg, 2004; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). African American males are more likely to be suspended or expelled; and are also lower performing academically. Noguera (2003) points out the connection between these phenomena suggesting that missed instructional time from out of school suspensions negatively impacts academic performance. Additionally, low academic achievement or unsupportive environments can lead to disciplinary referrals as well (Berg, 2004). Additionally, it is critical to examine how social factors such as poverty, parental support, and the criminal justice system may impact educational experiences of African American males. Institutionalized racism also manifests itself in teacher bias and cultural insensitivity of teachers who do not know how to engage with economically disadvantage students, and who do not understand how to interpret behavioral styles across cultures (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson & Wu, 2006). In order to get a truly comprehensive understanding, it will be critical to examine these experiences from the
perspective of the students who can share their perceived systemic barriers that hinder success. For instance, researchers (Noguera, 2003, Skiba et al, 2011; Kim, Losen, and Hewitt, 2011) have reported on disparate discipline rates, however, this study will ask those students most effected to describe their experiences and what may lead to excessive suspension and expulsion.

Pushout is a term used to describe harsh discipline policies that push students out of school with excessive out of school suspension and expulsion (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010). For the purposes of this study, pushout also refers to school-controlled factors that cause disengagement of African American male students- often a precursor of suspensions and expulsions.

While the preceding discussion of pushout refers to characteristics of schools and society that have the impact of moving students from the regular school setting to some alternative one, the concept of lockout means to be denied access to critical components of education altogether. Students who are pushed out of school once had access, and that was taken away over time. Students who are locked out-have been denied access to quality instruction, and academic tracks that put students on pathways to college and career readiness. Darensburg, Perez and Blake (2010) suggest that African American males are impacted by harsh discipline policies, inequities in teacher quality, ability tracking, detachment from school, and placement into alternative school settings. This assertion is supported by the work of Kim, Losen, and Hewitt (2010) who wrote, “Toward the front end of the pipeline, the denial of adequate educational services sets up many students for failure…and later involvement with the courts” (p. 1). Critical Race Theory plays a major role in the construction of the interview protocol and analysis for this study in that every question is strategically put together in order to be analyzed and create a comprehensive overview of the educational experiences of African American males, which this study aims to
accomplish. This is significant in that the findings from the proposed study may unearth deeper understanding of institutional factors within traditional educational settings that serve as a pathway to the criminal justice system.

School to Prison Pipeline through a Critical Race Lens

The tenet of Critical Race Theory that describes racism as pervasive (Ladson-Billings, 1998) is the underpinning of the proposed study. CRT regards racism as so deeply embedded in society that it is often overlooked and viewed as ordinary (Delgado & Stefancic 2001). Institutional racism operates in a much more subtle way than blatant bigotry of the past (Alexander, 2010). Gillborn (2005) and Ladson-Billings (1998) assert that racism is demonstrated by the outcome of practices and not evidenced by intent. Inherently, policies and practices may not target members of a given race, but if they disproportionately impact members of a given race, they are still functions of institutionalized racism.

The school to prison pipeline conceptual framework is emblematic of Critical Race Theory within the context of the American public school system. CRT “dares us to keep looking at those things we would rather turn from” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. xii). This study intends to examine the American educational system through a Critical Race Theoretical lens, giving educators a context for understanding how historical and socio-cultural inequities within the educational system have impacted a historically excluded group as told by the young men in their own voices.

Smith (2009) identifies the school to prison pipeline as a conceptual framework used to understand how policies and practices within the educational and criminal justice systems work together in a manner, which results in students of color being disproportionately pushed out of school and into prison. In the 1980s and 90s a national increase in juvenile crime birthed policies
that “policed” children and adolescents inside of schools which created an adverse effect of racial disparities in discipline and involvement in criminal justice systems (Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). Research also shows that, “cumulatively, a black student’s chances of being incarcerated are roughly four times greater than those of a white student” (Smith, 2009, p. 1017). Kim, Losen, and Hewitt (2010) state that at its core, the school to prison pipeline is the result of a failed K-12 public education system that does not meet the needs of a large number of students it serves.

Inequitable practices of the educational system and its impact on African American (particularly male) students has been documented for years (Childrens Defense Fund, 1975; Noguera, 1997; Skiba et al, 2011). Tuzzolo and Hewitt (2006) described how the educational experience impacts the school to prison pipeline, explaining that failure to provide quality education, together with excessively harsh discipline policies act as contributing factors that exclude young African American men from school. These factors also function as components of institutionalized racism. The school to prison pipeline is best explained by Tuzzulo and Hewitt (2006), “instead of creating safe and positive learning environments where students with behavioral challenges are equipped with the tools they need to be successful in society, school districts around the country have adopted policies and procedures that actually force these students out of school” (p. 66). These policies and procedures refer to the zero tolerance policies and academic stratification procedures outlined in the review of literature that result in systemic exclusion from school.

The school to prison pipeline often flows in one direction. One of the detrimental possible outcomes of school exclusion is that once some students find themselves involved in the courts or with alternative schools, it becomes difficult to reenter the traditional school setting
(Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). This also has larger implications for those who attend alternative schools and serves as an additional rationale for the present study.

**Context of the Study**

*New Orleans Public School System: A Brief History*

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, public schools in New Orleans were run by a single entity, Orleans Parish School Board or NOPS (New Orleans Public School System). NOPS was notorious for having problems prior to August 2005, “the public school system in New Orleans prior to Katrina was riddled with a history of financial mismanagement, abysmal test scores, crumbling facilities, notorious incidents of school violence, and blatant racial segregation” (Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006 p. 60). The Recovery School District of Louisiana (RSD) was founded in 2003 as an instrument to take over failing schools across the state. With the arrival of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the state legislature passed Act 35 which permitted the state to alter the definition of “failing” in takeover districts: the state of Louisiana could deem any school below the state average failing and seize the school (Cowen Institute, 2010). The RSD took over a little more than 100 public schools in New Orleans; however, the takeover was overwhelmed by a number of management and operational problems (Frazier-Anderson, 2008). The initial takeover of New Orleans’ public schools was announced as temporary; the RSD launched a strategic turn-around plan that included awarding school charters to several charter management organizations (CMOs).

The current public school governance structure in New Orleans is as follows: as of the 2013-2014 school year, “there are 87 public schools in New Orleans (11 direct run schools, 75 charter schools and 1 independent school)” (Cowen Institute, 2014, p.3). Because of the sheer devastation that arose following Hurricane Katrina and the social and economic implications of
that devastation, this further warrants a closer look at the current state of the public school system in New Orleans, specifically African American males. This population has historically been at the receiving end of consequences stemming from inequitable practices in the school system.

**New Orleans, Louisiana School to Prison Pipeline**

The school to prison pipeline refers to intersecting policies and practices within the educational and criminal justice systems which result in students of color being excessively pushed out of school (Smith, 2009). It is important to consider both factors that influence education in New Orleans such as income and access to quality education, in addition to, practices within the schools that impact education such as discipline policies. Racial and economic segregation remains extremely high in New Orleans schools, with the majority of students of color going to schools in the poorer, more segregated, and lower-performing schools (Institute on Race and Poverty, 2010).

Socio economic status of students plays a critical role in their educational experience. In Louisiana alone, a startling 48% of African American families are considered to be low-income families (Louisiana Kids Count Report, 2013). This is important to note because factors such as school environment, teacher selection, class size, student-teacher ratio, and school rules are all affected by the school's socioeconomic status (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Funding for schools is partially tax driven. Low-income areas provide schools with less money, which then reduces the resources available to the school (Rowley & Wright, 2011). This was evidenced in New Orleans, as the lower the school performance score, the higher amount of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch (Cowen Institute, 2008; 2013).
Charter schools are now a majority segment of publicly funded schooling in New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina. It is important to consider that in some cases, charter schools have worsened student segregation on the basis of race, language status, and special education, in addition to poverty (Baker, et al., 2012; Frankenberg & Seigel-Hawley, 2012; Mead & Green, 2012). Charter schools select their students through their enrollment process, discipline practices, and parental involvement requirements (Wells, 1998). Charter schools have autonomy to deny admissions to low income students whose parents cannot commit to some of their parental involvement requirements (Boston Consulting Group, 2007; Dingerson, 2007; Fenwick, 2009c; Macey, Decker, & Eckes, 2009). This is important to note for two reasons. The first is because literature (Cowen Institute 2013; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006) indicates that the majority of students in New Orleans are still mostly African American, and mostly low-income students, some who also qualify for special education services who are systemically being denied equitable access to quality education.

In addition to concerns of gaining access to quality schools, there are added concerns regarding disciplinary practices within schools and how those practices impact African American, low income males. While disparate discipline policies are affecting students of color disproportionately nationally, local disparities in school discipline practices are cause for alarm (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010). Louisiana has the second-highest out-of-school suspension rate and the highest expulsion rate in the country (LAPCS, 2012). Public schools in New Orleans have historically utilized harsh discipline policies that have pushed students out of school at alarming rates both prior to, and after Hurricane Katrina (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). Garibaldi (1992) analyzed 1986-87 school year discipline data for Orleans Parish Schools and found that African American males accounted for
58% of those who did not graduate from high school, 65% of the out of school suspensions, 80% of the expulsions, despite only representing 43% of the total school population. This data indicates the African American males have been subjected to overzealous and disproportionate discipline policies for quite some time in New Orleans.

An analysis of 2003-2004 discipline data for Orleans Parish Schools was just as startling, as not much had changed nearly 20 years later from the original study of discipline practices in New Orleans. Tuzzolo and Hewitt (2006) determined that in the 2003-2004 school year 80% of NOPS students were suspended out of school. Additionally, Tuzzolo and Hewitt (2006) estimated approximately 500 school arrests per year in Orleans Parish School prior to Hurricane Katrina. This data is important to note because during the years analyzed, 87% percent of students enrolled in public school were African American. This data showcases a pattern in the New Orleans Public School System of excessive school pushout of African American students.

Post Hurricane Katrina, despite having a completely new network of management for public schools in New Orleans, students are still subject to harsh discipline policies that result in school push out. In the 2008-09 school year, there were 186 out of school suspensions per week in the RSD schools in which 98% of the students enrolled were Black, and 79% were low income (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010, p.3). Suspensions were often handed out for minor misbehavior, such as dress code violations or being tardy to class or school (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010, p.3). In the 2008-09 school year, 1,016 students were recommended for expulsion in the RSD, Students were removed from their school pending an expulsion hearing, sometimes missing days, weeks or even months of school before their hearing was held (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010, p.3). The information compiled by Southern Poverty Law...
Center shows a clear continued culture of excessively harsh discipline consequences that disproportionately impact African American, low income students.

Most recently, a 2014 report compiled by the Louisiana Department of Education revealed that in the 2013-14 academic year, 44% of the public school student population were African American, yet received 67% of out-of-school suspensions and 68 percent of expulsions in Louisiana. Specifically in New Orleans that year, the Recovery School District New Orleans expulsion rate was 0.66% when compared to a state expulsion rate of .50%. This data once again highlights the disproportionate nature of discipline in New Orleans public schools.

Public schools in New Orleans remain plagued with an amalgamation of factors that include lack of resources, continued failure to provide quality education for all students, and excessive punitive discipline policies with consequences in the form of out of school suspension, expulsion, and school arrests that ultimately exclude students from traditional education settings. While the charter school reform movement in New Orleans makes some claims to increasing the overall academic performance of students, in many ways the no excuses school models of many charter schools has exacerbated the already existent disparate discipline problem. The no excuses model is reminiscent of zero tolerance policies in that it consists of high academic and behavior expectations that are enforced by strict disciplinary policies (Horn & Wilburn, 2013). Due to the historical, pervasive disparate nature of harsh discipline policies in New Orleans, this warrants a closer look at the schooling experiences of those students who have been expelled from public schools in New Orleans. This study examined the experiences of students who have been expelled and yielded important data on how institutional structures may exacerbate barriers faced by students who come to school already on an unequal playing field.
African American Male Educational Experiences

Academic Achievement

Opportunity Gap: Access Denied

The achievement gap refers to the notion that Black and Latino students do not perform academically as well as their White peers (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Standardized test scores and high school graduation rates serve as the main instruments for measuring student achievement. Given the 59% graduation rate of African American males (Schott Foundation, 2014), and the detrimental outcomes for the 48% that do not complete high school (Jenkins, 2006; Smith, 2009; USDOJ, 2007), it is important to consider the idea that achievement gaps stem from opportunity gaps (Carter & Welner, 2013). The opportunity gap in education refers to inequitable dissemination of both resources and opportunities (Carter & Welner, 2013). This notes some specific examples of gaps in opportunity as it relates to curriculum and instructional practices (specific teaching methods that guide learning in the classroom) with African American male students.

Research studies, (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Darling-Hammon, 2007; Peske and Haycock, 2006) focusing on the impact of the achievement gap, have indicated that lack of quality instructors significantly influences this phenomenon. In addition to being subjected to poor teacher quality, school-age African American males tend to be overrepresented in and often misdiagnosed into special education programs; however, they tend to be underrepresented in Advanced Placement or college-preparation programs (Harper, Terry & Twiggs, 2009). Further, African American males are twice as likely to be designated as mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed or having a learning disorder than their non-black peers (Smith, 2005). As opposed to restricting access to high quality education, teachers and administrators should serve as
advocates for young African-American males by recommending higher-level courses and having high expectations for their academic performance.

Assessments are tools that are often used to make decisions about students’ educational trajectories (Donner & Shockley, 2010). Instructional practices like standardized testing and tracking serve as examples of how academic stratification in public schools contribute to educational inequity, school marginalization, exclusion, and incarceration (Smith, 2009). Donner and Shockley (2010) assert that the “misalignment between standards based assessment and instructional practice suggest that students currently situated at the low end of the academic achievement gap will be further marginalized” (p. 55). Academic achievement in African American males is important to note due to the link between academic achievement and incarceration (Donner & Shockley, 2010).

Ability tracking is another detrimental instructional practice or, method used by classroom teachers to guide learning that impacts African American males (Oakes, 1985; Smith, 2009). Entwisle and Alexander (1993) found educational stratification begins in early elementary school when students are initially placed on to academic tracks or trajectories. Essentially, students are labeled as they enter school based off of skills they may lack. These labels remain for the next 12 years of their education, as opposed to finding ways to increase skills from day one. Labeling is much more disproportionate for minority students. Lleras and Rangel (2009) determined that African American and Hispanic students are much more likely to leave elementary school having lower achievement compared to white peers, and these disparities persist throughout middle and high school. Placing students into lower tracks begins a domino effect of negative consequences because it results in inequitable curricula, and because low tracked students are subjected to instructional methods that stimulate disruptive behavior (Smith,
2009), which ultimately leads to larger concerns throughout their educational experiences (Noguera, 2003; Oakes, 1985). Methods such as ability tracking and inequitable access to quality instructions that cause the achievement gap play a dual role alongside the institutional systems such as teacher expectations, and discipline policies that cause the discipline gap (Berg, 2004; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010).

**African American Males in Special Education**

One of the contributing factors to the achievement gap between African American students and their white peers is the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Connor & Ferri, 2005). Special education is defined as specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (IDEA, 2004). The spectrum of those who qualify for special education relates to the academic, physical, cognitive and social-emotional need of students who may have one or more disabilities. Provided below is a list of the types of disabilities that qualify for special education services, and a brief explanation of how those diagnoses are made:

Children with disabilities may be viewed according to two major categories: (1) high incidence and (2) low incidence. High-incidence disabilities are also referred to as mild disabilities and include the subcategories of learning disabilities (LD), emotionally disturbed (ED), mild mental retardation (MMR), and speech and language disorders. Low-incidence disabilities are more severe in nature and include conditions such as sensory disorders (visual and hearing impairments), moderate to severe mental retardation, physical disabilities, and autism. The high- and low-incidence categories might also be distinguished, respectively, by “clinical judgment” and biological factors. That is, the diagnosis for mild disabilities is relatively subjective, while low-incidence disabilities are based on medical assessments. (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009, p. 383).
Subjectivity is inherently a problem as it relates to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. African American students remain two to three times more likely to be labeled as mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, and learning disabled (Connor & Ferri, 2005; Cartledge & Dukes, 2009). In addition, males are more likely to be identified for special education compared with females (Coutinho & Oswald, 2009; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). In fact, 80 percent of students in special education programs are Black and Latino males (National Educational Association, 2011). This is important to note because students receiving special education services are also more likely disproportionately impacted by school discipline policies (Kaplan & Cornell, 2005). Students who are disparately placed into special education programs not only miss out on access to quality instruction, but they are vulnerable to excessive discipline referrals, and often more likely to be exposed to juvenile justice systems.

Approximately more than 134,000 youth are incarcerated in public and private juvenile correctional facilities in the United States (Quinn, Rutherford, Leonne, Osher, & Poirier, 2005). Another important note is that these youth are also disproportionately male, poor, Black, Native American, or Latino, and many have significant learning or behavioral problems that entitle them to special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Quinn et al, 2005). According to Quinn et al (2005), “The prevalence of students labeled with disorders among the juvenile justice population has led some professionals to characterize juvenile justice as a "default system" for youth who cannot read or write well, who have mental health problems, and who drop out or are forced out of school” (pp. 339-340).

It makes sense that juvenile justice systems have an over representation of students with special needs, and that those students are disproportionately Black and Latino males, as school systems have historically disproportionately pushed African American males into special
education programs. Connor and Ferri (2005) insist that following the mandate of Brown vs. Board of Education, schools would abuse and disproportionately place children of color in special education classes as a means of keeping those students separate from their white peers. Whether one agrees with the Connor and Ferri (2005) theory or not, it does not negate the fact that the disproportionate placement of African American male students in special education is a long-standing, multifaceted issue. It is undeniably part of a larger problem related to the disparity in academic achievement between African American and European American students, and warrants notation given the purpose of this study to examine the educational experiences of African American males who have been expelled from public schools.

**Social Factors that Influence Academic Achievement**

*Relationships with Peers*

The core of this study was to examine the educational experiences of African American males. Academic performance cannot be observed without consideration of external influences on student achievement. For some time, researchers (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Ogbu 2003; Wentzel, 1994) have found that peers can greatly influence an adolescent’s attitude towards education. Peer support is positively related to student achievement (Lundy & Firebaugh, 2005; Wentzel, 1994). In their 2006 study, Haynie, South, and Bose found both peers' behavior and parenting to be considered significant predictors of academic performance. Shin, Daly, and Vera (2007) performed a study of individual and peer factors’ relationship to school engagement. The findings of their study proposed that both positive peer norms and positive ethnic identity may serve as substantial factors in minority student engagement in school. Explicitly, students who indicated having higher levels of positive peer norms and ethnic identity tended to report higher
school engagement compared to those students who indicated having lower levels of positive peer norms and ethnic identity (Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007).

Not only does positive peer attitudes and behaviors towards education impact peers, but students were also found to be impacted by peers that displayed negative attitudes and behaviors towards education (Fleming, Hagerty, Catalano, Harachi, Mazza, & Gruman, 2005; Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007). Participants who reported higher levels of negative peer norms also indicated lower school engagement compared to those who reported lower levels of negative peer norms (Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007). Similarly, exposure to low performing peers is associated with poor academic performance and school drop-out (Fleming et al., 2005; Gottfredson, 2001). Nebbitt, Lombe, LaPointe, and Bryant (2009) found that as students’ interactions with low performing, at risk peers increased, they were less likely to report high achieving grades. Somers, Owens, and Piliawshy (2008) examined factors involved in the academic success of African American students. The authors of this study found that social support was correlated with educational intentions and behaviors that lead to success in school. Parental involvement and peer influence came out to be the most strongly correlated with academic achievement (Somers, Owens, & Piliawshy, 2008). While this study found that peer influence is strongly correlated to student achievement of African Americans, this population is also more susceptible to receiving negative reactions to their success in school.

African Americans in particular may receive more negative feedback from their peer groups for achieving success in schools (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Ford & Moore, 2006). More specifically, African American males are more likely to adopt behaviors from their peers that are counterproductive to academic success (Noguera, 2003). Gavazzi, Russel and Khurana (2009) conducted an analysis of data collected from a sample of court-
involved Black youth and the link between education risk and outside variables. Results from this study concluded that individual traits, family dynamics, and peer group affiliations are thought to shape the developmental pathways that lead to behavioral and academic outcomes for these students. Peer influence is an important part of the African American male educational experience. It will be important to assess what, if any, role did peer relationships play in the experiences of the participants in this study. This information may lead to ways in which schools can foster positive relationships and support systems for African American males and their peers.

