REAL TALK: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE, RACISM, AND THE IMPACT OF RACIALIZATION AND GENDERING ON THE SELF-CONCEPTS OF BLACK BOYS IN A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE MIDDLE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

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As our country currently exists, racism and anti-Blackness via racial violence, police brutality, police shootings of unarmed Black people, race riots, and public shootings are commonplace. What is uncommon, is discourse surrounding race, racism, racialized and gendered experiences, and their impact on the lives of Black youth, specifically Black boys. The racial milieu in which Black boys exist, the meanings and stereotypes attached to their race and gender, and the racist encounters and racialized and gendered experiences they endure, deeply impact how they know, see and understand themselves. However, there is little inquiry into how these racial understandings and racialized and gendered experiences inform how and why Black youth see and understand themselves in the manners in which they do. This is notably evidenced among Black boys in middle school, who are rarely, if at all, given space to engage in conversations about race, racism, racial and gender socialization processes, and their overall identities and constructions of self.

Real Talk examined how Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school made sense of and experienced race and racism and the impact that racialization and gendering had on their self-concepts. Using narrative research grounded in phenomenology, this study used qualitative interviews, student artifacts, and non-participant observations to highlight the role of race and gender in the daily lives of eight Black boys, illustrating how racism, anti-Blackness, and power operate within society and school settings. Guided by three theoretical and conceptual

influences, Black boyhood, Critical Race Theory in education, and anti-Blackness in education, this study addressed three questions: (1) How do Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school understand and experience race and racism?; (2) How might these understandings and experiences inform their self-concept as they enter and move through the middle school grades?; and (3) What practices and structures create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school?

Findings in this study revealed that Black boys are indeed knowers, self-authors, and social and cultural actors in their racialized and gendered experiences. The boys in *Real Talk* demonstrated the ways they individually and collectively understood race and gender and their impact on their identities and perceptions of self. They spoke of the many ways their innocence, intellect, and truth were racialized, unveiling the implicit and explicit ways that racism and anti-Blackness operate in society and schooling contexts. Most importantly, this study uncovered protective factors and positive racial socialization processes that contributed to how these boys developed and maintained Black joy, positive racial, academic, and social identities, and promising outlooks on their lives in the face of racism, anti-Blackness, racialized and gendered stereotypes, race-based implications, and racist ideologies. In the end, the social and cultural space that *Real Talk* cultivated, proved to be critical for exploring and examining the myriad of factors that impact Black boys' life outcomes, opportunities, identities, and sense of self. In doing so, it highlighted the need to engage in critical dialogue, conscious raising, and *real* conversations about race, racism, gender, and the racialized and gendered experiences among Black boys at home, school, and other spaces. This research also emphasized the understandings and experiences that Black boys have that contribute to how parents, school practitioners, and educational researchers should engage with them.

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, the late Michael Id-Deen. A compassionate, loving and faithful husband, father, coach, and educator to communities across the world, he knew I would become a “Dr.” before I did. My father always told me that I was destined for great things and that I would impact many. I trusted and believed him then as I do now. I love you. I miss you. I thank you for instilling in me the love, courage, power, wisdom, and faith to keep going and fulfill this dream.

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I am forever indebted to my first teachers, my mother, Samaiyah Id-Deen and my father, the late Michael Id-Deen. They have been and continue to be the force and inspiration behind everything that I do. I've always pride myself on being the "perfect" combination of my parents. I have my father's heart, passion, wittiness, and competitive spirit, and my mother's selflessness, sense of caring, understanding, and empathy. Without you, there would be no me.