**Parental Involvement**

The notion that the role parents play in a student’s schooling process has potential to impact student achievement has been a common topic for dialogue and planning in educational practice (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hayes, 2012; Jeynes, 2005). Conceptualizing the role of parental involvement in student achievement is a complex process that requires a clear understanding of the nature of the term. For instance, Epstein (2001) outlines a framework for parental involvement that includes the following six types: (1) parenting; establishing a supportive home environment; (2) communicating; home to school and school to home communication about student progress; (3) volunteering; participating in school events and activities; (4) learning at home; helping students with homework and being actively involved in curriculum decisions; (5) decision making; (PTO, school board, advocacy activity); and, (6) collaborating with community; identify and build programs between the school and community that foster the success of the school.

As it relates to parental involvement and student achievement, parental involvement is a critical factor in the educational experiences of minority students (Epstein, 2001; Henderson &
Mapp, 2002; Xu, 2002). Several studies (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005) determined that parental involvement has a significantly positive impact on student achievement. More specifically, parenting style has been found to play a substantial role in influencing academic performance among African American students (Casanova, García-Linares, de la Torre, & Carpio, 2005; Williams, Davis, Miller-Cribbs, Saunders, & Williams, 2002). When African American parents are involved in their children’s education, there is a positive relationship to student achievement (Hayes, 2012; Jeynes, 2005). These studies are quantitative in nature and simply determine that parental involvement does impact student achievement without determining underlying factors that influence parental involvement, nor meaning that students themselves attached to ways in which their parents influenced their educational journey. This study aimed to garner a deeper understanding in which participants will describe ways in which their parents may or may not have influenced their educational experiences.

There are a number of ways in which parental involvement may positively impact academic achievement (Hayes, 2012; Jeynes, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). However, there have been some inconsistencies in research as it relates to African American parental involvement. Some studies have reported that African American parents are less likely to be involved in the educational process of African American males (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Jeynes, 2005). Reasons cited for lack of involvement with school include African American parents appear to be unconcerned about their children’s educational experiences and outcomes (Thompson, 2003; Field-Smith, 2005), African American parents are more involved in extracurricular activity than academic support (O’Bryan, Braddock, and Dawkins2006), and mutual feelings of distrust and apathy on the part of school officials, as well as, African American parents (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Williams & Baber, 2007). In sum, it
is known that parental involvement serves as a factor that influences academic performance. It is also known that for whatever reasons, African American males tend to have less academic support from parents. Thus, it is not enough to look at academic performance in African American males without acknowledging external factors as critical parental involvement or how other societal factors such as socio economic status influences both students and their families.

*Socio Economic Status (SES)*

Socio Economic Status directly impacts student achievement because it influences access that students have to quality educational experiences. Factors that strain a student’s ability to adapt to school demands include run-down facilities, inadequately prepared teachers, inconsistent school rules and regulations, heightened levels of crime and violence, substandard housing, poor health care and persistent poverty (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). Historically, researchers (Coleman et al, 1966; Reynolds & Walberg, 1992) have long studied the relationship between family income and student achievement. The Coleman Report of 1966 pointed out a definite correlation between socio economic status and student achievement, prompting the start of the national Head Start program as a means to lessen the negative effects of poverty on education. Coleman (1988) suggested that a family’s SES both directly and indirectly impacts student achievement in terms of resources available to the student at home and impacting social capital necessary to be successful in school. Reynolds and Walberg (1992) determined that family SES defines which type of school environment students have access to.

Socio-economic status influences how educators perceive students and their families (Morrow & Torres, 1995). Wenglinsky (1998) corroborated this notion in comparing low SES schools with high SES schools. Disparities were found in resources and teacher quality. There is also a trend for lower socio-economic status families to be unaware of their rights and roles in
the school; feel inadequate in their ability to contribute to their child’s education; and, do not feel welcomed by the school environment (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

SES is a determining factor in access to health care and plays a role in misdiagnosis and placement into special education programs at school (Harry et al., 2000). Additionally, children living in poverty were less likely to have access to mental health care services, than their peers from higher socio-economic levels (Federal Interagency Forum, 2013). Children living in poverty were twice as likely as their middle and upper class peers to have severe mental health needs, but were less likely to receive sufficient help (Federal Interagency Forum, 2013). Students from low income families in inner cities are more likely to receive low quality services from schools (Noguera, 2003).

Peske and Haycock (2006) studied trends in Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Using multi-stakeholder teams from the three states, Peske and Haycock studied trends between teacher quality and school socio-economic status. School socio-economic status is determined by the number of students in the school who receive free or reduced lunch, which is a service awarded to students based on family income. Peske and Haycock (2006) determined that when it comes to the dissemination of high quality teachers, poor and minority students often receive the short end of the stick. Students in the highest-poverty schools were assigned to inexperienced teachers almost twice as often as children in low-poverty schools. Similarly, students in high-minority schools were assigned to inexperienced teachers at twice the rate as students in low minority schools (Peske & Haycock, 2006). In all three states, highly qualified teachers (certified teachers) were more likely to be assigned to low poverty, low minority schools (Peske & Haycock, 2006).
Families considered being low income families are overwhelmingly, African American families. In 2013, on a national level, 39% of African American families were considered to live below the poverty level (Louisiana Kids Count Report, 2013); and this was the highest rate of poverty when compared to other racial groups. Socioeconomic segregation is considered an important cause of educational inequality (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Orfield and Lee (2005) assert that students in urban schools are ostracized by the white community, as well as, middle class schools. Minority children are far more likely than whites to grow up in persistent poverty (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013). Minority students comprise 80 percent of the student population in extreme poverty schools. In the South, Blacks make up 62 percent of the student population in extreme poverty schools even though they only account for 30 percent of the public school enrollment (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Contemplation of socioeconomic status’ influence on education paints a larger picture of why African American males continue to have disproportionate access to high quality education. On a larger scale, those students are also disproportionately living in poverty which directly influences access to resources and highly qualified teachers.

**Criminal Justice System**

The criminal justice system, much like other socioeconomic factors, parental involvement, and peer relationships also influences the educational experiences of African American males. More and more school systems are beginning to mirror prison systems which both result in disproportionate negative outcomes for African American males (Clemson, 2015; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Alexander (2010) argued that from a young age, we relegate our most vulnerable (poor, Black youth) to permanent second class citizenship through a strategically designed criminal justice system in what she refers to as the New Jim Crow. Many
African American male youth are facing chart topping arrest and incarceration rates (Noguera, 2003). 40% of Black men in their 20s and 30s, without a high school diploma, are incarcerated (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). Black men overall, are six times more likely than white men overall to be incarcerated (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). Alexander (2010) likens mass incarceration to slavery and Jim Crow in that institutions, laws, and policies work together to ensure secondary status of African American males. These facts no doubt are directly related in the U.S. education system.

Unfortunately for African American males, criminalization begins at a young age, and is often traced back to the school setting. Black and Latino students are more likely to be arrested at school than their white peers, making up nearly 45% of all juvenile arrests (Kim, Losen & Hewitt, 2010). 12% of formerly incarcerated youth complete high school and 50% are re-arrested within 2 years of release from custody (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Students of color are more likely to be referred to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program than white students (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010).

In addition to disparate discipline policies that lead to excessive suspension, expulsion, and school based arrests for African American male students, modern day schools mimic prison environments in several ways. Black students are disproportionately stuck in educational systems that operate in a similar manner to jails, as opposed to, an institution of learning (Clemson, 2015; Toldson, 2012). Cooc, Currie-Rubin, Kuttner, & Ng (2012) described one experience in a middle school as dreary and uninviting, and equipped with security guards and metal bars, with common references to students as “assholes and animals” (pg. 32). Kim, Losen, & Hewitt (2010) describe schools as institutions that police students via “drug sweeps, metal detectors, locker checks, and full time police officers on campus (school resource officers)” (p.112). 26% of Black
students report passing through metal detectors when entering school compared with 5% of their white peers (Toldson, 2012). Sipe (2004) noted that children are shaped by their physical and external environment and that heavy emphasis on having control over students is very similar to the need to exhibit control over inmates. These are a few ways in which the school system and criminal justice system intersect.

Once students are referred to police agencies and court systems, they are, in a sense, denied their educational rights. According to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 2011) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2011), incarcerated youth have the right to a high quality education. Hindrances to quality education include: misaligned curriculum to state standards (Gagnon, Barber, Van Loan, & Leone, 2009), low level instruction as opposed to higher order skills (Leone & Cutting, 2004), lack of accommodations for students who are entitled to services under Special Education (Leone, Miesel, & Drakeford, 2002), and poor planning to transition youth back into traditional public schools after time served (Baltadano, Mathur, & Rutherford, 2005; Brock & Keegen, 2007; Mears & Travis, 2004). These factors increase the chances that formerly incarcerated youth will be arrested again in their lifetime. Alexander (2010) explains this as a clever means to disenfranchise black men in similar ways that they were disenfranchised at the height of Jim Crow, “Once you’re labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal” (pg.1). The crux of this study was to examine experiences of youth who have been expelled from school, and that are now matriculating in alternative schools; which is determined to be a pathway to prison. Information gathered from this study may provide ways in which educational institutions can abate the
negative, prison-like experiences faced by African American males leading to detrimental outcomes.

**Institutionalized Racism within School Systems**

*Teacher Expectations and Relationships with Students*

Racism manifests itself in public schools in a multitude of ways (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Alexander, 2010). Certainly the attitudes of teachers towards minority students are a major component of institutionalized racism in schooling systems. As it relates to student support, both high expectations and caring teacher–student relationships are critical factors associated with student success (O’Malley & Amarillas, 2011). Teacher-student interactions also have a long lasting impact on student engagement in their academic journey and prove to be a critical component of success in students. Positive experiences with teachers impact at risk students in a positive manner. A study by Toldson (2008) found that African American male students who were successful perceived their teachers to be nurturing people who made them feel as if they were cared about. Townsend (2000) explained that establishing and maintaining relationships are important to African Americans in various settings including schools. Students may find it difficult to fully engage in their educational process without positive relationships with their teachers and school personnel (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008; Hamre, Pianta, Bear, & Minkie, 2006; Townsend, 2000). Townsend (2000) also argues that building rapport with students also helps school personnel to become aware of and tend to individual needs of students.

Teacher expectations are also a factor that heavily influences teacher-student interactions, and is thus also a contributing factor to potential outcomes of students. Martin, Martin, Gibson, and Wilkins (2007) found that African American adolescent male students have poor self-
efficacy regarding their academic abilities. The authors reported a lack of motivation to perform and achieve because of a belief that their teachers have low expectations for their students’ academic capabilities. These findings were similar to an earlier study (Garibaldi, 1992) that found 40% of African American males believed that teachers had lower expectations for them and 60% of African American males believed that their teachers did not push them hard enough.

Roderick (2003) studied the transition to high school for African American males as part of a longitudinal study in Chicago. Findings in this mixed methods study concluded that African American males experienced much more dramatic declines than females in their grades between 8th and 9th grade and were viewed more negatively by their 9th grade teachers. Ultimately, only 40% of the males graduated compared to 80% of the females. Through the interviews with the participants, themes of neglect and rejection from teachers in the school environment emerged. Roderick (2003) noted that, “the options of alternative schools and GED programs came after failure and withdrawal and were presented as punishment for their behavior. High school, for these students, was an arena in which their day-to-day interactions undermined their school attachment and sense of competence and self-esteem” (p.579). Negative day to day interactions with the school environment led to further disengagement in the schooling process for these students. This idea informs the present study in that interviews will intentionally focus on participants’ daily life in high schools as African-American students.

Hampton (2007) conducted a qualitative study that compared the perceptions of at risk students’ school experiences with the perceptions of honor students’ school experiences. Findings in this study showed that the at risk students felt that they did not have adequate teacher support, and in some cases that their reputations would precede them and impact the way teachers would support them in the classroom. Interestingly, the honor students felt that because
their reputations had preceded them, teachers would show more support and interest. When asked the question about whether or not they felt that their teachers personally cared for them, at-risk students were split. Half felt that none of their teachers personally cared about them, while the other half felt that at least one did; versus the honor students who all felt that at least one or more of their teachers cared about them. Overall the at-risk students reported often feeling lonely and mistreated by both adults and other students in school. In recommendations for further research, Hampton (2007) noted that, “the responses of the African American students in this research study showed that several of these students had negative perceptions of their educational environment. Further research is recommended that focuses directly on experiences of minority students.” (p. 128). The present study aimed to add to the discussion presented in Hampton’s study by describing the experiences of excluded African American males.

Bailey (2003) sited the following as practices within the school system that represent instances of low teacher expectations:

1.) seating black male students closer to them than they do other students to serve the purpose of surveillance and control;
2.) giving black males less direct instruction. This contributes to the feelings of confusion and frustration over what is expected;
3.) paying less personal attention to black males in academic situations;
4.) calling on black males less often to answer classroom questions or to do demonstrations;
5.) giving black males less time to answer questions before moving on;
6.) failing to give black males feedback about their responses more frequently than other students; and,

7.) demanding less work and effort from black males than from other students (Bailey, 2003, p.20).

These descriptions outline microaggressions faced by African American male students on a daily basis in the classroom. High teacher expectations and positive relationships with teachers are critical factors in engaging students. Not only do teachers’ perceptions of students impact student access to quality curriculum and instruction, and academic performance, it inherently plays a role in how discipline is handled in the classroom and at the school level. It is important to learn how these factors have impacted the participants of this study.

**Disparate Discipline Policies and Practices**

Excessive suspension and expulsion of African American males has consistently been a point of concern for over 40 years. The Children’s Defense Fund (1975) first brought this issue to the forefront with findings that, at that time, African Americans were twice as likely to be suspended as their white peers. Since that time, studies have been done on this issue and have found that the discipline gap has only increased with the onslaught of Zero Tolerance policies in schools across the nation (McFadden, Marsh, Price & Hwang, 1992; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Skiba,Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002; Skiba et al, 2011; Townsend, 2000; Welch & Payne, 2010).

What we now refer to as Zero Tolerance Policies began as a response to the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA). GFSA was originally enacted in an effort to keep weapons off of public school campuses in order to keep students safe. Since then however, researchers at the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (2000) have found that these policies have more
negative impacts on students than positive, including: “increasing use of criminal sanctions at schools, and the placement of law enforcement officers in schools as a mechanism of maintaining school discipline” (Boyd, 2009, p. 574). Over time, schools have expanded zero tolerance policies beyond weapons and drugs. In some schools, they now include automatic suspensions and expulsions for infractions such as tardiness, absences, disrespect, and non-compliance (Smith, 2009).

The increased harshness of school punishment mirrors that of the criminal justice system. While violence and delinquency have been on the decline, punitive discipline has increased (Welch & Payne, 2010). For many teachers and administrators their schools’ zero tolerance policies mandate their next disciplinary step be suspension or expulsion; however, the “…harsher student treatment is not merely a reflection of more violations punishable by mandated suspensions, but also importantly involves the discretion of teachers and administrators in identifying and acknowledging those behaviors” (Welch & Payne, 2010, p. 27).

Black students have been found to be suspended twice as much as their white peers for minor, subjective offenses such as cell phone use, disruptive behavior, disrespect, and display of affection (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Zero tolerance policies have created an environment in which teachers and administrators no longer handle discipline issues within their own classrooms, but instead, immediately refer students for disciplinary action. As a result, out-of-school suspension and expulsion has been on the rise and has only further widened the discipline gap. Rocque and Paternoster (2011) examined how disparate discipline practices impact African American males as early as elementary school; with a rationale that elementary school experiences have developmental consequences later in life. Rocque and Paternoster (2011) found that African American elementary school students were
30% more likely to be disciplined than their peers; and, develop reputations for being troublemakers, creating a pattern that functions as an antecedent to the school to prison pipeline. Currently, Black students who make up for 15% of the national student enrollment, account for 35% of out of school suspensions, and 36% of expulsions (Department of Justice, 2014). This is critical considering the research that shows that students who have been suspended are more prone to social ills such as school failure, drop out, participation in crime, and incarceration (Butler et al, 2012; Skiba et al, 2011; Smith, 2009).

Zero tolerance policies have fashioned an institution of confinement where classrooms have begun to resemble prison cells (Clemson, 2015). The institution of confinement is a system in which students from low socioeconomic status, in special education, English language learners, and students of color, are more likely to drop out or get pushed out of school. As a country, the United States frequently punishes the very students who are in the greatest need of academic, social, economic, and emotional support (Noguera, 2003). Teachers who fear losing control of their classroom, largely because of longstanding stereotypes and misunderstanding of marginalized communities, further marginalize the most vulnerable of students by labeling them as deviant and dangerous (Noguera, 2003). The students labeled as deviant are consistently removed from the classroom causing students to miss out on instructional time (Fenning & Rose, 2007), initiating a pattern of criminalizing behavior that disproportionately affects students of color.

The removal of “bad” individuals results in the labeling and stigmatization of already marginalized students, who tend to be poor, male and from racial or ethnic minority groups (Welch & Payne, 2010). Several studies (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al, 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002) explain the disparate nature of discipline policies as it relates
to astronomical suspension and expulsion rates of African American male youths. Fowler (2011) asserted that “students involved in one or more disciplinary incidents were 23.4 times more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system.” (p. 15). Hence a vicious cycle is created in which male students of color find themselves caught in. Once down this path, it is difficult to reverse the cycle. Disparate discipline practices are not limited to a certain region of the country, and warrant deeper exploration as another function of institutionalized racism that impacts African American male educational experiences and contribute to the school to prison pipeline. Students who are impacted by repeated suspension and expulsion sometimes find themselves having to enroll in an alternative school setting, which is deemed by some as a potential next step on the path to prison.

**Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs**

Alternative schools are nontraditional public school settings that have a bit more autonomy in the way students are educated. Alternative school settings tend to service students with severe special needs, overage students who have dropped out but would like to graduate, as well as students who have been expelled for disciplinary reasons. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2008), 64% of all public school districts have alternative schools for students who need them and 73% of the students enrolled in them are Black, Hispanic, or Native American (NCES, p.5), despite students from these racial groups making up only 39% of the country’s public school population (NCES, 2013). This study will focus on students who are at alternative schools for disciplinary reasons. Booker and Mitchell (2011) described Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEP) as schools designed to serve students who do not function well at their home school settings. Admission to such schools is initiated by a school-based or district-level administrative referral from the school district. These
Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs are typically referred to as alternative schools. Most DAEP schools were created to serve students who have been suspended or expelled (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Escobar-Chaves, Tortolero, Markham, Kelder, and Kapadia (2002) suggested reasons for expulsion include academic performance, attendance, behavioral infractions, and criminal arrests. The American Civil Liberties Union (2015) has identified placement in an alternative school setting as one of several paths that leads students into the school to prison pipeline in several ways: locking students into inferior educational settings, or funneling them into juvenile justice systems.

The purpose of this study was to examine educational experiences of African American males prior to their placement at an alternative school. It is important to gain insight on how all factors that influence African American male schooling experiences interconnect, and how the participants ended up at a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program. In some cases, students at schools utilizing zero tolerance discipline policies have been subject to mandatory placement in a DAEP; while some school districts use discretionary placement practices. Discretionary practices of placement into a DAEP is another alarming trend that refers to school administrators’ ability to pick and choose what behaviors can be used to determine a student’s placement in an alternative school setting. For example, The Council of State Governments Justice Center and Texas A & M University (2011) reported that while Texas has mandatory suspension and expulsion rules, 97% of suspensions and expulsions were discretionary. The demographic characteristics of students in this study determined that African Americans were 31% more likely to experience a discretionary suspension or expulsion in comparison to Hispanics or Whites. This study explored the traditional school experiences of students prior to
their enrollment in alternative schools. All participants have disciplinary reasons for their attendance at an alternative school, and this, forms an important touchstone for this study.

**Conclusion**

In sum, African American males are systemically locked out (or denied access to) quality instruction and curriculum, and furthermore, pushed out of schools via factors that lead to academic disengagement and harsh discipline policies. Examining the entire K-12 experience is important to garner a comprehensive picture of student experiences, not just examining the catalyst event for expulsion. Educators cannot always see the big picture about how their decisions impact students. A qualitative study on this issue allowed for some exploration into the lived educational experiences of the participants. This study should serve as a catalyst to discussion and action by educators both in New Orleans, and those who look to New Orleans as a model for school reform to reevaluate some practices and policies that hinder success for all students. Collecting data on these interrelationships will help to paint a more comprehensive picture.
Chapter Three:
Methodology

Introduction

Statement of the Research Question

Some of the essential purposes of conducting research are to explore phenomena, questions, and solve problems. My study aimed to answer the following question: What are the educational experiences of African American males who have been expelled from public school settings? Moreover, my research sought to explore K-12 educational systems and practices’ impact on African American males’ educational outcomes. For deeper insight, I asked sub questions such as, What do African American males perceive as barriers to their success in traditional educational settings? How do these students describe their relationships with their teachers, and administrators? How do African American males in alternative educational settings describe their relationship with peers in the traditional educational setting vs the alternative educational setting? To what degree do African American males perceive the roles of race, and racism in their educational experiences?

Critical Race Theory

The underpinning of the study regarded institutional racism as a significant factor impacting these youth’s exclusion from public school. One of the main tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) places particular importance on the voices and experiences of people of color who have historically not had a voice in educational research and practice (Ladson-Billings, 1998; 2006). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explain by noting, “because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know” (p.9).
Storytelling has the potential to act as a catalyst to challenge racist systems and institutions (Rollock, 2012). This dissertation investigated the role of racism and institutionalized racism in the educational experiences of African American males. CRT is a framework that guided my research questions, as well as my methods. Counter-storytelling, usually presented through interviews, authenticated the experiences with racism by African Americans. By using the semi-structured, open-ended interview guide within the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory, I had an opportunity to create an authentic counter-story of African American male students K-12 educational experiences in public schools.

**Qualitative Research Design:**

The purpose of this study was to gain new perspectives to add to the dialogue about the educational experiences of African American males. A qualitative approach was specifically well-suited to answer the research question because qualitative research design can “contribute knowledge that will help people understand the nature of a problem in order to intervene, thereby allowing human beings to more effectively control their environment” (Patton, 2002, p. 217). Qualitative research is designed to describe and infer some human experience to gain understanding of a situation (Maxwell, 2012). Specifically, phenomenology is essentially the study of lived experience or the lived world (van Manen, 1997). The lived experience is understood as what one experiences, without interpretation, and quite often includes what is taken for granted (van Manen, 1997). The study of these phenomena intends to reexamine these taken for granted experiences and perhaps uncover new or forgotten meanings (Laverty, 2008). By using a phenomenological research design, detailed descriptions of the participants’ experiences with racism as African American males in public schools was provided.
The phenomenological approach lends itself to the task of understanding participants’ lived experiences specifically related to their educational experience and the meanings they attach to them (Glesne, 1999). Laverty (2008) asserts that this inquiry asks, "What is this experience like?" as it attempts to unfold meanings as they are lived in everyday existence” (p.22). Previous research (Casanova, P., García-Linares, C, de la Torre, M., & Carpio, D. L., 2005; Coley, R. J. & Baker, B., 2013; Jeynes, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Peske, 2006; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008; Williams, Davis, Miller-Cribbs, Saunders, & Williams, 2002) has explored various angles, including but not limited to socio-economic implications, parental involvement implications, and peers of the students, to attempt to explain vast disparities in the academic achievement of African American males when compared to their white peers. Few researchers have taken the approach to examine the educational system through the experiences of those who have succumbed to exclusion from traditional settings altogether.

**Research Site and Participants**

The institution selected for my study was a disciplinary alternative school in New Orleans, Louisiana for students in grades 7 through 12. The institution serves as the designated school for the students in the city who have been expelled. There are about 50 students enrolled at the school; however, enrollment fluctuates throughout the course of a school year as students are expelled from or counseled out of other schools, or are re-entering school from the criminal justice system. Currently, the student body is over 90% African American, 70% are male, and 70% qualify for free or reduced lunch. The researcher chose to refer to the institution as School X in an attempt to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants. This school was purposefully selected as the best suited setting for the proposed study based on student enrollment and its function as the city’s designated disciplinary alternative education program.
I gained access to potential participants through the purposeful sampling method. Purposeful sampling involves a deliberate effort to secure representative participants through the inclusion of groups in a sample (Patton, 1990). This sampling method was suitable for this study because it was the only viable sampling method in gathering information from a very specific group of people. Some benefits to this sampling method included the automatic elimination of unsuitable participants, which led to results that were more representative of the target population (Patton, 1990). Potential participants were those who met the following criteria: African American males, ages 15 through 18, who were currently enrolled in a disciplinary alternative education program in New Orleans. Participants, in addition to their parents, were asked to provide consent and assent after being thoroughly informed about the study by me in order to participate in the study. I obtained access to these settings by presenting the purpose and significance of the study to the gatekeepers (in this case, the principals of the schools).

**Gatekeepers**

Much qualitative research relies upon penetrating gatekeepers, “those who are in a position to ‘permit’ access to others for the purpose of interviewing” (Miller & Bell, 2002, p.62). Researchers must learn the social structure of a research site to successfully negotiate entry (Berg, 2004; Wanat, 2008). Feldman, Bell, and Berger (2003) assert that access is gained by building positive relationships with gatekeepers. Wanat (2008) recommends that “cooperation is best gained by understanding social power, having open lines of communication, and knowing when yes means no” (p.205). The researcher’s work as a school leader provided the benefit of understanding the social structure of both traditional and alternative K-12 schools. It also helped in anticipating and addressing concerns gatekeepers may have had regarding the implications of
this study for their organizations. For example, one of the concerns a school might have participating in a study may be to protect their students and their brand. Emphasizing the steps that I would take to protect anonymity and confidentiality of the students helped to assuage those concerns when gaining access.

Gaining entry into an alternative education institution in the K-12 landscape required working with various people in leadership roles within the organization. For the purpose of my study, I identified the principal at the school. I discussed my access and recruitment plan with my committee chair, Dr. Alonzo Flowers of the University of New Orleans, as well as, committee members Dr. Rashida Govan and Dr. Brian Beabout who are both long time researchers and practitioners in the New Orleans K-12 school landscape. I focused the setting of the study specifically at an alternative school as opposed to an alternative education space (i.e. a nonprofit space for high school dropouts or those who were recently incarcerated to complete school) because the research explicitly named the alternative school as a significant point on the school to prison pipeline. Additionally, the proposed setting was aligned with the sampling method which required that the participants had specifically been expelled and placed into this setting as opposed to willfully enrolling for a second chance opportunity. The latter could have possibly yielded different results and may be useful to include in future studies. I sent an initial letter of introduction to provide information about my background and an overview of the proposed study. I then met with the principal to explore what remaining questions this school leader had about my role with his students. I worked with the school leader and support staff (behavior mentors) to select potential participants in the study.
**Researcher Identification**

I am an African-American woman who is a school administrator in a secondary, traditional, public school setting and am currently in my eleventh year of work in the education field. I have served as a classroom teacher, school counselor, and school administrator with an at-risk population. I have worked in Orleans Parish Schools, East Baton Rouge Parish Schools, and St. Helena Parish Schools in traditional public school settings with large minority and poor student populations my entire career. Qualitative researchers must have a rich understanding of self in order to produce research that is of quality. Both how I identify as an African American New Orleans’ native, as well as, my background in education helped me build a strong rapport with participants, which was ideal in the data collection process.

In qualitative research, subjectivity is inherent in every aspect of the research process (Peshkin, 1988). It plays a role in why one chooses a particular topic. It plays a role in the population chosen to study. It plays a role in how the methodology is chosen. It plays a role in the questions that get asked. Naturally, it plays a role in how data is analyzed. The value of this is that we are driven by our passions, and what is important to us. However, it is important to simply be aware of subjectivity so that as we come to the conclusions of our research we can remain accurate in our findings, and effective in our recommendations. Peshkin (1988) believes that “subjectivity operates during the entire research process” (p.17).

I have spent the entirety of my career working with at-risk, minority students. Throughout this time, I have been involved in a number of expulsion hearings, which resulted in placing students, specifically African American males, into alternative school settings. These students had been on the receiving end of disparate discipline/Zero Tolerance policies that resulted in multiple suspensions for “disrespect” or talking back to authority, refusing to shake
hands with authority, and reasons such as “disrupting class” which often stemmed from unaddressed academic needs in the classroom. I have also always been particularly interested in the males that I have worked with as their stories have been the most compelling. Additionally, I have always been frustrated with systems in place that hinder African American males from being successful in school much to the detriment of themselves and their communities. This is another reason why Critical Race Theory (CRT) was chosen as the lens for this particular study.

CRT’s (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2003) focus on unveiling the subtle institutional racism within public education systems also helped me to be more reflective regarding my bias. This particular bias is also every bit of who I am and every bit the reason I chose to study this topic in depth. I have taken steps to combat these biases through bracketing, a process used to create a non-judgmental mentality and an awareness of any prior information, perceptions, or beliefs about the participants (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Through my research, I have been more or less forced to push beyond my personal views to take an honest look at the data collected. Additional strategies that assisted me with my bias included reflective journaling, or leaving an audit trail, member checking, and peer debriefing (Shenton, 2004).

**Data Collection**

My study examined social, academic, and institutional structures in place that incapacitated African American males on their educational journey in traditional public schools. CRT (1989) asserts that the experiential knowledge of people of color is an appropriate and legitimate means to analyzing and understanding racial inequality. One of the major tenets to CRT is understanding a lived experience within a given population which aims to change mindsets or reframe thinking regarding a certain problem or phenomenon.
The procedures for data collection as outlined by Moustakas (1994) consist of identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one’s experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon. The participants’ descriptions of their K-12 educational experiences were obtained through in-depth interviews with each individual participant. A major advantage of in-depth interviewing is that it focuses on meanings that life events have for individuals and how that meaning guides their future actions (Creswell, 1998). Individual interviews were best suited for this study because this method is aligned with the counter-storytelling tenet of CRT and gave the participants a platform to communicate their experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

An interview guide was developed, adapted, and utilized in order to gather data from participants. The interview guide was used to ensure a common interview process for each participant. Interviews were conducted in one session with participants due to the possibility of losing participants, because of the transient nature of alternative schools. Although multiple interviews allow the researcher to analyze the data and develop additional question guides that dig deeper into a specific concept or event discussed by the participant, I had no guarantee of being able to sit with each participant on multiple occasions or a number of reasons. Some participants could have gotten transferred back into traditional schooling, or some other life event could have prohibited further contact. Therefore, I strategically modified the interview protocol to gain sufficient quality data in one single interview. The semi-structured interviews lasted one hour. These interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim by me, the researcher, and analyzed for categories that further illustrated the research problem.
Data Analysis

Data analysis is described as the process of transforming succinct statements into an overall description or explanation of a given phenomenon (LeCompte, 2000). As it relates to data analysis in a phenomenological study, phenomenologists are focused on the crux of an experience. Thus, “phenomenologists are interested in showing how complex meaning are built out of simple units of direct experience” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). In order to accomplish this, Merriam (2002) asserts that the researcher must bracket their previous experiences in order to analyze and understand the crux of the experience from the perspective of participants.

I scheduled at least one meeting with each participant and conducted individual interviews designed to last about 60 minutes with participants. I analyzed the data using modified methods described by Moustakas (1994) in his guidelines for analysis of phenomenological interview data, which includes coding for statements of significance, clustering for units of meaning, and then writing a composite description that provides the essence of the phenomenon in its entirety.

Bracketing is a process by which the researcher takes note of his or her biases in an effort to be aware of how those biases influence the data analysis process (Creswell, 1998). I bracketed by way of keeping memos throughout the data analysis process to explore feelings and biases about my research and the participants’ experiences. I manually coded the transcriptions using the open coding method, which consisted of a line-by-line analysis of each transcription and focused on patterns that yielded codes (Holton, 2007). Next, I placed each code into categories and sub-categories in search of larger themes or a structural description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I did all transcriptions and coding manually in order to avoid error or overlook some themes that coding software might cause. I then categorized codes in an effort to
create a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Saldana, 2012). Finally, I validated my coding by having the analysis reviewed by an independent researcher (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

**Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness of findings refers to the credibility of one’s results. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four questions for producing trustworthy research: (1) Truth Value: How does the researcher establish confidence in the “truth” of the findings? (2) Applicability: Are the method and findings applicable to other contexts? (3) Consistency: How can reliability be determined? (4) Neutrality: Are the findings a true representation of the participants and a representation of the biases or interests of the researcher? (p. 290). Credibility is determined by the richness of the information gathered and on the critical abilities of the researcher (Patton, 1990). Glesne (1999) describes establishing rapport with the participants as essential to establishing trust. I used the first few minutes of the allotted interview time to build rapport with participants through small talk and ensured comfort of the process.

As it relates to transferability, the research consumer must determine whether the findings are transferable to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher can only enhance the transferability of findings by providing adequate detail and information through the data collection process. The use of “thick description” in the demonstration of findings verifies its transferability. Thick description is a very detailed account of participants, environment, behavior, stories by participants, in addition to, a detailed interpretation of the participants’ behaviors and words (Geertz, 1973). “A thick description … does more than record what a person is doing. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of
interacting individuals are heard” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). Thick description is necessary to adequately address the counter story telling tenet of CRT, in which the voices of marginalized people are sought. In the present study, the perceptions of the participants are heavily supported by detailed descriptions of their experiences and detailed accounts of the meaning that they attach to those experiences. Particularly, the data and discussion provided in the following chapters allow educators deeper insight into the nuances of racism and how they impact various aspects of schooling for African American males.

Dependability examines the consistency in the research process and context. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserts that an “inquiry audit” enhances the dependability of qualitative research (p. 317). The inquiry audit allows the consumers and reviewers the opportunity to review the consistency of the research process and outcomes. I performed every step possible to ensure that the procedure and context for every interview was the same or similar, and I documented this process heavily as well. Confirmability refers to the notion that the research results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. There are a number of strategies for enhancing confirmability. I checked and rechecked the data through the entire research process, in addition to inspecting data collection and analysis procedures to make for potential bias. In order to achieve this, I sought peer debriefing throughout the analysis process. This allowed for an objective party to review the codes and themes that emerged from the interview transcriptions.

**Research Benefits**

A deepened understanding of students who are currently at an alternative school setting, which is described as one of the paths to prison (Booker and Mitchell, 2011; Skiba et al, 2011), will enable school administrators and politicians to dismantle the school to prison pipeline through practice and policy. In depth analysis of themes associated with significant stages in the
K-12 experiences from an untapped perspective, can lead to significant gains for all stakeholders involved in education and public policy fields.

**Ethical Considerations**

Several steps were taken to prevent risks or ethical dilemmas present with being in the qualitative phenomenological study of African-American males’ experiences in K-12 educational settings. The participants were not required to engage in any unethical or dangerous actions. The identity of the participants was concealed by using assigned abbreviations for their names. Additionally, the participants who were interviewed received pseudonyms completely made up by the researcher. The school in which the participants were selected remained confidential and was referred to as the qualifying school or School X. Additionally, in the event of interviewing a court adjudicated participant, the consent form asked that the participants not speak about pending or recent criminal investigations in which they may have been involved. The confidentiality of all participants remained secured for the entirety of the study.

The data collected was secured in a locked file cabinet in my home office with only me having access. Upon completion of the data analysis, the data, all related files, audio tapes, and documents were placed under security in a locked storage file cabinet with only the researcher or chair having access for three years and will then be destroyed. The destruction of the paper files and documents will occur through the process of shredding and then placed into a trash receptacle.

**Limitations**

Limitations to this study include the inability to apply the findings of this study to other populations because the findings represent only the experiences of the present study’s
participants. Thus, future research is needed to confirm or disprove the initial findings represented in this study. Another limitation to this study is that the participants were not involved in validating the final data analysis findings by the researcher. Involving all of participants in the data analysis process could strengthen future qualitative research on this phenomenon. Moreover, the participant sample size of ten students could have been increased or varied to gather a greater understanding of the strength of the findings. All of these limitations are aspects for consideration and caution in future research.

**Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to reiterate the research questioning regarding exploring the educational experiences of African American males who have been expelled from school and to describe the research methodology of this study. Critical Race Theory served as an underpinning to data collection and analysis. A phenomenological study of the participants’ educational experiences permit valuable insight into the lived educational experiences of those students.
CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Although some researchers (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Noguera, 2003, Schott
Foundation, 2014; Skiba et al, 2011; Smith, 2009) have examined the various disparities in the
K-12 educational system as it relates educating African American males, marginal research has
focused on those experiences from the perspective of African American males who have been
expelled from public schools. To gain deeper insight into the schooling experiences of this
demographic, qualitative methods were used to examine the experiences of ten African
American males who have been expelled from public schools within the last one to three years.
These young men were currently enrolled in a disciplinary alternative school in New Orleans,
La.

The purpose of the study was to examine educational experiences of the participants prior
to, and since their placement in an alternative school. Five research questions guided this study:
1. What were the educational experiences of African American males who had been expelled
from public school settings? 2. What did African American males perceive as barriers to their
success in traditional educational settings? 3. How did these students describe their relationships
with their teachers and administrators? 4. How did these students describe their relationships
with their peers? 5. To what degree did African American males perceive the roles of race and
racism in their educational experiences? This chapter provides descriptions of the participants,
provides the data collected from the study and, concludes with a discussion of the findings.

Descriptions and background information on the participants and research site has been
included in this chapter because thick description is key to quality qualitative research and
analysis (Patton, 2002). Ponterotto (2006) notes that thick description aims to give a deeper
concept of the perceptions, thoughts, and emotions of the participants in the study. In this
chapter, descriptions of the site and participants are followed by categories that emerged from the data which include: (a) Race and Racism, (b) Self Perceptions, (c) Family Expectations and Support, (d) Male Role Models and Mentors, (e) The School Environment, (f) School Discipline, and (g) Alternative School.

**Description of the Participants**

Participants who met the following criteria were chosen to be a part of this study: African American, male, expelled from a public school within the last 1-3 years, and currently enrolled in a disciplinary alternative educational setting. The information provided by the participants on the demographic sheet (Appendix B) gives general background information of each young man, including his classification in school, previous schools he attended, extracurricular activities in which he participated, and post-secondary plans. The participants’ ages ranged from 15 to 18 years old. Classification as a high school senior, junior, sophomore, or freshman was set based on the number of Carnegie units a student had earned. This classification system is outlined by the Louisiana Department of Education and the RSD Pupil Progression Plan for students. The pupil progression plan outlines all policies for schools regarding instructional time, grading, graduation requirements and grade level classification. Students who are considered high school freshmen have earned 0-5 Carnegie units of the 24 required to graduate. Students classified as sophomores have earned 6-12 Carnegie units. High school juniors have earned 13-19 Carnegie units and high school seniors have earned at least 19 or more Carnegie units towards graduation (LDOE, 2013). Five of the young men were considered seniors in high school, one was a junior, and four were considered sophomores in high school. Eight of the young men were expelled from a public charter school in New Orleans, while two were expelled from a traditional public school. Eight of the young men also participated in football and/or basketball both at their
previous school setting and the current setting. All of the young men had post-secondary goals beyond completing high school. Two of the young men aspired to join the military immediately following graduation; one young man planned to attend a technical or community college, and seven of the young men had aspirations to attend a four year college or university upon completing high school. To gain deeper understanding of how these young men perceived their educational experiences, each one was interviewed individually. To protect their identity while providing a thick description, pseudonyms are used with descriptive detail of each young man.