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PROLOGUE

The history of violence and disregard against Black boys is nothing new. For over 400 years, "Black male bodies, and what they represent, [were and still are] deemed as threats to a particular social order" (Howard, 2014, p. xi). Historically and currently, Black boys are hunted, stolen, beaten, hung, and killed as a consequence of their race and gender. They are largely described from deficit, demoralizing, and dehumanizing perspectives, rooted in racialized and gendered stereotypes and racist and anti-Black rhetoric. They are constantly constructed as problems to "fix" in society and in schools and are rarely sought or given the opportunity to share their own experiences, voice their own ideas, or exist and be as they imagine. It is no surprise then, that in 2020 we see rehashed and recursive portrayals of Black boys as imagined social threats to society, where they are constantly at war with the world to simply live. As author, teacher educator, education researcher, and Professor Emerita Gloria Ladson-Billings (2011) reminds us, "Black men, regardless of class, education status, and age, we know that there exists a widespread fear of them throughout the society" (p. 10). This is more evident today than ever as we see Black men who are politicians, professors, doctors, educators, entertainers, professional athletes, grandfathers, fathers, uncles, and Black boys lose their humanity and more often than not their lives at the hands of systemic racism and anti-Blackness. As we continue to witness these atrocities and as we are continuously exposed to racism, racial discrimination, racial bias, and disdain for Black humanity, I think about the impact and implications that this has on all Black people, but Black boys specifically as they are in the process of exploring and discovering who they are. This is one of the many reasons that I argue that engaging in "real

talk" with Black boys about race, racism, racialization, and gendering is important to their identities, conceptions of self, experiences, understandings of the world, and their places in it.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation begins with a brief discussion of race and racism in the United States, where I emphasize that racial discourse has been omnipresent among Black people and within their legacies and histories for centuries. From enslaved and non-enslaved Blacks speaking out against racial dehumanization, to literature and media revealing the abhorrent conditions of Black people in America, to Black youth engaging in conversations that expose their daily racialized experiences in schools, racial discourse as a practice of resilience and self-love has taken on many forms. Even with this understanding, and despite living in a racist and anti-Black culture, dialogue surrounding race and racism is still positioned as taboo in society writ large and in education and schooling contexts in particular. I argue throughout the dissertation that not talking about race, racism, its intersection with gender, and the impact and consequences of them specifically among Black boys is detrimental to their understanding of self and the world. Here, I introduce and frame the focus of this study. That is, Black boys occupy a liminal space in society, schools, and in educational research where they are not viewed as children or boys but men; where their experiences and actualities are not seen as valid sources of knowledge or contributions to research, and where their existence is constructed and analyzed without their voices or regard (Dancy, 2014a; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Rowley et al., 2014). I then outline how I address these concerns, notably by centering Black boys as social and cultural actors and self-authors to illustrate how race, racism, racialization, and gendering are key staples in their lives in societal contexts and in the context of attending a predominantly white middle school. Next, I introduce the research questions before discussing the three theoretical and conceptual influences that ground the study. The chapter ends with an overview of the dissertation.

Background

Race Talk: Centuries-old Conversations about Race, Racism and Racial Strife

> Race is both an empty category and one of the most destructive and powerful forms of social categorization.
>
> -Morrison, 1992, p. ix

As the 1993 Nobel laureate in literature and award-winning novelist Toni Morrison underscored, race is nuanced and antithetical, with very *real* consequences. Race is a social construct that has been used to group individuals on the basis of skin color, hair texture, eye shape, nose structure, and other phenotypic differences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Leonardo, 2013). Within a United States context, it has been "constructed for purposes of control, power and economic exploitation, racialism, [and] is fundamental to everyday life" (Parker & Stovall, 2004, p. 170). Subsequently, racism operates as a system of oppression based on race that is not only immersed in the rhetoric, practices, laws, policies, and ideologies of this country, but it is also embedded in its structures and social institutions as well. Thus, the history of race and racism in this country is a long, painful and oppressive one and has "play [ed] a central role in determining what the United States looks like" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 19). For Black people, however, "experiences with [race and] racism is nothing new" (Carter Andrews, 2012, p. 2). Race and racism have had, and still have, very *real* consequences on the life experiences and opportunities for Black people in this country (Sellers, Smith, et al., 1998). Despite the psychological resilience (Rutter, 1987), epistemic labor and armor of healing (Matias, 2016) necessary to live and thrive in a country where the permanence of race and racism is profound and where one's existence as a Black person is seen as a problem (DuBois, 1935; Dumas, 2016; Leonardo, 2013; Nasir, 2012; Noguera, 2013), Black people have been talking about race, racism and its impact on their lives for centuries.