Table 1: Description of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Reason For Expulsion</th>
<th>Extra-curricular</th>
<th>Post-secondary plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MALIK</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Possession of marijuana on campus</td>
<td>Football/basketball</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLIFFORD</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Possession of marijuana on campus</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THERON</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Selling marijuana and prescription pills on campus</td>
<td>Football/basketball/literacy club</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROBERT</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Disrespect (repeated infractions)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRANDON</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Smelled like marijuana (nothing found on him)</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARVELL</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Gun on campus</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHAKUR</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Cutting class/fighting/disrespect (repeated infractions)</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MALCOLM</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Prank resulting in injury</td>
<td>Football/basketball</td>
<td>Military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROLAND</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Gun on campus</td>
<td>Football/basketball</td>
<td>Technical school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DYLAN</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Fight resulting in injury</td>
<td>Football/basketball</td>
<td>Military</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MALIK

MALIK was an 18 year old senior in high school. He attended two schools prior to his placement in the alternative setting and was ultimately expelled from a charter school for possession of marijuana. While describing himself, he noted that although he was now maturing, it had taken some time. He shared how he often thought back on his past and things he should have done for a different outcome. He cited just being tired of getting into trouble as part of the catalyst for maturing,

“Either you gonna steadily get kicked out of school until you can’t go no more and you gonna end up in jail or dead for doing stupidity. So it was time for me to chill” (MALIK-p.6).

He was involved in both basketball and football his entire time in high school. He described himself as a positive person who was respectful and outspoken. He considered himself to be a typical student who would sometimes fall off track in class or talk to peers during instructional time but overall was focused on being successful. He took care to brag on his 3.5 grade point average in school. His long term plans included completing high school and attending college.

CLIFFORD

CLIFFORD was an 18 year old senior in high school. He attended two schools prior to his current placement and was ultimately expelled from a charter school for possession of marijuana. He was a member of the football team at his current school. He described himself as someone who focused on getting his work done before he entertained his peers. He credited academic success to being a fast learner. He also considered himself to be a student leader. He believed that he had changed for the better since enrolling at the selection site. He attributed that change to not wanting to let his grandmother down. He stated: “Once I got put outta school…I
just (pause) man my grandma… I made her cry. After I got put out and seen how mad she was with me, I was like man I can’t put her through that” (CLIFFORD, p.1). He described himself as a cool, laid back person who enjoyed sports. He hoped to one day attend college to major in engineering and minor in band.

THERON

THERON was a 16 year old junior in high school. He attended two schools prior to being expelled from a charter school for selling marijuana and pills at school. He then had to enroll at the alternative school. His extra-curricular activities included football, basketball, and the literacy club. He described himself as being very intelligent and as someone who had always done well academically. He said he was an outspoken person who liked to engage his peers and teachers in real conversations. He felt as though he had matured a lot since being expelled, also citing an intrinsic desire for change as a catalyst, “Just realizing constantly making bad decisions wasn’t getting me nowhere. I was tired of getting put out of schools and starting over” (THERON, p.1). He mentioned that he likes to live life to the fullest as a way of honoring God for a second chance. His aspirations included completing high school and going to college.

ROBERT

ROBERT was a 15 year old sophomore. He attended two schools prior to his ultimate expulsion from a charter school and enrollment at the alternative school chosen as the research site. He was expelled when he was in middle school due to too many suspensions for cursing at teachers and talking back. He said he chose to stay at the alternative school to complete high school even though he had the option to leave. He had never participated in any extracurricular activities at school. He described himself as adventurous, determined, and outgoing with familiar people, while sometimes shy when meeting new people. He described himself as a typical
student who talked a lot during instructional time, but he was otherwise focused on learning and being successful. He was the only student who reported taking some courses ahead of schedule in his curriculum. His long term goals included graduating from high school and attending college.

BRANDON

BRANDON was a 16 year old high school sophomore. He attended another alternative school before enrolling in his current alternative school. He had previously been expelled from a traditional public middle school for smelling like marijuana, although they allegedly did not find any on him. He reported that although he was not formally arrested, the campus police officer handcuffed him until his mother came to pick him up. His extracurricular activities included being a member of the basketball team. He described himself as funny, smart and laid back. He described himself as a student who was serious about classwork and homework assignments because being successful was important to him. He stated: “It was either keep going or change. My thing was to change” (BRANDON, p.4). He had aspirations of graduating from high school and attending college.

DARVELL

DARVELL was a 15 year old sophomore in high school. He had attended one school prior to enrolling at the current placement after being expelled from a charter school for bringing a weapon to school. He described himself as respectable, caring, compassionate, and smart. He said that events in his life taught him perseverance and that’s what he tries to live by. He felt as though he was mature, citing life experience as the catalyst for his maturity. He claimed that, “Most people tell me I’m wise for my age ‘cause I had a lot of stuff happen to me in my life that don’t happen to most 15 year olds. So that kind of forced me to grow up” (DARVELL, p.1). He
described himself as someone who always tried to do his best even though he believed he was not the best student in the world. He also wanted to emphasize the fact that he was not a mean person. His future goals included completing high school and going to college.

SHAKUR

SHAKUR was a 16 year old high school sophomore. He attended another alternative school before enrolling in the current alternative school. He had previously been expelled from a traditional public middle school when he was in 6th grade and still felt frustrated with the reasoning for his expulsion. He explained, “That’s why I got expelled…like too many suspensions. I didn’t bring a gun to school or smoke no weed….none of that…I just had too many suspensions” (SHAKUR, p.4). His extracurricular activities included being a member of the basketball team. He described himself as intelligent, respectful, kind, happy and outgoing. He was confident in himself, stating, “I can do anything I put my mind to” (SHAKUR, p.7). He had aspirations of graduating from high school, attending college, being successful and giving back to the Black community.

MALCOLM

MALCOLM was a 16 year old high school senior. He attended school at a charter school prior to being expelled and enrolling at the alternative school. He reported being expelled for playing a prank resulting in an injury to one of his peers which was grounds for expulsion. While in past years he participated in football and basketball, he was not currently not an athlete, nor was he one at school at the time of his expulsion. He described himself as very smart, positive, street smart, someone who likes to play, outgoing, yet laid back. He considered himself a lazy student at times, but overall he was hardworking and focused on graduating. He cited
doing some soul searching as the reason he decided to do some things differently and work at
being successful in school,

Over time, I learned that it’s nothing wrong with trying to be like someone but make sure
that it’s a positive person. Which I never had any positive people around me that I wanted
to be like, so I had to either go down the road and be like this person that’s been to jail
and that’s not going to be anything or try to find out who you are as a person

(MALCOLM, p.8).

His future plans included joining the military immediately following high school graduation.

After the military he would like to attend college.

ROLAND

ROLAND was a 17 year old high school senior. He had attended three schools since
middle school and was ultimately expelled from a charter school for bringing a gun to school. He
described himself as self-motivated, smart, calm, focused on school, and a hardworking student.

He said that in prior years, he was known for having an attitude and arguing with people often,
but he had worked hard at changing. When asked what he attributed to his change he shared,

“Um. Nothing really made me change….I just took it upon myself as I need to change because it
really ain’t leading me nowhere. Like I can’t get along with other people and that’s affecting me
and not them” (ROLAND, p.1). His long term plans included enrolling in a technical college
after completing high school.

DYLAN

DYLAN was an 18 year old senior in high school. He attended four schools prior to his
placement in the alternative setting and was ultimately expelled from a charter school for
fighting and causing an injury to the other student in the fight. He was involved in both
basketball and football as extracurricular activities. He described himself as a black man trying to do his best and as a good person. His long term plans included completing high school and joining the military.

**Description of Site Selection**

School X is considered the official disciplinary alternative education program in Orleans Parish in Louisiana. It is now operated as a charter school and has undergone a name change and several location changes since Hurricane Katrina. Students are placed at School X once he or she has been expelled from either a district direct run school or a charter school in the New Orleans area. The school places emphasis on being positive role models and creating a safe learning environment for its students. The school sets up small learning communities for students based on their academic and socio emotional needs and their vocational goals. Students attending School X are on a 4x4 block schedule. This means that they take 4 classes per semester for a gain of 8 Carnegie Units towards high school graduation requirements per year. Each classroom is comprised of ten students to one teacher with the additional support of a behavior mentor; behavior mentors are staff members who provide students with behavioral or academic support in the classroom (Institutional Statement, 2014).

Students at the high school level collaborate with the counselor to complete a Personal Education Plan (PEP). Extracurricular activities offered at the school include football, basketball, volleyball, cheer, dance, track, baseball, music club, running club, religious clubs, drama club, and volunteering clubs. School X encourages parent and community involvement through providing the opportunity to participate in a parent leadership council that meets monthly with the school leadership. Additional opportunities for parents to be involved include: orientation, counseling sessions (free of charge), and quarterly meetings with teachers and staff.
Data Analysis

This study examined the perceptions of K-12 educational experiences of African American males who have been expelled from public schools. The data were produced through analysis of the participants’ demographic profile sheets, individual interviews, and institutional documents including but not limited to mission statements and student handbooks. The aforementioned methods of data collection were used to understand the experiences of the participants. Although the K-12 educational experiences of African American males include various systemic, social, and institutional factors, this study was meant to understand the perceptions of these young men, and in particular, how they perceive race and racism has played a role in their educational experiences.

Categorization

The categories from the interviews provide comprehensive context for how the participants perceived the educational experience up until this point and the role that each young man believed race and racism played as barriers to their success. Research question one focused on the participants’ perceived barriers to success in school. Research questions two and three concentrated on relationships within the school, such as interactions with teachers, administrators and peers. Research question four focused on how the participants viewed the roles of race and racism in their experiences. The data related to these research questions were divided into seven emergent categories that focused on various aspects of the participants’ K-12 educational experiences: (a) Race and Racism, (b) Self Perceptions, (c) Family Expectations and Support, (d) Male Role Models and Mentors, (e) The School Environment, (f) School Discipline, and (g)
Alternative School. Table 2 illustrates the conceptually clustered matrix including each participant’s response within the context of each of these seven categories. The display is a critical step in the analysis process. Its purpose is to present an “organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action.” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.10). The units of data presented in the matrix provide a description of each participant’s perceptions regarding each category.

Table 2: Conceptually Clustered Matrix Identified Through Analysis of Data: (a) Race and Racism, (b) Self-Perceptions, (c) Family Expectations and Support, (d) Male Role Models and Mentors, (e) School Environment, (f) School Discipline, and (g) Alternative School
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race and Racism</th>
<th>Self-Perceptions</th>
<th>Family Expectations and Support</th>
<th>Male Role Models and Mentors</th>
<th>School Environment</th>
<th>School Discipline</th>
<th>Alternative School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAM1</td>
<td>they ain't looking for a black male to go to school and graduate. It's easy for a black male to stop going to school too and fall to the streets too and that's what really changed me</td>
<td>I'm very positive and respectful.</td>
<td>Sometimes my family be looking at me like I ain't gonna go nowhere, I ain't making it nowhere</td>
<td>like I never had nobody to talk to me. My daddy...he was around but he like come and go.</td>
<td>You get a lot of people...teachers and students...talking down to you growing up in New Orleans...you get that a lot</td>
<td>If they have a relationship with that person but not with you, they write you up and give you your paperwork but really don't do the other person anything. I don't like that either</td>
<td>I feel safer than previous years and I'm doing better. When I first got here I was like man...what I'm coming into? Y'all might as well put me in handcuffs. It was wild.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAM2</td>
<td>For me? Well it feel like...well I have to prove everybody wrong...like it's so many people who said I couldn't do it...go to school, finish school, go to college</td>
<td>I'm a good student. I think I'm a good student because as long as I'm there to learn it, I'ma get it.</td>
<td>Well my grandma want me to finish school and do what I gotta do in life.</td>
<td>2nd is Coach D. he always make sure I'm straight in class and check in with me and make sure I have everything straight</td>
<td>Yeah every school got they issue but they got a lot of ppl here to help you and if you don't wanna do it then why should they help you.</td>
<td>They take time to explain why rules are there and when you look at the reasons and that everybody get treated the same then you be like yeah that's fair. I feel like it make as safe you know</td>
<td>Well since I came here, it been a good experience because now I feel like now I'm set up to be or to have the college requirements I need and stuff like that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAM3</td>
<td>It's a bit more of a challenge than everybody else because it's like sometimes we get looked at different by like our white or Caucasian teachers</td>
<td>I'm very intelligent...extremely intelligent. That's how I see myself.</td>
<td>Like my mama always told me she thought I would be the first one to go to college</td>
<td>Yeah he [my father] died but I was always more angry that he wasn't really around like before he died. He was already half way dead to me anyway.</td>
<td>A lot of em come to school and talk about killing each other and always wanna fight. Like and that impacts the classroom</td>
<td>I don't understand taking all the bad kids out and putting 'em all in one spot. It's just kinda hard to say. You putting all the bombs in one building</td>
<td>...this place was like jail when I first got here...fighting...break jaws all day. Things have changed here but still.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAM4</td>
<td>Teachers perceive black males students as like they don't really try hard, even though I think most of us are trying to get rid of that reputation</td>
<td>adventurous, determined, uh out going, and high achieving</td>
<td>My family like expects for me to be very high and successful in life and I'm trying to meet that goal</td>
<td>Teachers and principals being more interested in me</td>
<td>Some school environments might be hectic and that could impact success like in a bad way and some that are more strict might make it easier for students to learn</td>
<td>Getting suspended a lot for being disrespectful to teachers while I was in middle school. Talking back a lot. Cursing. I just stayed for high school.</td>
<td>This is not a bad school now but it doesn't have like as much opportunities as like other top schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Race and Racism</td>
<td>Self-Perceptions</td>
<td>Family Expectations and Support</td>
<td>Male Role Models and Mentors</td>
<td>School Environment</td>
<td>School Discipline</td>
<td>Alternative School</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAM5</td>
<td>Uh like people be like he's not gonna graduate he's gonna drop out. Like stuff like that.</td>
<td>I'm funny. I'm very nice and laid back. I think I'm smart (laughs) 'cause I don't want to think I'm dumb (laughs harder)</td>
<td>My family has high hopes for me like graduating high school and graduating college.</td>
<td>My other bothers they always there and always keep me going, then my old basketball coach... he was always fun and doing new things</td>
<td>Cause when we was across the river like in the 9th ward like people would bring guns and put em around the school.</td>
<td>They take our phones and we gotta get searched every day. I feel like why we gotta get searched? We ain't in jail!</td>
<td>Like this school laid back now but in the middle of the year, beacap people gonna start coming here and they gonna have all kinds of lights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAM6</td>
<td>I think they perceive them as children who just need very special help you know</td>
<td>Caring, compassionate, and smart</td>
<td>My family wants me to graduate high school and go to college... get a college degree... usual stuff that a family wants.</td>
<td>If you the type of person that likes to mess off and not do his work you can come here for that too. Or wants to learn and try to get something done... you can also come here for that.</td>
<td>I been here two years... like I brought a uh... a weapon inside school. I expected to be expelled or arrested.</td>
<td>It's harsher here because it's like other students... they comin' straight outta jail.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAM7</td>
<td>A lot. The trend nowadays is that black males wanna be gangsters and the street's role play into to school. The black dudes wanna act hard... but really... I wanna be different</td>
<td>I'm a smart, intelligent and kind person. I do stuff for people, like try to help and stuff like that.</td>
<td>Before my grandma died she told me I have to go to college</td>
<td>I never had my daddy. He been in jail since I was born.</td>
<td>The streets play a role in school and everywhere else</td>
<td>That's why I got expelled like too many suspensions. I didn't bring a gun to school or smoke no weed—none of that— I just had too many suspensions.</td>
<td>I aint gonna lie... from last year this school is getting much better... with better teachers who gonna make us better in life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAM8</td>
<td>You're already portrayed as ignorant. You don't want to do the wrong thing. You don't want to lay down and get kicked around all the time either. It's hard. It's hard being a black male in school</td>
<td>Outgoing, very smart, and lazy at times</td>
<td>My mother has always been the type of person I be like you have to be better than me. You have to go to college because I didn't make it and you are my only child</td>
<td>We need more black men that done made it... that's like in college to talk to us. We don't know what people have went through or how we can make it out of high school. If we can get a black man here that made it... here to talk to us... it'll be better.</td>
<td>It depends on where you school is located. No one gets learning done because of the mindset of the kids. A lot of altercations happen because of that.</td>
<td>The other guys who didn't play football got expelled and the two football players did not get expelled. That's not equal to me. That's not fair to me.</td>
<td>It's the same because the students have the same life stories I've always heard. Here it's like they push us more to be more successful to go to college or get a job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Race and Racism</td>
<td>Self-Perceptions</td>
<td>Family Expectations and Support</td>
<td>Male Role Models and Mentors</td>
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<tr>
<td>AAM9</td>
<td>The color of your skin is the color of the skin...can't nobody judge you bout it.</td>
<td>I'm self-motivated. I'm very smart. I got a head on my shoulders.</td>
<td>My family most likely wants me to succeed.</td>
<td>Like my mentor... I would rank him as first. He's the best counselor or mentor I ever had.</td>
<td>I didn't feel safe.</td>
<td>Um a lot of people think boys do more wrong than girls.</td>
<td>They both the same really except this a alternative school. You don't get as much freedom here as a regular school. Not as much leeway.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAM10</td>
<td>At school...tryna fit in more with the crowd...and look cool. Teachers don't be thinking bout what people be going through at home and talkin to people wrong. Socially...being a black male period. Trying to survive...always thinking somebody gonna do you something.</td>
<td>I'm a good person. On paper you can't see that because I used to always get in trouble.</td>
<td>My mama told me that I ain't gon be shit. I know she didn't mean it she probably was just mad and want me to do something with my life.</td>
<td>I wish they had more male teachers to talk to.</td>
<td>If somebody ignorant and getting into it with teachers a teacher probably tell him he won't be nothing or something like that and that probably how he would really feel.</td>
<td>None of them got put out though. I'm the only one that got put out 'cause they had been wanted me out of the school because I was always fighting.</td>
<td>They different cause the children at the other school was smarter...over here it was wild when we first got here....it's tryna get better now though.</td>
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Because the context of the study focused on the insights of African American males who had been expelled from public school, each participant provided their perceptions of how race and racism played a role in their school relationships, support systems, challenges, opportunities and school policies during their schooling experiences. The following sections provide a discussion of each category and summarize the responses given by each participant. Within this section, quotations from the participants’ responses provide the perspective of their experiences.

Category 1 - Race and Racism

Participants in this study examined the roles that race and racism has played during their educational journey based on their experiences both inside and outside of the school building. Howard (2008) asserts that, “one of the glaring absences of much of the research associated with African American males is that it has not included first-hand, detailed accounts from African American males about the roles that they believe power, race, and racism play in their educational experiences” (p. 967). He declares that there is much value in experiential knowledge that may offer important insight to educators to increase African American male achievement in K-12 schools.

Social Challenges of Being an African American Male

Critical Race Theory (1989) asserts that racism is pervasive and permeates through every fabric of society. Therefore, it is important to understand how the participants view issues of race and racism in every aspect of their lived experience before looking deeper into how it permeates within the school system. For the participants, race and racism are impediments that they encountered and interacted with on a daily basis. Many of the participants described the
challenges they are faced with daily. MALIK voiced that constant encounters with racism had become overwhelming when he said, “I don’t know like we face challenges everywhere. It’s just a lot….like I don’t wanna talk about it…like it probably bring tears to my eyes” (MALIK, p.8). For MALIK, it seemed easier to shut down in an attempt to avoid thinking of racism’s full impact as a tool for self-preservation.

During the interviews, all of the participants expressed an idea of being under constant attack and the need for self-preservation. For example, DYLAN expressed that a common social challenge for black men is, “Trying to survive….always thinking somebody gonna do you something” (DYLAN p.5). MALIK also offered similar views when he said, “…people calling you black niggas and all kind of stuff. That’s on my mind every day” (MALIK, p.8). Similarly, THERON shared his thoughts by stating: “I know I’m a target by the police. It’s like I feel like I have to go out of my way to appear nice to police and stuff so they don’t harass me” (THERON, p. 8).

Some of the participants also believed that being an African American male negatively impacts options that are available to them beyond school. For instance, when discussing the many challenges faced by African American males, ROBERT voiced, “I think it’s harder for black men to get jobs because some people just have a mindset about us like black people are this and black people are that like they lazy or they wild stuff like that when that’s not the case” (ROBERT, p.4). MALCOLM also said that, “Applying for jobs is very discouraging. Like black men who been to jail can’t get jobs. That’s very discouraging to people so they go back to the streets. It’s hard for black men to go to college because they can’t pay for it” (MALCOLM, p. 13). For the participants, these experiences with racial prejudice are with them on a day to day basis and have also affected their schooling experiences in terms of their relationships and
interaction with teachers and staff members which will be further explored in the next set of categories.

*Schooling Experiences as African American Males*

Because first-hand experiential knowledge of an experience is critical to gaining deeper insight, how the participants described their feelings on being an African American male in school was important to the overall context of the study. For these participants, being black and being male were constant constructs that impacted every aspect of their schooling experiences including how they engaged in the school environment and how they interacted with others. Eight out of ten of the participants described the complexities of navigating their educational journey. MALIK articulated the idea that the positive reinforcement or pride that comes with achievement is often clouded by the marginal expectations of society for African American males to be successful. He explained this when he said, “Like I have mixed feelings. I feel good because I got good grades and I’m gon’ graduate this year and that feels good because you know they ain’t looking for a black male to go to school and graduate” (MALIK, p. 5). Thus for MALIK, his achievements are now the exception to what society expects of African American males.

During the interview process these young men expressed a perpetual man vs. society conflict with regards to the additional burdens of the perceptions and expectations of others throughout their educational experience. For example, BRANDON said, “To me it’s a good thing because I’m black and if I graduate they gon’ be like oh there’s not too many of them that graduate. Uh like people be like he’s not gonna graduate, he’s gonna drop out….stuff like that” (BRANDON, p. 7). Throughout the interview process, the participants discussed how the perceptions of society translated as a challenge for them in school. Eight out of ten of the
participants associated their challenges with racism that is perpetuated in society and trickles down into the educational system. Some of the participants maintained that functions of institutional racism, such as poor perceptions and low expectations, encourage a spirit of disengagement and discouragement from the educational process. For instance, THERON said, “It’s a bit more of a challenge than everybody else because it’s like sometimes we get looked at different by our white or Caucasian teachers, but we also get looked at by police watching you while you on your way to school thinking you have something on you because you black and you a male. They stereotype us a lil too much but that’s something that’s never going to change…..sad to say” (THERON,p.6). MALCOLM offered more insight into this idea when he said, “It’s more of a caution thing. You’re already portrayed as ignorant. You don’t want to do the wrong thing. You don’t want to lay down and get kicked around all the time either. You can’t say certain things….it’s like I’m gon’ just be quiet and not say this to ‘em. It’s hard being a black male in school….especially if you have white teachers or female teachers that can’t relate” (MALCOLM,p. 11-12). For eight of the participants, these encounters with microaggressions as forms of racism decreased their connection to the school environment and process. The perceptions of the participants coincide with related literature, which asserts that African American males begin to internalize frequent encounters with racial microaggressions and consequently disengage from school (Jenkins, 2006). In this context, racism acts as a form of school pushout because it alienates young African American males.

Teacher Perceptions of African American Males

The perceptions of teachers greatly impact academic outcomes for students in terms of their access to a quality education, interactions, relationships they ultimately foster, and subsequent support systems. For the participants of the present study, teacher perceptions of
them have functioned as a barrier to their academic success at times. Throughout the interview process, some of the participants conveyed the idea that teacher perceptions of African American males in general was a determining factor in academic outcomes. Seven out of ten of the participants believed that the teachers generally had poor perceptions of African American males. MALCOLM expressed this when he said that, “A lot of teachers feel like [black males] won’t be anything” (MALCOLM, p.12). THERON shared similar sentiments by stating that, “They think oh he African American, he probably came from a bad school or a low performing school” (THERON, p.7). Therefore, for THERON, his teachers had already placed a label on him from day one without any additional information and this impacted the quality of their interactions from that point forward.

During the interview, eight of the participants voiced a belief that their own behaviors or actions in some way warranted low expectations and poor perceptions by teachers. For example, MALIK said, “It depends on what type of attitude you go to school with. ‘Cause when I was in elementary school, you know that was my problem. I was hyperactive. Teachers looked at me like I was a clown” (MALIK, p.7). MALCOLM went a step further by asserting that the media also impacts how teachers in the classroom perceive their African American male students. He claimed, “They feel as though [black males] have no future. They feel as though a lot of ‘em won’t make it to college because of everything they hear about us….killing each other…going to jail…they see that on the news every day” (MALCOLM, p. 12). Throughout the interview process, the participants described their teachers’ deficit way of thinking when it came to formulating their perceptions of African American males. Nine of the participants articulated that some teachers see African American males as deficient or as a problem. For instance, DARVELL said, “I think they perceive them as children who need very special help you know,
children who need help at home, help in the world, help at school, just help….period” (DARVELL, p. 5). In the same way, CLIFFORD expressed, “They feel like they gotta help us ‘cause so many people say oh they can’t do this, oh they can’t learn in school” (CLIFFORD, p. 4). For eight of the participants, poor teacher perceptions had a negative impact on their schooling experience and outcomes.

Several of the participants believed that it was important to change the negative perceptions of their teachers in order to foster their own success. For example, ROBERT shared that “Teachers perceive black male students as like they don’t really try hard, even though I think most of us are trying to get rid of that reputation” (ROBERT, p. 3). This supports Noguera’s (2003) research, which maintained that the majority of African American males in his study wanted to succeed academically and desired to attend college; however, they were the group least likely to believe that teachers cared about them and their education. Simply put, a common misperception is that overall, African American males are not interested in or not capable of academic success. The data from this study and the Noguera (2003) study suggests that African American males do in fact desire academic success. However, teacher perceptions of African American males influence the overall culture of a school. Thus, when teachers have low perceptions of these students males, it negatively impacts the day to day relationships and operations of that school. To African American males, schools then become places that are unwelcoming and vexing as opposed to nurturing and supportive places that foster success.

Summary

The data presented affirms that race and racism are complex constructs that are embedded into society and educational systems that have a significant impact on the educational experiences and school environments of the participants. Furthermore, the participants’
encounters with racism inside and outside of school function as a more subtle version of school pushout in that they felt that there is an overwhelming consensus that they will not be successful anyway. Specifically, participants sought to convey that their daily encounters with racism have functioned as significant barriers to their success.

**Category 2- Self-Perceptions**

Self-perception has been previously linked to academic outcomes (Pajares, 2002). A common notion is that positive self-perception is positively correlated with high academic achievement. The participants in the present study all revealed positive self-perceptions despite their teachers’ and society’s perceptions of African American males. For example, MALIK used only positive adjectives to describe himself, “I’m very positive and respectful. I have respect for all teachers. Oh and I want to say something else, I’m a 3.5 student (big smile)” (MALIK, p.1). MALIK was especially proud of his current academic success. It was almost as if he was in awe over himself.

CLIFFORD saw himself as a smart person with leadership qualities. He noted, “I’m a good student. I think I’m a good student because as long as I’m there to learn it, I’m a get it. I make sure I’m a leader when it comes to like the student stuff” (CLIFFORD, p.1). THERON shared similar sentiments, “I’m very intelligent….extremely intelligent. That’s how I see myself. I’m always the one that’s gonna engage you in a real conversation. I’m outspoken. Always been very smart. Always did well academically” (THERON, p.1).

ROBERT also perceived himself to be, “adventurous, determined, uh out going, and high achieving” (ROBERT, p.1). ROBERT based his perception of being high achieving on the fact that he takes advanced courses at School X. DYLAN also described himself in a similar manner but made sure to point out that he feels as though his perception of himself is different from
what others perceive him to be. He validated this idea when he said, “Um, I’m a black man tryna make sure I made the right decisions and make the best out of my life. I’m a good person. On paper you can’t see that because I used to always get in trouble” (DYLAN, p.1). DARVELL similarly shared his perception of himself to be, “Caring, compassionate, and smart. I’m not a mean person” (DARVELL, p.1). Much like DYLAN, it was important that DARVELL note that he wasn’t mean, as opposed to what someone might think of him based solely on the reason for his expulsion.

SHAKUR had a positive self-perception as well. He noted, “I’m a smart, intelligent and kind person. I do stuff for people, like try to help and stuff like that. You can’t judge a book by its cover. I’m a better person than what my grades show” (SHAKUR, p.1). BRANDON showed his light-hearted nature when describing his perception of himself. He shared, “I’m funny. I’m very nice and laid back. I think I’m smart (laughs) ‘cause I don’t want to think I’m dumb (laughs harder) you never should doubt yourself” (BRANDON, p.1). BRANDON showcased a level of confidence that was also seen in all the participants. MALCOLM perceived himself to be “…outgoing, very smart, and lazy at times” (MALCOLM, p.1). ROLAND also had a very positive self-image, which he solidified when he said, “I’m self-motivated. I’m very smart. I got a head on my shoulders” (ROLAND, p.1). The participants’ self-perceptions were an interesting contrast to how they believed society and their teachers viewed them.

Summary

The participants held favorable self-perceptions despite daily encounters with racism and poor perceptions and expectations of some in educational settings, as well as, society as a whole, and this is evident in the above data. This is a contrast to some literature that suggests that at-risk or low achieving African American males do not have positive self-images. Additionally, some
participants thought it worthy to align others’ perceptions of them with their own by urging others to look beyond grades and behavioral records.

**Category 3- Family Expectations and Support**

Chen (2008) reported that the most substantial impact on high school students’ achievement were high parental expectations for student achievement. Furthermore, Spera (2006) noted that student engagement increases for African American students when they perceive their parents to have high expectations for their success. Despite having different family structures, offering varying levels of expectations and support, none of the participants were deterred from reaching their academic goals. For example, MALIK shared that he used the low expectations of his family as a motivating factor to succeed. He voiced, “That’s all I really want to do because my family not looking at me like, ‘he gon graduate’ because of my past. Sometimes my family be looking at me like I ain’t gonna go nowhere…I ain’t making it nowhere” (MALIK, p. 4).

It is also important to consider how family expectations are communicated. For instance, DYLAN reflected on a conversation he had with his mother where she told him that he would not amount to anything, which he interpreted as a reflection of her desires for him to succeed. He recalled, “My mama told me that. I know she didn’t mean it. She was probably just mad and want me to do something with my life” (DYLAN, p. 5). He also felt as though his mother and father could have supported him more as he was growing up and attending school.

Other participants shared similar feelings in terms of family expectations. CLIFFORD shared, “Well my grandma want me to finish school and do what I gotta do in life. Sometimes she be like well college ain’t for everyone and she not gone get mad at me if I don’t want to go” (CLIFFORD, p. 2). Although CLIFFORD had intentions on going to college, he took solace in
the fact that his grandmother was proud of him and loved him regardless of his future decisions. He also displayed some frustration in not having enough academic support at home. He explained, “Like both of my parents like they never got to finish high school and stuff like when I go home and stuff, I gotta go to my brother and sister for help because my parents didn’t even finish so it’s like I can’t even ask them for no help” (CLIFFORD, p. 5). THERON shared a similar sentiment,

“Like my mama always told me she thought I would be the first one to go to college and I strayed off a lil while but I still never failed a class. But I slacked a lot and she knew if I could have applied myself the whole time I was in high school I coulda got a full scholarship somewhere you know. She been disappointed in me slacking off so now I’m just trying to like get back, graduate, and go to college” (THERON, p. 3).

Despite being aware of his mother’s high expectations for him to be academically successful, he felt as though she was not there to support him enough. He noted that she made sure he had material items that he needed but he mostly lived with his uncle who he also felt did not provide much academic and emotional support and guidance.

ROBERT had a different experience in that he felt as though his family had consistently held and communicated high expectations for him to succeed academically. BRANDON also expressed the same when he said, “My family has high hopes for me like graduating high school and graduating college” (BRANDON, p. 2). SHAKUR supported this by adding, “Before my grandma died she told me I have to go to college” (SHAKUR, p. 2). Likewise, DARVELL added, “My family wants me to graduate high school and go to college….get a college degree….usual stuff that a family wants” (DARVELL, p. 2). All of the aforementioned young men believed that not only did their families effectively communicate high academic
expectations, but they were also very supportive of them every step of the way. MALCOLM felt as though although his family had always communicated high expectations for him to graduate from high school and attend college, they were never truly a factor. He knew that they did not complete high school and did not take their expectations seriously. ROLAND could only offer an assumption on whether or not his family had high expectations, which indicated those expectations for him have not been clearly communicated.

**Summary**

The participants in this study defined parental support as parents having high expectations and providing material, emotional, and academic support. The results in this section point to the notion that parental expectations and support may play a critical role in students’ educational journey at some point along that journey; however, each young man had arrived at a point where he was determined to finished high school and pursue his own college or career goals despite support from his parents/family. This warrants a closer look into how parental expectations and support impact each phase of education for African American males.

**Category 4- Male Role Models and Mentors**

Throughout the interviews the participants overwhelmingly expressed a need for male mentors due to absentee fathers or male guidance in their lives. MALIK expressed that he and his peers would have benefited from a mentoring relationship that provided them with guidance and support. MALIK said:

“Like I never had nobody to talk to me. My daddy…he was around but he like come and go. It’s a couple of guys left here that’s well they straight but they don’t have a father at
home to talk to ‘em. I feel as though the principal or somebody could sit down and talk to ‘em and say man yall could have plans and really do better” (MALIK, p. 6).

MALIK also shared that he took it upon himself to pursue mentors within his school to gather the guidance he was seeking; he reflected on this when he said,

“I just started making relationships with older males around the school so they could really teach me something….and tell me something I can really take heed to you know instead of listening to my friends that don’t listen to nobody and do what they wanna do” (MALIK, p.8).

THERON voiced his feelings about how not having his father impacted him at school. He recalled:

“I was going to [school] my 5th grade year when my daddy got killed and we moved back with my mom and went to [a] charter school. Like my anger management teacher used to say I fought a lot because my father died, but I always thought she was wrong. Yeah he died but I was always more angry that he wasn’t really around like before he died. He was already half dead to me anyway” (THERON, p.7).

DARVELL had similar thoughts in that he appreciated the support of his mother, but she could not replace what he thought he was missing in having a father. He mentioned:

“Like my mom always helped me with school work stuff but my father was never there to teach me the basic stuff like stick from the girls and be in the books. Really and truly I don’t know all the good stuff like having a father and sitting down and talking to him. That’s why I like that this school be having them mentors. They sit down a lot with us and just talk to us” (DARVELL, p. 6).
When asked what he thinks could have had a bigger impact on his educational experience, DYLAN offered, “I wish they had more male teachers to talk to” (DYLAN, p.6). When asked the same question, SHAKUR answered, “I never had my daddy. He been in jail since I was born” (SHAKUR, p. 7). ROLAND reflected on the relationship that he has had with a court-appointed mentor for years expressing that it has benefitted him by keeping him focused on achieving his goals. MALCOLM summed it all up by expressing pointedly that:

“We need more black men that done made it…that’s like in college to talk to us. We don’t know what people have went through or how we can make it out of high school. If we can get a black man here that made it….here to talk to us….it’ll be better” (MALCOLM, p.12).

Summary

Whiting (2006) asserts that mentors have play vital role in impacting academic success in African American male students. The participants in this study felt as though having a father figure or an African American male mentor figure would significantly impact their chances on overcoming barriers that have impeded their success in the past. The participants’ assumptions about filling the gap of having a male figure for guidance is aligned to research (Whiting & Mallory, 2007) that reported an increase in academic engagement and achievement as the result of mentorship relationships between African American males.

Category 5- The School Environment

For the participants in the study, the school environment was a vital factor influencing student outcomes. Researchers (Stewart, 2008; Toldson, 2008) have found that school environments and climates are critical factors that affect success for African American students.
Martin, Fergus, and Noguera (2010) noted that “academic performance is positively supported by students getting along with their peers and adults in the school, regardless of their backgrounds, feeling that they belong at the school, and feeling safe at these schools” (p. 4). Meager school environments can negatively impact student engagement and academic success, while positive school environments foster success.

*School Safety*

A safe school environment is a precondition for quality learning experiences and success. Seven of the participants felt as though having a safe and orderly campus was an underlying key to fostering success. THERON was adamant in his assertion that, “Schools need structure and gotta have discipline” (THERON, p.7). ROBERT felt that student perceptions of the school could influence their outcomes. ROBERT elaborated on this idea stating:

“Some school environments might be hectic and that could impact success like in a bad way and some that are more strict might make it easier for students to learn and stuff. It really just depends on how the student perceives the school. Like if they think it’s a bad place they might go the wrong way but if they perceive it as a good place, they might do right” (ROBERT, p. 3).

MALCOLM felt as though external environmental factors affected the school environment as well. MALCOLM noted, “The streets play a role in school and everything else. The environment is a big part. It really depends on where your school is located” (AAM,-p. 12). For MALCOLM, those external factors acted as a barrier to success because they impeded learning from taking place at school. MALCOLM added, “No one gets learning done because it’s all about location and the mindset of the kids. A lot of altercations happen because of that” (MALCOLM, p. 12).
This statement places the responsibility of school safety and its impact on student achievement on the students.

MALIK offered a similar sentiment when he said, “…but a lot of times students don’t respect each other and always fighting and stuff” (MALIK, p.6). THERON added, “A lot of ‘em come to school and talk about killing each other and always wanna fight. Like that impacts the classroom….if you learning…if you even wanna come to school” (THERON,p. 7). From THERON’s perspective, the threat and fruition of school violence inhibited access to quality education and decreased student engagement in school. Although all of the participants shared THERON’s viewpoint, eight of them maintained the notion that it was up to the student as an individual to disassociate with potential negative environmental factors in order to be successful.

Peer Influence

Peer relationships are an important facet of the school environment. The participants noted that peer influence was a significant factor that led them down the path to alternative school. For example, MALCOLM voiced,

“I don’t want to be like the outcast or anything so I’m gonna do it. It’s a lot of times I’ve been through peer pressure. I am here for that reason. I’m here because I encountered the peer pressure of doing something that I wasn’t supposed to do” (MALCOLM,pp.3-4).

Previous research (Fleming, Hagerty, Catalano, Harachi, Mazza, & Gruman, 2005 ; Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007) has indicated that while positive peer interaction does lend itself to high student achievement, students who demonstrate negative behaviors and attitudes can considerably impact their peers as well. BRANDON attributed some of the underlying reasons for some of his choices to the company he kept in school. He expressed,
“If I woulda never stayed hanging with the crowd I was hanging with, I wouldna got sent to an alternative school. They were cool. I wanted to be cool and hang with the cool kids but that’s the ones who were getting in trouble. I shoulda been with the ones doing their work” (BRANDON, p. 9).

MALIK also offered, “That’s what always got me in trouble, talking a lot in class, playing around with the – I don’t want to say clowns—but the comedians in class” (MALIK, p. 2). He also acknowledged peer influence as a barrier to academic achievement citing, “I failed all my classes that first year here tryna be down with the ones that was doing bad…tryna be cool with them….tryna be down with the cool crowd” (MALIK, p. 6). This is supported by the literature (Fleming et al, 2005; Gottfredson, 2001) that reported that acquaintance with low performing peers is associated with poor academic performance.

DYLAN and MALCOLM both categorized peer influence as a challenge. DYLAN described, “Tryna fit in more with the crowd and look cool” as a challenge (DYLAN, p. 5). THERON shared the same idea that peer relationships can act as a barrier to success and become a challenge for African American males. THERON said, “Like playing hard for your peers or classmates, getting caught up in that can like stop your success” (THERON, p. 1). Their ideas are both aligned with Noguera (2003) who asserts African American males are more likely to espouse behaviors from their peers that are counterproductive to obtaining successful outcomes. The literature (Korir & Kipkemboi, 2014) linked positive peer norms to high school engagement and academic achievement; however, none of the participants in this study attributed their current path of success to positive peer influence. They all felt that because they did not interact much with peers in the alternative school setting, they are now experiencing academic success.
MALIK validated this idea by saying, “I’m doing better here ‘cause I stay to myself” (MALIK, p. 8).

Teacher Expectations

Teacher expectations are a major component of the school climate. According to researchers (Evans, 2005; Varlas, 2005), teacher dispositions and expectations have a significant impact on student outcomes. Throughout the interviews, participants all viewed communication and messaging as a representation of whether or not their teachers had high expectations for them. BRANDON viewed verbal messaging as a device that had the power to either further engage him in the learning environment or one that could push him away. He elaborated by saying:

“To me it’s compliments. They keep me going so I know I have something to keep me going like a person telling me something good gonna keep me going. It’s like if somebody always tell you something negative, you gonna do negative” (BRANDON, p. 1).

Six of the participants articulated that the negative messages that they received from teachers had a negative impact on how they felt about themselves. For example, DYLAN shared, “I been told ‘you ain’t gon be shit.’ I felt bad but a lot of people done told me that” (DYLAN, p. 5). MALIK offered, “But sometimes I’ve had teachers tell me I ain’t gonna make it nowhere like every day. I was only in 4th grade though” (MALIK, p. 7). BRANDON shared a similar experience,

“And they got certain ones who doubt you and they be like oh you not gon make it past 17 or 18. Like somebody told me that here last year. I felt bad like…how can you say that….like you don’t know what I’m doing” (BRANDON, p. 8).
While reflecting on his schooling experiences prior to his current setting, MALIK felt slighted in not having had someone to provide verbal encouragement and guidance. He said, “I never had no teacher that really pulled me to the side and tell me ‘you doing the wrong thing’ or ‘you can go the right way.’ They just let me get in trouble. I don’t like that” (MALIK, p. 2). He shared that at School X, his teachers seemed to take a personal interest in him and took time to give him encouragement, which he attributed to his current success.

During the interviews, the participants voiced that teacher’s nonverbal actions are the most significant indicators of whether or not their teacher had high expectations for them. The ways in which their teachers carried out instruction in the classroom helped them to gauge how their teachers felt about them and what their expectations were for them. For example, CLIFFORD described it as, “Like when you have different activities to do. Like stuff that engage us in the work instead of just giving us work and sitting down and having us to read it” (CLIFFORD, p. 1). Additionally, THERON claimed that,

“Because like they sit there and take the time to really like make those lesson plans and make sure you right for your EOC, which is a state test. Instead of throwing work at you that’s irrelevant that you gonna forget in the next hour, they take their time with you and make sure you’re learning” (THERON, pp. 3-4).

For THERON, the extra effort and time that his teachers put into preparing for him as a learner meant they felt he was capable of learning and achieving. BRANDON had similar thoughts when he cited,

“You know the ones that want you to do something with your life because they teach from when you walk in to when you walk out like from bell to bell. A teacher that keeps
pushing you feels positive. One that sits down and won’t teach you nothing doesn’t think highly of you” (BRANDON, p. 3).

Chenoweth (2006) reported that high student achievement was supported by teachers unwavering belief that their students were capable of learning. ROBERT and DARVELL felt as though teachers who had high expectation for their students took time to provide them feedback and make sure they learned the material being presented. For instance, ROBERT said, “They show me their expectations by helping me like if I don’t get something they come and make sure I get it” (ROBERT, p. 2). Similarly, DARVELL noted, “Like walk around, see if I did something wrong and school me on it” (DARVELL, p. 3). ROLAND explained, “If you ask them for help and they don’t help you or ignore you, they don’t care about your education” (ROLAND, p. 2).

Aside from instruction, the interpersonal relationships the participants had with their teachers were important as well. They felt that these stronger interpersonal relationships in the current setting also attributed to their current success as opposed to their experiences in their prior settings. The participants indicated that feeling cared about, welcomed, and comfortable with their teachers indicated that that person had high expectations for them. SHAKUR described it as, “They are loving…Like Ms. W. She’s one of my favorite English teachers ever because she goes out of her way to help you with anything” (SHAKUR, p. 2). DYLAN also celebrated the fact of having close relationships with his teachers in the current setting, which he felt benefited him as well. DYLAN expressed, “I always talk to my teachers like they my mama or something….like Ms. L” (DYLAN, p. 3). MALCOLM also elaborated on this idea by explaining his views on how he can assess whether or not his teachers have high expectations. He voiced,
“The way they treat me. If they are caring, asking if I need help. It’s about the actions they come at me with. I don’t say nothing to you first until I see what you do. Once I see whatever you do I can tell if you are a good person and I can really open up to you and say this is what I’m struggling on” (MALCOLM, p. 6).

This supports the work of Toldson (2008) who reported nurturing and caring teachers as a critical component to success for African American males. In his analysis of three national surveys, Toldson (2008) found that high achieving African American males in school described positive relationships with their teachers which manifested themselves having high expectations, encouraging students, and building on students’ strengths. For the participants, developing positive relationships with their teachers were very important factors in their academic outcomes.

**Summary**

Undoubtedly, the attitudes and behaviors of teachers of minority, male students are key facets of institutionalized racism in the schooling environment. Moreover, the participants’ encounters with low teacher expectations were found to be barriers to their success prior to enrolling at their current school. Consequently, all participants articulated a marked difference in the relationships they had with their teachers they have now versus teachers in the past. Participants attributed high teacher expectations in the current setting as a factor in their current success in terms of getting good grades and being on track to graduate high school.

**Category 6- School Discipline**

Participants in this study examined the discipline policies and procedures and the circumstances behind their own expulsions throughout their K-12 educational experiences. The related literature (Skiba et al, 2011) asserts that African American males are significantly impacted by disparate discipline policies in K-12 schools. For example, black students are twice
as likely to be suspended twice as much as their White peers for subjective transgressions such as disruptive behavior and disrespect (Losen & Skiba, 2010). The participants described their perceptions of these experiences.

Perceptions of Discipline Policies and Procedures

African American male students have remained overrepresented in suspension and expulsion rates for decades (Garibaldi, 1992; Welch & Payne, 2010). According to Howard (2008):

“Methodologically, CRT-based research can not only examine the racial disparities in school discipline, but this research can also provide qualitative studies that allow students to talk about the ramifications that policies and practices have on their perceptions of school and how they believe their lives are influenced by them” (p. 980).

For the participants, discipline policies and procedures were subjective in nature and as such, function as an elusive barrier to success for the young men. Eight out of the ten the participants viewed various policies and procedures for discipline as biased and therefore unfair practices in which they had no stake.

One of the ways that the participants perceived discipline practices as inconsistent was because they felt as though teachers and administrators had the power to manipulate policies or be subjective at will. BRANDON elaborated on this idea by stating, “In a way they rules is fair but in a way they not because you can change the rules at any time because you got the authority to do what you want” (BRANDON,p.6). MALIK gave the following example, “If they have a relationship with that person but not with you, they write you up and give you your paperwork but really don’t do the other person anything. I don’t like that either” (MALIK,p. 4). THERON
agreed, “…and I feel like how you get treated for breaking a rule really just depends on if they like you or not” (THERON, p. 5). SHAKUR also felt that students were dealt handled more harshly if they had committed an infraction in the past.

MALCOLM believed that schools gave athletes more leniency when giving consequences for disciplinary infractions, which he considered to be unfair. For him, this was reminiscent of how African American male athletes and entertainers are revered in American society, yet all other African American males are deemed worthless. For CLIFFORD it was important for his school to allow him to decode and analyze policies and procedures that were in place. CLIFFORD said of his current school, “They take time to explain why rules are there and when you look at the reasons and that everybody get treated the same then you be like yeah that’s fair. I feel like it make us safer you know” (CLIFFORD, p. 3). Both CLIFFORD and MALCOLM appreciated that they were provided more insight on some of the policies to some extent which afforded them the opportunity to make an informed judgement on policy. Six of the participants viewed many disciplinary policies as unnecessary forms of power and control. For example, THERON offered his perception in that,

“Rules are there to create structure but half of ‘em are just there because they wanna control you. They got millions of schools without uniforms that got great academics. And why can’t I talk in class?! I can see if it’s like don’t talk while someone else is talking but no talking at all?!?” (THERON, p. 5).

He also shared a story about being in middle school and earning his way on to the Honor roll at school. He explained that he had also been suspended for a fight, and in addition to the suspension, he was denied his earned accolade of being acknowledged for his hard work and
intelligence by the school which was irrelevant to his decision to fight. He saw this as show of power by the school leaders.

Sipe (2004) asserts that preoccupation on having control over students is very similar to the need to exhibit control over inmates in prisons and that student development is significantly impacted by their environments. THERON voiced that the exclusionary practice of expulsion and placement at an alternative school was a systemic barrier to success. In his opinion, “I don’t understand taking all the bad kids out and putting ‘em all in one spot. It’s just kinda hard to say. You putting all the bombs in one building…eventually they gonna go off. Gotta find a better way” (THERON, p. 9). He felt as though this practice was a set up for failure for all students involved. Although all of the participants appreciated the support and success they had experienced at the alternative school, there was still some concern about the disciplinary practices at School X and their former schools, which were likened to that of practices in criminal justice facilities. For example, BRANDON described his perceptions as such,

“They take our phones and we gotta get searched every day. I feel like why we gotta get searched? We ain’t in jail! So just because we made one mistake we gotta go through this for the rest of our life just because we go to an alternative school. At the last school we had to walk through a metal detector. It’s a lil better because you don’t have to get searched, you just walkin’ through. The pattin’ stuff….you don’t know how people feel that day and you touchin’ on ‘em. One school it was like you have to walk in a straight line or get suspended. We in high school and we gotta walk in a straight line?!”

(BRANDON, p. 5).

For him, not only did these practices mimic life in a prison, but they were also displays of power and control over him for which he had no voice. This supports research (Toldson, 2012;
Clemson, 2015) that states how black students are disproportionately impacted by jail-like structures in schooling environments.

DARVELL did offer a counter point suggesting that students getting more input in policies at their school may be on the horizon. He noted one change that had already taken place based on the uniform policy, which allowed the students more choice in what they wore to school. This is important because uniform infractions are also a part of many schools’ discipline policy handbooks. He shared, “So they been more lenient with us in a way and they do stuff with us but it’s not that often” (DARVELL, p. 4).

Expulsion

According to Howard (2008), the effect from excessive suspension and expulsion seems to be that students’ academic outcomes suffer and they become progressively more likely to drop out of school and consequently more likely to become part of the criminal justice system. As reported by the Louisiana Department of Education (2014), African American males represented 68% of the expulsions, although they made up only 44% of the public school enrollment. Of the 10 participants, the expulsion breakdown was as follows: three were for possession of marijuana, one was for marijuana use, one was for repeated suspensions for disrespecting authority, two were for weapons on campus, one was for repeated suspension for campus disruption and skipping class, one was for a fight with injury, and one was for a prank. Nine of the participants expected to be expelled or arrested because of their infractions.

Throughout the interview process the young men shared their feelings about the ultimate outcomes of their expulsions. MALIK expressed the following:
“Well I didn’t know if I was gonna have to go to jail or get expelled but I knew it was gonna have to be either one. So it came up to be an expulsion. So I was like that’s fine because I didn’t want to go to jail” (MALIK, p. 4).

For MALIK, although he did not feel as though he was given proper due process, he saw the expulsion and subsequent enrollment at an alternative school as a positive thing that still afforded him the opportunity to attend school and learn, which was still a passion and a priority to him.

DARVELL offered that he too did not undergo proper due process by the school when he brought a weapon to school. He expressed,

“Really and truly, I didn’t get to give my opinion. I think it was fair but in some ways it wasn’t fair because they had other people doing way worse stuff and they only got two semesters and they got to go back to regular school and I got two years” (DARVELL, p. 4).

THERON was also just happy to not be arrested, adding,

“Just by the luck of God the Dean taught my whole family so he wouldn’t allow them to call the police on me. So I just got expelled. I respected that so I wasn’t mad about having to come here because I really should have been in jail” (THERON, p. 6).

CLIFFORD was at peace with the school’s decision to expel him because he understood that narcotics were not permitted on campus. Similarly, ROLAND was also at peace with only being expelled for bringing a gun and glad that he was not arrested. DYLAN had not initially expected to be arrested after his fight, but he did expect to be expelled because he had already been in several other fights. He acknowledged that the arrest was due to an injury endured by the other participant but felt like the others who had helped him jump a boy should have had the
same consequences. DYLAN expressed, “None of them got put out though. I’m the only one that got put out ‘cause they had been wanted me out of the school because I was always fighting.” (DYLAN-p. 4). For DYLAN, he had already been feeling isolated and ostracized by the school, which he considered to be a barrier to success as he increasingly became disengaged and knew he wouldn’t be there much longer. BRANDON had also expressed frustrations with not feeling welcomed at school prior to his expulsion citing,

“But like my old school, it was bad from the moment I walked through the door. I could feel the vibes from the people. They’d be like ‘oh he comes from a bad school, we gon send him back to a bad school’” (BRANDON, p. 4).

BRANDON cited the ostracizing treatment as the reason he was unfairly accused, mistreated during the process and ultimately expelled from his school. He said,

“But like my old school, it was bad from the moment I walked through the door. I could feel the vibes from the people. They’d be like ‘oh he comes from a bad school, we gon send him back to a bad school’” (BRANDON, p. 4).

“My school was bad from the moment I walked through the door. They would smell me and say ‘we got a bad influence in here’ and they would start earing me up. Like schools on this side [Westbank of New Orleans], police stay on the campus so when they did all that, they put me in handcuffs and was like, ‘you got two choices call your mama or you going to jail’. First of all you didn’t find nothing on me to put handcuffs on me” (BRANDON-pp. 5-6).

He felt as though the school officials were overzealous during their process because they never wanted him there to begin with. SHAKUR mentioned that he too is to this very day still confused as to why he was expelled. He mentioned, “That’s why I got expelled like too many suspensions. I didn’t bring a gun to school or smoke no weed—none of that—I just had too many suspensions.” (SHAKUR-p. 4). He also felt unwelcomed at the school from which he was expelled and cited that as the true underlying reason that he was removed. He noted,
“I don’t know. It’s like from the moment I stepped in there they did not like me. It was the dean. He seen me and [Twin], he called us cheeto heads because we had lil twists. He used to give us in school suspensions and out of school suspensions for like walking around the school…like even if I had permission from teachers” (SHAKUR, pp.3-4).

MALCOLM felt that because he was not an athlete who could offer something to the school, he was of no value to the school and was consequently treated unfairly. He had this to say about his experience,

“I didn’t want to play sports so it was like the first time he mess up we gon get him because he showing us he not worthy of going anywhere. It’s not right. We jumped off the back of the bus. We never looked back to see what was going on. Once they told me that a girl broke her arm, I knew then I’m expelled. The other guys who didn’t play football got expelled and the two football players did not get expelled. That’s not equal to me. That’s not fair to me” (MALCOLM, pp. 9-10).

The participants also shared their perceptions on whether or not being a black and/or male had any impact on their schools’ decisions to expel them. Eight out of the ten participants believed that their penances would have been lighter if they were female students. MALIK said, “She probably wouldn’t have got expelled” (MALIK,p.5). DYLAN added, “I think they would have given a girl another chance” (DYLAN,p. 4). AMM2, THERON, BRANDON, and MALCOLM all agreed. SHAKUR felt that schools would be more lenient on girls because “Men have more sympathy for females. I don’t why” (SHAKUR,p.5). ROLAND attributed his beliefs to, “Um a lot of people think boys do more wrong than girls” (ROLAND,p. 3). Seven of the ten participants felt white males would have been treated with more leniency as well, although they could not offer any possible theories as to why; it was just a fact for them. MALCOLM was
adamant stating, “I don’t care what’s going on or how we’re doing things. Women are treated different. White men are treated different than black men” (MALCOLM, p. 11).

Summary

These data suggest that labeling, stigmatizing, and shunning of students often take place prior to incidents that result in expulsion. Most of the participants view race and gender as constructs that have a significant impact on their educational experiences and disciplinary practices. Furthermore, in many instances, students did not feel welcomed at their respective schools, viewing these sentiments as well as certain discipline policies and practices as barriers to success functioning as more blatant attempts of school pushout.

Category 7- Alternative School

Disciplinary Alternative School Settings are schools in which students are placed once they have been expelled from public school settings. Wald and Losen (2003) reported that “alternative placements for excluded students are often disproportionately filled with minority students and inadequately serve the needs of students sent there” (p. 9). Brown (2007) noted that concerns associated with excluded students include loss of academic instructional time during the expulsion process, quality of alternative education program, disengagement from the schooling process leading to drop out, or permanent push out from school altogether. For the participants in the study, the school environment, structure, and support systems in place at School X were critical factors impacting their academic outcomes.

Perceptions of Alternative School

There was a consensus among the participants that School X has made many positive changes mostly due to its new leadership and caring staff members. MALIK shared his
memories of how it was when he first arrived versus how he saw the school at the time of the interview. MALIK said,

“So I got expelled and had to come here but it worked out. I like it here better. When I first got here I was like, ‘man what I’m coming into?! Yall might as well put me in handcuffs. It was wild. But it’s changing now. Everybody was jumping off walls, out of windows like a house full of animals. I feel safer than in previous years and I’m doing better. I can’t even say I was learning before now. I’m happy to really be learning now” (MALIK, pp. 6-9).

MALIK felt as though School X had removed some of the barriers to success by providing a safe environment that was conducive to learning. DYLAN shared those views, “Over here it was wild when we first got here. It’s tryna get better though” (DYLAN, p. 6). CLIFFORD indicated that his experience was better because he was getting access to courses he needed to pursue his goals beyond high school. He stated, “Well since I came here, it been a good experience because I feel like now I’m set up to be or to have the college requirements I need and stuff like that” (CLIFFORD, p. 5). MALCOLM also felt as though the staff pushed him more to get what he needed in order to go to college or join a career. THERON said that his initial experience at School X was rough but noted that some of the positive changes they have made have benefited him. He expressed, “This place was like jail when I first got here….fighting…breaking jaws all day. Thing have changed but still” (THERON, p. 9). THERON felt as though having supportive teachers were the biggest benefit to him citing, “Instead of teachers who gonna just suspend me and send me home like here I have teachers who care about me being successful like” (THERON, p. 8). SHAKUR also offered, “I aint’ gonna lie, from last year this school is getting much better with better teachers who gonna make us better in life” (SHAKUR, p. 7).
Although ROBERT acknowledged feeling comfortable at School X, he wished that they would make a few additional changes so that all students could reach their full potential. He emphasized that, “This is not a bad school now but it doesn’t have like as much opportunities as like other top schools.” (ROBERT-p. 4). BRANDON recommended that there are still some things about the school culture that needed to be addressed. He observantly pointed out the calm and orderly nature of the school in the beginning of the school year but warned that as the school year went on and more students were expelled and placed there, the environment became less safe due to an influx of fighting. He also voiced frustrations with peers who disrupted the classroom but suffered no consequences. He said, “Like I’m learning but I’m not learning enough because we got like people who wanna be class clowns. Ain’t nothing gonna happen to ‘em so it’s like you’re not learning” (BRANDON, p.7). Similarly, while he was happy to have caring teachers, DARVELL admitted that he considered the environment to be tougher than a regular school environment, “It’s harsher here because it’s like other students they comin’ straight outta jail” (DARVELL,p. 5).

Minus a few recommendations for continued improvements, the participants were generally happy with their experience in the alternative school and happy with the changes that the principal and teachers had made to remove as many barriers as possible as they worked towards their college and career goals. In other words, the participants feel as though there were different systems being put in place at School X that supported their needs more closely. They attributed these changes to changes in leadership and staff. The participants felt as though they were now supported by people with a genuine interest in them and an expectation that they can and will succeed, which had been one of the biggest barriers to achievement for these young men. They now feel as though they had access to quality instruction, although there was room for
improvement; they felt some level of accomplishment with what they had been learning in pursuit of their post-secondary goals.

School Based Support Systems

Green, White, and Green (2012) emphasize that teachers, school leaders, and the community at large each have an obligation to uplift academic and societal expectations of African American males. The authors believe that such a task requires “a comprehensive approach on behalf of the wider school community guided by culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches, fair application of school disciplinary policies, and rigorous academic expectations.” (p. 13). As noted earlier, throughout the interviews, the participants described how teachers showed them their expectations, an act that was considered to be a key factor in either creating barriers to success or dismantling those barriers. The participants identified their biggest support systems at School X and highlighted the importance of those relationships to them. The participants considered their biggest support system to be their teachers, coaches, and school leader.

MALIK expounded on why these individuals were making such an impact,

“I didn’t have that before I got here. Well I’ll say my coaches and my current principal Mr. ___ are my biggest supporters right now because they are also pushing me and checking on me and making sure I have what I need. I never had that as a child” (MALIK,p. 2).

DYLAN defined support from his teachers as comprehensive beyond school, “My teachers support me too. They willing to talk to me. When they see me on the streets they still help.”
Most of the participants defined a supportive teacher as someone who went above and beyond the call of duty. For example, CLIFFORD said,

“To me, number one is Ms. L. She like my second mom. Anything I need, I go to her. She’s always been there for me. Second is Coach D. He always make sure I’m straight in class and check in with me and make sure I have everything straight” (CLIFFORD, p. 2).

THERON added:

“Well really now since I been at this school, my teacher Ms. L she really been on my case. She basically a math teacher: ACT Prep, Algebra, Geometry….but she really help you with all your classes. You can’t beat that. She like one of the only teachers I can talk to, not only about my school problems but like what affects me at home. Next Coach D, like he come check on me like every 5 minutes and make sure I don’t need anything and I got what I need and make sure im doing alright in class” (THERON, p. 2).

BRANDON and SHAKUR listed their basketball coach and their teachers as constant sources of support as well. DARVELL defined supportive teachers as,

“So like people who see that I want to be somewhere in my life….like just try to do something. People who always tell me get to class, do your work, be on your Ps and Qs in school and just do your work and graduate” (DARVELL, p. 2).

MALCOLM noted that he had a closer relationship with the coaches at School X because he appreciated the fact that they really pushed him towards his academic goals as well and did not just view him as a nameless talent to represent the school. All of the participants really appreciated their new principal because they perceived him as someone who wanted to form
genuine relationships with them by spending time talking to them, working out, playing sports, and listening and trying to give them a voice in the direction of the school.

**Summary**

Certainly the relationships between school leaders and teaching staff of minority male students are key factors that impact the educational experiences. Moreover, the participants’ encounters with their teachers, coaches, and school leader were found to be an important support system to them as they pursued their academic goals. Subsequently, participants recognized higher expectations backed up with actions as a factor in their current successful paths towards graduating high school.

**Conclusion**

This study examined the insights of ten African American males who have been expelled from public schools concerning their K-12 educational experiences. The following categories materialized from analyzing the data: (a) Race and Racism, (b) Self Perceptions, (c) Family Expectations and Support, (d) Male Role Models and Mentors, (e) The School Environment, (f) School Discipline, and (g) Alternative School. It is imperative to note the subtleties among the participants regarding their perceptions of the role race plays in their school environment, and the expectations and levels of support from their teachers and families.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This phenomenological study explored the perceptions of African American male students who had been expelled from New Orleans, La public schools. This chapter discusses the findings reported in chapter IV. Additionally, this chapter presents, the relation to conceptual framework, relationship to research questions, considerations for New Orleans, La, recommendations for policy, practice, and implications for future research.

Discussion of Findings

Previous researchers (Howard, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Schott Foundation, 2014; Skiba et al, 2011) have examined the disproportionality in academic achievement for African American males in public school systems. However, few researchers have explored those experiences from the perspective of African American males who have been pushed out of public schools. I designed my study to examine how the young males who have been expelled from school perceive their educational experiences, relationships; and the role they believe race to have played in those experiences. Based on the participants’ responses, seven categories emerged from the data including: (a) Race and Racism, (b) Self Perceptions, (c) Family Expectations and Support, (d) Male Role Models and Mentors, (e) The School Environment, (f) School Discipline, and (g) Alternative School. As a result of the findings, I concluded that K-12 schools must acknowledge and account for the numerous influences (for example, teacher perceptions, cultural values and influences, discipline policies, and support systems) on African American male student achievement. Specifically, K-12 schools must understand the significance of high expectations, mentoring, and homogenous implementation of policies concerning African
American male students. Previous researchers (Kim, Losen & Hewitt, 2010; Schott Foundation, 2014; Skiba, 2002; Skiba, 2011) concluded that African American males are more likely underperform academically, and more likely to be pushed out of schools. Thus, it is imperative for schools to develop interventions that reroute the expected path of these students. Ensuring that African American male students are supported and successful in school provides a basis for dismantling the school to prison pipeline and its long term effects on individuals and communities.

**Relation to Conceptual Framework**

In the previous chapter I discussed the perceptions of the educational experiences of African American males who have been expelled through analysis of data organized into categories and sub categories that explicate those experiences. In this section the data collected from the participants will be examined through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens. Three tenets of Critical Race Theory encompassed the conceptual framework used for this study: (1) Racism as Pervasive, (2) Intersectionality, and (3) Counter-Story telling. Each served as an underpinning for understanding how the participants conceptualize their experiences.

**Critical Race Theory**

The most significant tenet of CRT used in the present study is that racism is prevalent and deeply embedded in American society (Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995). Because racism is a perpetual element of everyday life, Delgado (2006) asserts that it is therefore difficult to resolve. Howard (2008) maintained that it is critical to seriously consider the role that race and racism play in the manifestations of inequities in educating African American males, citing, “In so many ways they find their experiences and opportunities being shaped largely by issues of race” (p. 960). The participants of my study noted racism as a daily barrier to academic achievement.
The participants felt that as though they are surrounded by challenges due to the color of their skin, and that their race heavily influences how they are perceived by members of society, their teachers and other staff. These perceptions often lead to unjust labeling, stigmatizing, and shunning at school— an experience unique to black males. This form of racism greatly impacts their relationships and interactions within school which has led to concerns with teacher expectations, school safety, discipline policies and procedures, and jail like treatment within school. For example, all the participants gave examples of teachers who perceived them as low achieving, incapable, or unwilling to learn. Disproportionality in African American male academic achievement has been credited to factors such as low teacher expectations (O’Malley & Amarillas, 2011; Toldson, 2008). Consequently, this impacted what and how the participants in the present study were taught, and how disciplinary issues were handled, ultimately serving as a significant barrier to success.

Another important tenet of CRT used to analyze the findings of my study is the notion of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a component of CRT that has been define as a concept that, “calls attention to events and forces operating at the intersection of two or more categories, such as race and gender” (Delgado, 2011, p. 1257). CRT considers multifaceted systems of power and thus supports dialogue about how the intersection of race, gender, and class all influence inequity. My study considers the intersection of both race and gender and its impact on the educational experiences of African American males. Howard (2008) notes, “It is important to delve into the constructs of race and gender for African American males for several reasons. First, the exclusive use of race in the analysis of African American males does not set their realities apart from the experiences of African American females, and other racial minorities… An analysis of African American males
strictly through a gendered lens does not allow race to be examined. A conceptual framework with an explicit examination of the ways that race and racism manifest themselves and their juxtaposition with gender in education may offer new analysis into the underachievement of African American males, and provide new insight and direction for reversing their school achievement.” (p. 966).

The participants of my study considered their schooling experiences as African American males to be unique for several reasons. Participants shared commonalities of feelings of isolation because they could not relate completely to white or female teachers, which made them more susceptible to stereotyping and poor perceptions. For instance, participants noted being both black and male as underlying factors for harsher disciplinary actions against them; citing that they did not believe white males or black females would have been treated the same.

Another form of intersectionality experienced by the participants was the development of their masculinity. All participants stressed a desire for closer relationships with older African American males who have had their same experiences as a source of learning how to navigate their unique experiences. For these young men, it was important to be shown the correct way to “be a man”. Flowers and Banda (2015) assert that men of color develop characterizations of masculinity from various social and cultural factors which require a closer look at social systems that impact the development African American masculine identities.

The final tenet CRT applied in this study is the idea of counter story-telling or counter narratives. CRT researchers (Decuir and Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2004) assert that the voices of marginalized people in educational settings must be heard in order to facilitate true reform and social justice. Howard (2008) maintains that research that explores the experiential knowledge of African American males regarding their perceptions of race and its impact on
education is lacking. The purpose of my study was to provide what some consider to be a counter story (Delgado, 1999; Howard, 2008; Tillman, 2002) to the typical accounts of African American male academic achievement. Through this tenet, the participants’ voices are heard through their experiential knowledge of their educational experiences, relationships within school, and barriers to their academic achievement. For example, one of the counter stories illuminated is the participants’ positive self-images despite the glaringly low perceptions of others. Another counter narrative found is their intrinsic motivation to learn and be successful despite a lack of support and mainstream narratives that say young black males are unmotivated.

**Relation to Research Questions**

This qualitative study addressed the five research questions. The questions were created from previous literature concerning disparities in African American male academic achievement and discipline policies and procedures which ultimately cause them to be pushed out of school.

*Research Question One*

The first research question serves as the overarching question to the study. Research question one asked, What are the educational experiences of African American males who have been expelled from public school settings?

Study participants described the totality of their education experiences by opening up about what they felt were key factors at play. Ultimately participants felt as though almost every experience they encountered were driven by underlying issues of race and racism. The participants described race and racism as intricate dynamics that are rooted into the larger society which impacts educational systems and their experiences in those systems. Moreover the participants’ encounters with racism function as a more subtle version of school pushout
designed to encourage low expectations of themselves and disengagement from the schooling process. In fact, participants noted that issues of race and racism are so prevalent in their day to day interactions, most of the time their “go to” coping mechanism is to shut down or withdraw, in an attempt at self-preservation, which eventually impacts their experiences in school.

Participants really wanted to shatter the myth that African American males lack motivation towards education and academic achievement. The participants all maintained a positive self-image despite daily subtle and blatant attacks on their psyche. All participants showed a strong desire to succeed academically in pursuit of better outcomes. There was a common notion that society does not have high expectations for them to succeed; but they were striving towards their goals despite what anyone else expected of them. In the past when the participants have felt disengaged from school, it was not due to an internal lack of motivation to succeed or poor perception of self; it was because schooling environments made them feel labeled and ostracized or unwanted. All of the participants noted that their school environments and relationships with their peers, teachers, and other staff have played a significant role in both their downfalls and their success. Relationships that were driven by low expectations and poor perceptions influenced both the way discipline policies in their schools were handled and instructional practices in the classroom. Conversely, relationships that were driven by high expectations and strong support have been key factors in their current success. The overarching ideas in this section will be explored in more detail using the sub research questions in the next sections.

Research Question Two

Research question two asked, What do African American males perceive as barriers to their success in traditional educational settings?
According to the participants of this study the most significant barriers to their success has the abysmal expectations others have for black males in general, coupled with a lack of support in various areas. For example, the participants specifically discussed the challenges in trying to understand and cope with the microaggressions that confront them daily. Not knowing how to navigate interactions with racism, or having an outlet to process their feelings about those experiences with, led to disengagement from the occurrence. MALIK said that daily thoughts of racism were too much to bear and that he tries not to think about it because it saddens him. THERON also offered the idea that he’s always becoming angry when he thinks about how he is perceived by, and consequently treated by others.

The overwhelming challenges of being both black and male elucidated the lack of male figures or mentors as a barrier to success as expressed by the participants. The participants expressed a sense of being at a disadvantage due to either a lack of father figures or older, successful black males in the school environment. Feeling as though their journey as a black male is a unique one, those are relationships they desired in an attempt to learn how to cope with and overcome the challenges they face daily. DARVELL valued the support he received from his mother, but felt as though she could not teach him the basic principles of being a man. MALCOLM felt as though it would greatly help them to gain knowledge specifically from black men who were able to successfully navigate the challenges of being black and male in order to finish high school and go on to be productive citizens. Parental and family support varied for the participants who noted that the type of support they received sometimes surfaced as a barrier to success. For example, both CLIFFORD and MALCOLM explained that their families all communicated high expectations for them to be successful, but when it came down to academic
support, their parents could not offer that because they themselves had not been successful in school.

The participants also described various elements of the school environment as barriers to success. Whether or not the school was safe played a role in academic success. ROBERT felt as though if students perceived their school as a bad environment, that they would not take that place serious as a place to foster academic achievement. THERON articulated that an environment that is under a constant threat of violence or execution of violence on campus limits access to a high quality education. The participants described a desire to fit in and be accepted by their peers as a barrier to success. BRANDON and DYLAN noted that wanting to be liked often affected their decision making, which assisted in landing them in alternative school. The participants also described low teacher expectations as barriers to success. The participants felt like teachers demonstrate their expectation through their actions, as well as, through their words. SHAKUR, THERON, and MALCOLM all expressed that how teacher feel about you is evidenced by what they do in the classroom. They all gave examples of experiences with teachers who would not actively teach them, offer academic support, or give positive feedback and encouragement to them. All of the participants saw these behaviors as barriers to success. They also viewed these behaviors by their teachers as factors that led to labeling, and ostracizing them, which also influenced the way discipline policies were enacted and carried out. The participants felt as though infractions were handled differently based on whether or not the staff “likes you”. That being said, participants also felt like female students and white male students would not have received the same treatment and consequences for committing the same infractions.
Research Question Three

Research question three asked, How do these students describe their relationships with their teachers and administrators?

The participants in my study described two distinctly different types of relationships with their teachers and administrators. One type of relationship described in the study is one that is tainted with mistrust, resulting in disengagement from school. The participants expressed that this type of antagonist relationship stems from poor perceptions of African American males. THERON and MALCOLM felt that for many of their teachers and administrators, it is automatically assumed that because they are African American males they are academically low performing and won’t amount to much. BRANDON and MALCOLM felt as though those poor perceptions come from the negative imaging of African American males in the media. CLIFFORD and DARVELL feel like there is a presumption on the part of teachers that African American males require extra help because they are incapable of learning. Whereas ROBERT felt as though the actual presumption is that they are simply unmotivated. The participants felt that in these instances, because those adults saw them in a negative light, this determined the expectations they had for them, how they spoke to them, if and how they taught them, and how they supported them. For example, DYLAN, MALIK, and BRANDON shared experiences of teachers blatantly telling them that they would not amount to anything, which naturally caused them to disengage from those teachers and those schools. The participants also felt as though teacher actions also dictated to them how they were perceived. For instance, ROLAND recounts stories where teachers would simply refuse to actually teach them; instead they would assign them work and ignore them altogether. All of the participants shared similar stories. The displays
of low expectations would also result in the participants developing negative feelings towards school and further disengaging from it.

Similar actions by administrators also led to a lack of trust by the participants. The young men felt that administrators also had poor perceptions of them from day one, and because of those poor perceptions, they would manipulate policies and enforce controlling and jail-like practices at the school. For example, BRANDON and SHAKUR recalled specific times when an administrator blatantly told them that he did not want them there and would get rid of them. For other participants, like MALIK and MALCOLM, administrators who never bothered to form relationships with students did not think much of them, which again resulted in mistrust. Not being able to trust anyone within their schools were strong factors that led to disengagement from school, and some of the infractions that happened at school. School had become just like any other place that they had to survive.

The other type of relationship described by the participants was one that was positive and supportive. The participants noticed that they performed better for teachers who gave them verbal praises. All of the young men declared that verbal encouragement was a sign of having high expectations for them. For example, DYLAN, SHAKUR, and MALCOLM felt like they could trust and depend on the teachers and administrators who took the time to get to know them and encourage them. All of the participants believe that their principal, teachers, and other staff believed in them at School X and those high expectations alone were attributed to their current success. DARVELL felt like he was able to tell that his current teachers and principal thought highly of him, because he’s had constant positive interactions with them. The participants also felt that they were getting more of a voice at School X which also resulted in more buy in. For example, DARVELL shared that they now had a choice in uniforms. MALIK noted that the
principal often talks to him and other students about what they think they need at the school and how they can be better served. Whether or not all of their ideas get implemented was not as important; they were happy that somebody bothered to ask them what they thought. They felt as though being in an environment where they are treated as young men, receiving quality instruction, and receiving adequate support was critical to their academic achievement.

*Research Question Four*

Research question four asked, How do these students describe their relationships with their peers?

When asked to describe their relationships with their peers, all of the participants noted that they mostly stay to themselves at school. When asked to articulate why, the participants noted negative peer influence as a barrier to success for them. For example, BRANDON and SHAKUR explained that they wanted to be accepted and liked by their peers so they participated in the same activities; even when they knew that some of those activities were considered to be behavioral infractions. Some of the participants expressed that finding the balance between doing what’s right or acceptable and wanting to be liked and accepted by peers as a challenge. Every participant listed not interacting much with peers as an important factor in their current success in the alternative school setting.

*Research Question Five*

Research question five asked, To what degree do African American males perceive the roles of race and racism in their educational experiences?

For the participants of my study, issues of race and racism within the context of the larger society, directly impacts every aspect of their education. The participants consider the
relationship between racism and their educational experiences as an overwhelming challenge; one too difficult to cope with. For example, DYLAN and MALIK shared a feeling of being under constant scrutiny from all aspects of society including within the educational system. THERON and MALCOLM shared this idea of feeling as though they have to carefully choose their actions and words in order to appear to be something other than (nice, respectable, and intelligent) how people in society and some educators view them. The idea here is that they have already conceptualized that classroom instruction, relationships with teachers and administration, and the execution of discipline policies are a direct result of racial profiling and racial microaggressions. Godsil and Johnson-McGill (2013) argue that stereotypes cause people to make assumptions superficially, and to treat people accordingly. Stereotypes also have the potential to become self-perpetuating, which is important to note in terms of how this thinking impacts African American males within the educational system. The participants voiced that they felt as though many people develop their perceptions of African American males based on the barrage of negative images on the news and different media outlets. Their thoughts are aligned with research that says African American males are methodically negatively portrayed on news and entertainment programs, which can have the effect of intensifying racial stereotypes (Dixon, 2008; Godsil & Johnson-McGill, 2013). This type of implicit bias means that teachers will not teach to the best of their abilities, and school leaders will not create a framework to ensure their success to the best of their ability because the prognosis is “they don’t want it anyway”. Godsil and Johnson McGill (2013) report, “Race triggers powerful emotions. Among them is “racial anxiety,” which is discomfort about the potential consequences of inter-racial interactions. Black men and boys often experience the anxiety that they will be the subject of discrimination and hostile or distant treatment” (p.12). The participants felt that in previous educational settings, in
order to be treated fairly and gain access to quality education, they had to portray themselves as something other than what they were perceived to be. None of the participants were able to successfully navigate that challenge. That obstacle, coupled with societal challenges that African American males face to survive or to fit in with their peers, led them on their path to alternative school which ironically has turned out to be just what they needed in order to be successful.

**Considerations for New Orleans Public Schools**

Ten years following Hurricane Katrina, the reconstruction of the New Orleans public school system post Hurricane Katrina has not been without angst (Dixon, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015; Frazier-Anderson, 2008; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). Specific concerns regarding the shift from a predominately black governance structure, to one that is predominantly white and its influence on the students who matriculate through New Orleans public schools have been noted (Dixon, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015; Nelson & Grace, 2016). The restructuring of the school system has not abated practices that have historically impacted African American male students who remain at the forefront of excessive out of school suspension and expulsion. In fact, the continual cycle of school pushout in New Orleans has even more detrimental implications than the noted link to incarceration. Nelson and Grace (2016) assert that 55% of the murder victims in New Orleans are African American males under the age of 30 and 20% of murder victims are school aged. The findings of this study give important insight into the school related systemic nuances which have supported the exclusion of African American males from school, and consequently from society.

With the introduction a new superintendent for New Orleans public schools, much conversation has been centered on what the next ten years of reconstruction will look like. Long term priorities include making Orleans Parish schools “the premier portfolio school district” and increasing academic performance. However, authentic dialogue about the intersection of race,
class, and gender remains aloof in the discussion of school reform in New Orleans. Nevertheless, when one considers the overall context in which school systems play a role in the quality of life of the local communities that they serve, the current trajectory for African American males in New Orleans demands increased examination of the schooling system from a critical race theoretical perspective. The current trajectory for African American males in New Orleans demands that the voices of the participants in this study, and future similar studies become the vanguard from which true school reform can begin to take place. As a community we cannot change or atone for the atrocities of the past that led us to this point, nevertheless, we have an obligation to those we serve currently and those to come, to sincerely affect change in our education system which will no doubt have long term effects on the community in which we live. The following section contains recommendations for policy, practice, and future research for school leaders and policy makers in New Orleans, as well as, those in cities and districts who face similar challenges.

**Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

The findings of my study indicated that academic achievement of the participants was significantly impacted by teacher perceptions and expectations, subjectivity in discipline policies, and support systems—all of which had racially biased underpinnings. Based on the findings, several recommendations for policy and practice are presented in Table 3 and explicated in the sections below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addressing participants’ perceived barriers to success</th>
<th>Enhancing relationships with teachers and leaders</th>
<th>Cultivating positive relationships with peers</th>
<th>Addressing concerns of race and racism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monetary and Accountability</td>
<td>Mandatory training in Black Pedagogy in</td>
<td>Research and Expand Opportunities for AA</td>
<td>Ban Zero Tolerance Policies/Implement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Recommendations for policy and practice
### Policy Recommendations

1. **Provide federal and state incentives to school districts who employ comprehensive, vertically aligned improvement strategies to increase graduation rates for African American males.** The purpose in incentivizing these institutions would be to encourage research and implementation of best practices that foster increased academic success for African American males. These incentives include: (a) monetary awards or grants for K-12 districts that employ academic interventions and support for both African American males and their families and (b) accountability points for districts that partner with colleges and universities to implement comprehensive strategies to provide African American males with academic support, develop mentoring programs, and design trainings that increase teacher effectiveness by increasing cultural competency. The idea here is to provide African American male students with built in support systems that that help them navigate their educational journeys.

2. **Ban zero tolerance (and similar discipline policies), and jail like practices in K-12...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incentives for initiatives geared towards increasing AA male academic achievement</th>
<th>aspiring teacher and school leader programs, and school districts.</th>
<th>males to cultivate positive peer relationships (clubs, accountability partners etc)</th>
<th>Restorative Justice Models</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create City Wide Task Force to increase academic outcomes for AA males.</td>
<td>Incentives to recruit/retain AA male teachers and school leaders</td>
<td>Research and Expand Opportunities for AA males to develop authentic understanding their own identity and self image.</td>
<td>Guided Coalition to Pilot Critical Race Pedagogy Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-K-20 Mentoring Pipeline for AA males</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increase Mental Health Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand opportunities for parents/families to increase academic support for AA males.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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public and charter schools. The objective here is that state and local boards prohibit the use of excessively harsh discipline policies and consequences, metal detectors, traditional police officers, and controlling behavioral expectations (e.g. walking in a straight line in complete silence, particularly at the middle and high school levels). Boards should implement incentive programs for districts who implement effective restorative justice programs. The purpose of restorative justice is to move away from punishing misbehavior in efforts to strengthen relationships and address issues between all parties involved. In the restorative justice model behavioral infractions are looked at in terms of how they have now impacted the relationships of those involved and then strives to rebuild those relationships through interventions including mediations, conferencing, and healing circles (Hopkins, 2002).

3. Create a citywide task force that specifically works in conjunction with schools to increase academic outcomes for African American males. This task force would have different committees to plan events and services that unite community stakeholders including, local school board leaders, charter school board member and leaders, faith based leaders, business owners, non-profit leaders, parents and students with the specific goal of providing educational support for African American males and their families. This committee would begin with assessing factors that impact academic achievement for African American males, set short term and long term goals and create a strategic action plan to better support the needs of African American males who are in school.

Practice Recommendations

1. Colleges and universities, alternative certification programs, and school districts should collaborate to develop and implement mandatory cultural awareness and competency components of their training programs for aspiring teachers and school leaders using Black
Pedagogy. According to Marbley, Bonner, McKisick, Henfield, and Watts (2007), Black pedagogy acknowledges the nuances of race and its impact in education and encourages that teachers be mindful of these nuances when planning curriculum and fostering relationships with their students. Additionally, these agencies should work together to produce effective and meaningful job embedded professional development for educators who are already established in the field. Assessing and confronting cultural biases head on, and learning strategies to reduce these biases, could greatly impact the relationship barriers as articulated by the participants between teachers, school leaders, and African American males.

2. District leaders and school leaders should develop a guided coalition of educators to research, plan, and write a pilot curriculum that integrates state standards using a critical race pedagogy framework. According to Solorzano and Yosso (2005), critical race pedagogy contests assertions by educational institutions of race neutrality, and equal opportunity. The counter storytelling and intersectional components of critical race pedagogy allows students to examine curriculum within the context of being both African American and male, also providing a context to process their daily experiences as African American males. Using this framework could serve as an intervention needed as expressed by the participants of this study to learn how to process their experiences and develop coping skills through dialogue and by taking a social justice approach to their curriculum.

3. K-12 schools should partner with colleges and universities to encourage and facilitate a mentoring pipeline to address the unique needs of African American males in secondary schools by fostering relationships with African American males matriculating through college. This mentoring pipeline would also address the desire voiced by the participants of my
study to cultivate relationships with older black males who share their experiences, and who have had successful outcomes.

4. **K-12 school leaders should expand opportunities for parents to increase academic support for their children through hosting events like homework nights, weekend retreats, and virtual learning labs.** These events and virtual learning labs would consist of teachers redelivering skills taught in the classroom to the students and their parents so parent can be more directly involved in, or armed with better tools to support their children academically. The participants in the study noted that, for the most part, their families held high expectations for them but sometimes lacked the capacity to provide academic support such as helping with homework or projects.

5. **School leaders should invest in the implementation of restorative justice models to replace excessively harsh consequences associated with zero tolerance policies that result in the disproportionate school push out of African American males.** In some instances, the participants in the study felt as though they were treated unfairly and did not receive adequate due process during their expulsion process, and even in previous instances that resulted in out of school suspensions. Restorative justice circles allow for a more comprehensive approach to addressing the incident and the need for and degree of consequence thereafter.

6. **School districts should partner with colleges and universities to continue to research and implement strategies and incentives to recruit, and retain African American males into teaching and school leadership professions.** This would also address the need, as expressed by the participants, to see and interact with older African American males as professionals.

7. **School leaders should facilitate opportunities for African American males to cultivate**
positive peer relations beyond sports teams such as clubs, peer accountability partners, etc.

Participants noted negative peer influences as a barrier to success. Fostering positive peer interactions and relationships could potentially spawn relationships with peers that lead to positive influences which have been linked to high academic achievement. This component is also imperative because it also has potential to greatly influence the construction of identity and self image which may also impact academic achievement.

8. Increase mental health staff in urban schools and clearly define the role of these individuals across the board so that they may be effective in providing essential counseling services to students. This would allow for students who need it to learn appropriate coping skills for the traumatic events they are confronted with on a daily basis.

**Implications for Future Research**

First, researchers should expand the present study to explore the perceptions of African American males at a broader range of alternative schools across other states to assess whether or not they yield similar results. Similar results may solidify recommendations for policy and practices produced in this study. Conversely, varying results will call for further exploration to provide even more insight into this phenomenon. Future researchers may also want to examine variances in perceptions based on age, or based on violent versus nonviolent reasons for expulsion. Second, researchers should explore how racial anxiety impacts the self-perceptions of at-risk African American males and their academic achievement. Racial anxiety is explained as “discomfort about the potential consequences of inter-racial interactions. Black men and boys often experience the anxiety that they will be the subject of discrimination and hostile or distant treatment” (Godsil & McGill-Johnson, 2013, p.12). Participants in this study reported positive
self-perceptions, however, it is important to explore this further to ascertain how these self-perceptions are developed and impacted by daily encounters with racism. Third, researchers should examine the perceptions and experiences of parents of African American male students. The perspective of the parents can provide schools with more information on how to best increase parental involvement, and expand opportunities for parental academic support. Fourth, researchers need to further examine the cultivation of peer groups among African American males. It was interesting to note that in the present study, all of the participants felt as though they were better able to succeed without peer support. They all associated relationships with peers as a barrier to success. This warrants a closer look the phenomenon of how African American males cultivate peer relationships, and their perceptions of said relationships’ impact on their educational experiences. Lastly, future studies should also focus on the educational experiences of African American girls who have been expelled from a critical race theoretical perspective. African American girls are also disproportionately pushed out of school and are often left out of the discussion of education reform (Crenshaw, Ocen & Nanda, 2015). The educational experiences of African American girls matter. Research producing a counter narrative for African American girls will provide educators with deeper insight with hopes foster strategies that increase opportunities of achievement for African American girls.

Summary and Conclusion

This study explored the perceptions ten African American male students who had previously been expelled from public school. A qualitative methodology was used for this study. In doing so, interviews were conducted, audiotaped, and analyzed by me. I used three tenets of Critical Race Theory as the conceptual framework for this study: Racism as pervasive; intersectionality; and counter story-telling. Seven categories materialized from the data collected
and analyzed which focused on various aspects of the participants’ K-12 educational experiences: (a) Race and Racism, (b) Self Perceptions, (c) Family Expectations and Support, (d) Male Role Models and Mentors, (e) The School Environment, (f) School Discipline, and (g) Alternative School. Discussion provided in chapter five connected the findings of the study to the conceptual framework and related literature. The stories of the participants provided a deeper context of the nuances of racism and how it impacts their day to day educational experiences overall. This information serves as a catalyst for future inquiry into additional nuances that effect the academic achievement of African American male students in K-12 schools.
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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Good Afternoon Site Director,

I am a doctoral student in the Department of Education Administration at the University of New Orleans. For my dissertation, I am conducting a research study to examine African American males’ perspectives on their educational experiences in traditional public school prior to enrolling at an alternative school. I am requesting an opportunity to meet your students to ask them to participate in a one hour individual interview. Student participation, as well as, names of school they currently or previously attended are completely confidential and pseudonyms will be used to identify them.

Attached you will find a background and purpose statement, consent forms, my IRB approval letter for verification, and a copy of the questions that the students will be asked.

If you are interested in allowing me this opportunity, please let me know who I should be in contact with at the school level to help identify potential participants. Participants must meet the following criteria:

- African American
- Male
- Previously expelled from a traditional public school within the last 3 years

If you have any questions, you may contact me at 504-292-6676 or jegrace@uno.edu. You may also contact my supervising professor from the University of New Orleans, Dr. Alonzo Flowers at amflowers@uno.edu. Thank you in advance for your valued participation in this study.

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Sincerely,

Jennifer Grace M.Ed., NCC
APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE SHEET

Demographic Profile (Please Print)

Pseudonym ________________________________

Age __________________

Grade Classification: Freshmen ( ) Sophomore ( ) Junior ( ) Senior ( )

How do you describe yourself?

( ) American Indian or Alaska Native ( ) Black or African American

( ) Hispanic or Latino ( ) Asian or Asian American

( ) Non-Hispanic White ( ) Other

How many schools have you attended? ________________________________

What school did you attend before enrolling in this one? ______________________

List all clubs, organizations, and sports you have participated in at school

What are your longer term professional plans (Check all that apply)

( ) Complete my high school education ( ) Go to College

( ) Attend Technical School ( ) Enter Military

( ) Other, Specify

__________________________________

Thank you for your response
Informed Consent Form

(Participants 18 or Older)

You are invited to be in a research study about, African American male students’ perceptions about their K-12 educational experiences. You were selected as a possible participant because you met the criterion required for the study. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Jennifer Grace, Department of Educational Administration at the University of New Orleans.

**Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to explore the educational experiences of African American males who have been expelled from traditional educational settings, what they perceive as barriers to their success, and their sentiments on the relationships they have had with educators and peers whom they have encountered. Participants may provide rich data that may enable school administrators and other practitioners to begin steps to dismantle the school to prison pipeline by ensuring at-risk students are supported and successful in school without having to be removed.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one on one interview. This study will take 60-90 minutes of your time during one contact period. I will ask you a series of questions, which I will give to you during the interview.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study**

The risks associated with this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life. Participants have the right to refuse to answer questions they are uncomfortable answering. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Ann O’Hanlon (280-3990) at the University of New Orleans.

The participants will benefit by taking part in a study that will possibly increase the knowledge base of what African American males perceive as barriers to their academic success; and understand the role peers, parents, educators, and school environment play in their ability to achieve academic success.
Society will benefit by gaining first-hand knowledge, data and understanding from African American male students on how best to support them in attaining academic success and hope of finding answers to challenges and possible solutions for improving their academic success.

Findings may have an impact on colleges, leadership preparation programs and school reform regarding how administrators and school personnel work with African American male students. This research may provide the opportunity to reverse the cycle of low-achieving African American males and to create new best practices in graduating more African American males.

Compensation:

Your participation is voluntary and no payment will be given for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The interview for this study will be audio recorded. All research records and data will be kept private and stored securely for seven years and only the researcher and committee chair will have access to the records. Any sort of report published by this study will not include any identifiable information about you the participant.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in all aspects of this study is voluntary. Participants may withdraw from the audio taped interviews at any time without risk or penalty by notifying the researcher, Jennifer Grace. The participant has the option of not answering questions he does not want to answer. If you choose to participate, all information collected from you in combination with data collected from other participants will be held in the strictest confidence.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is: Jennifer Grace. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact them at 504-292-6676 or jegrace@uno.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact Alonzo M. Flowers, PhD, (amflowers@uno.edu) or contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon (280-3990) at the University of New Orleans.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.
Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature:__________________________________________ Date: __________________

Signature of Investigator:______________________________ Date: ________________
APPENDIX D

ASSENT FORM

Assent Form

(Participants 17 or under)

Rerouting the School to Prison Pipeline: A Phenomenological Study of the Educational Experiences of African American Males Who Have Been Expelled from Public Schools

You are invited to be in a research study about, African American male students’ perceptions about their K-12 educational experiences. You were selected as a possible participant because you met the criterion required for the study. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Jennifer Grace, Department of Educational Administration at the University of New Orleans.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to explore the educational experiences of African American males who have been expelled from traditional educational settings, what they perceive as barriers to their success, and their sentiments on the relationships they have had with educators and peers whom they have encountered. Participants may provide rich data that may enable school administrators and other practitioners to begin steps to dismantle the school to prison pipeline by ensuring at-risk students are supported and successful in school without having to be removed.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one on one interview. This study will take 60-90 minutes of your time during one contact period. I will ask you a series of questions, which I will give to you during the interview.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The risks associated with this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life. Participants have the right to refuse to answer questions they are uncomfortable answering. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Ann O’Hanlon (280-3990) at the University of New Orleans.

The participants will benefit by taking part in a study that will possibly increase the knowledge base of what African American males perceive as barriers to their academic success; and

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understand the role peers, parents, educators, and school environment play in their ability to achieve academic success.

Society will benefit by gaining first-hand knowledge, data and understanding from African American male students on how best to support them in attaining academic success and hope of finding answers to challenges and possible solutions for improving their academic success.

Findings may have an impact on colleges, leadership preparation programs and school reform regarding how administrators and school personnel work with African American male students. This research may provide the opportunity to reverse the cycle of low-achieving African American males and to create new best practices in graduating more African American males.

**Compensation:**

Your participation is voluntary and no payment will be given for participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The interview for this study will be audio recorded. All research records and data will be kept private and stored securely for seven years and only the researcher and committee chair will have access to the records. Any sort of report published by this study will not include any identifiable information about you the participant.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in all aspects of this study is voluntary. Participants may withdraw from the audio taped interviews at any time without risk or penalty by notifying the researcher, Jennifer Grace. The participant has the option of not answering questions he does not want to answer. If you choose to participate, all information collected from you in combination with data collected from other participants will be held in the strictest confidence.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is: Jennifer Grace. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact them at 504-292-6676 or jegrace@uno.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact Alonzo M. Flowers, PhD, (amflowers@uno.edu) or contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon (280-3990) at the University of New Orleans.
You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature:_________________________________________ Date: __________________

Signature of Investigator:_____________________________ Date: __________________
APPENDIX E

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

Parent Permission Form
(Parents/guardians of participants 17 and under)

Rerouting the School to Prison Pipeline: A Phenomenological Study of the Educational Experiences of African American Males Who Have Been Expelled from Public Schools

Your son is invited to be in a research study about, African American male students’ perceptions about their K-12 educational experiences. He has been selected as a possible participant because he meets the criterion required for the study. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Jennifer Grace, Department of Educational Administration at the University of New Orleans.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to explore the educational experiences of African American males who have been expelled from traditional educational settings, what they perceive as barriers to their success, and their sentiments on the relationships they have had with educators and peers whom they have encountered. Participants may provide rich data that may enable school administrators and other practitioners to begin steps to dismantle the school to prison pipeline by ensuring at-risk students are supported and successful in school without having to be removed.

Procedures:

If your child agrees to participate in this study, he will be asked to participate in a one on one interview. This study will take 60-90 during one contact period. I will ask a series of questions, which I will give during the interview.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The risks associated with this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life. Participants have the right to refuse to answer questions they are uncomfortable answering. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Ann O’Hanlon (280-3990) at the University of New Orleans.

The participants will benefit by taking part in a study that will possibly increase the knowledge base of what African American males perceive as barriers to their academic success; and
understand the role peers, parents, educators, and school environment play in their ability to achieve academic success.

Society will benefit by gaining first-hand knowledge, data and understanding from African American male students on how best to support them in attaining academic success and hope of finding answers to challenges and possible solutions for improving their academic success.

Findings may have an impact on colleges, leadership preparation programs and school reform regarding how administrators and school personnel work with African American male students. This research may provide the opportunity to reverse the cycle of low-achieving African American males and to create new best practices in graduating more African American males.

**Compensation:**

Participation is voluntary and no payment will be given for participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The interview for this study will be audio recorded. All research records and data will be kept private and stored securely for seven years and only the researcher and committee chair will have access to the records. Any sort of report published by this study will not include any identifiable information about you the participant.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in all aspects of this study is voluntary. Participants may withdraw from the audio taped interviews at any time without risk or penalty by notifying the researcher, Jennifer Grace. The participant has the option of not answering questions he does not want to answer. If your child chooses to participate, all information collected in combination with data collected from other participants will be held in the strictest confidence.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is: Jennifer Grace. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact them at 504-292-6676 or jegrace@uno.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact Alonzo M. Flowers, PhD, (amflowers@uno.edu) or contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon (280-3990) at the University of New Orleans.
You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I give consent for my son to participate in the study.

Signature:____________________________________Date: __________________

Signature of Investigator:________________________________Date: ________________
APPENDIX F
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Rerouting the School to Prison Pipeline: A Phenomenological Study of the Educational Experiences of African American Males Who Have Been Expelled from Public Schools

Review Consent

There should be a reaffirmation of consent here, especially with regard to the issues of withdrawal of consent without penalty

Introductory

1. How would you describe yourself
   a. As a young man?
   b. As a student?
   c. Have you changed through the years?
   d. What was the greatest impact to that change?

Academic Factors

2. In regards to your academic abilities how do you think most people perceive you?
   a. How/Why did people form this perception?

3. In regards to your academic abilities how do you perceive yourself?
   a. How did you form your self-perception?

4. What makes your classes interesting and engaging?

5. What are some challenges to success that you have encountered?
   a. How would you distribute responsibility for those challenges?

Support Systems

6. Prioritize your support systems (friends, family, coaches, teachers etc). Explain.

School Environment

7. Do your teachers at school have similar or different expectations as your family at home?
   a. Explain
8. How do your teachers show you their expectations?
9. How do you know what your teachers feel about you?
   a. What skills and personality traits do your grades not capture?
10. Tell me about times when you had contact with other school staff such as administrators and counselors?
11. Are the responses to kids getting in trouble at school similar for kids who commit similar offenses?

**Educational Experience as an African American**

12. What does it feel like to be Black and male at school?
13. What effect does the school environment have on African American male students' ability to achieve academic success?
14. How do you think teachers perceive Black male students?
15. Do you feel that you get labelled by your teachers?
   a. Are there any positive or negative labels that you believe they have of you that causes you to behave in certain ways?
16. What are some of the challenges that Black males face
   a. Academically?
   b. Socially?
   c. Occupationally?

**Closing**

17. In what ways are your current school and your previous school similar? Different?
18. What do you feel would have made a difference in your education
   a. Academically?
   b. Behavioral?

19. Which adults may could have had the most impact on your circumstance?
20. Is there anything else that you want educators and others to know about your experience?

Thank you for your time.
VITA

Jennifer Grace was born July 22, 1983 in New Orleans, Louisiana. She earned a Bachelor’s degree in Secondary Education from Louisiana State University in 2005, a Masters degree in School Counseling from the University of New Orleans in 2009, and her PhD in May 2016 in Education Administration with an emphasis on K-12 schools. Her research focuses on “Rerouting the School to Prison Pipeline”. Jennifer has been an educator for over ten years; having served as an ELA teacher, guidance counselor and currently, school leader. In her role she helps design course curriculum, mentors students, manages students’ learning processes, and coordinates several aspects of instructional development on campus. In addition, Jennifer has presented at several professional and academic conferences. She has presented on issues concerning, “Strategies for engaging African American Males in a PK-16+ continuum and Decoding the Common Core”. Her research topics are relevant and significant to student achievement, particularly for African American males in the educational pipeline.