From Phillis Wheatley's commentary on slavery (1770s) to Sojourner Truth's speeches on Black female existence and rights (1840s); from Frederick Douglass' writings and campaigns for the liberation of Black people (1860s) to W. E. B. DuBois' *The Strivings of the Negro People* (1897) and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). From Carter G. Woodson's *The Negro in Our History* (1922) and *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) to Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1939), these early works set in motion international and national conversations about race, racism and racial strife. Even in the face of relentless violence, brutalization, and dehumanization, these literary and oratory acts of resilience, advocacy, and resistance shaped how we talked about race and racism in this country. This was before *Brown v. Board of Education*, James Baldwin's writings on race relations and racial dissension in America, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, Shirley Chisholm's campaign for Black Feminism, Jesse Jackson's crusade for self-reliance for Black people, the Million Man March, the election of President Barack Obama, and the *Black Lives Matter* Movement. This is not to minimize the significance that these more recent historical events and movements have had in reengaging society in dialogue about race and racism. Rather, the purpose is to highlight how discourse about race, racism, and its impact on Black people have always been present. Over time, however, its existence as an ongoing conversation has ebbed and flowed according to how and what our country has deemed appropriate, necessary, meaningful, and relevant.

As our country currently exists, conversations about race and racism occupy a contradictory space. On the one hand, the *recognition* of race is justifiably used and discussed for evaluative means, e.g. poverty rates, prison populations, voter turnout, diversity in schools or the workplace, academic performance, test scores, etc. (Leonardo, 2013; Noguera, 2013). On the other hand, it is deemed unacceptable to challenge, interrogate, and talk about the structural

effects that race and racism has on the inequitable opportunities, outcomes, and experiences of Black people. Noguera (2013) argues that this is because increasingly, racism and "racial bias is seen as an outdated and ugly reminder of America's past, is no longer acceptable (at least in public), and is bad for our image as a nation" (p. x). Thus, in an attempt to erase and rewrite the disparaging legacies and histories of our "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2013, p. 4), our country has dangerously and misleadingly pushed the notion that we are living in a postracial, post-civil rights society (Carter Andrews & Tuitt, 2013; Donnor & Brown, 2011; Leonardo, 2013; Noguera, 2013; Chris Warren, 2012). Unfortunately, the propagation of postracialism has only reemphasized our country's desire to not acknowledge, talk about, or disrupt the impact of race and racism on communities of color, especially in the contexts of education and schooling (Alemán et al., 2011).

Race-*less* Talk: Color-Silent, Color-Evasive and Color-Resistant Discourse in Education

Schools and spaces of education are microcosms of our heavily racialized and increasingly racist society. They connect to and reflect the larger sociopolitical contexts and ideologies of white supremacy, racism, and culture of domination, which further marginalizes the experiences of students of color, notably Black students (J. Banks, 2013; Parker & Stovall, 2004). In 2018, for example, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that 15% of all students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools were Black, yet 79% of all Black students attended predominantly non-white, racially segregated schools (McFarland et al., 2017). Further, the number of Black students in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses remained significantly low, while the number of Black students retained, suspended or expelled continued to increase (McFarland et al., 2017). Moreover, of the 78% of Black students who graduated from high school, only 32% of them enrolled in college (de Brey

et al., 2019). These data speak volumes: the significance, presence, and embedment of race and racism in education matter. Scholars have clearly shown that race and racism manifest and operate in education and has very *real* consequences for Black students (e.g. Carter Andrews & Tuitt, 2013; Kohli, 2009, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2013; Tatum, 2007). Despite these facts, many of us, e.g. school practitioners, education researchers, and those of us in leadership positions in education and policy, continue to mute and reframe discussions about race, racism, and its impact on the experiences and opportunities for Black students. Public discourse, for example, suggests that "we have moved past race" (Donnor & Brown, 2011; Noguera, 2013). Yet, the proliferation of efforts to adopt seemingly "neutral, race-conscious" policies, teaching practices, and rhetoric are strongly evident in education, education research, educational policy, and teacher education discourse (Alemán et al., 2011; Annamma et al., 2017; Milner, 2007b).

Within the field of education, academic discourse has adopted color-silent (Tatum, 2017), color-evasive, and color-resistant ideologies and methodologies (Annamma et al., 2017). These calculated methods of erasure masked through the fortification of standardized testing, zero-tolerance discipline policies, hair policies, monolingualism, and monoculturalism, for example, are reflective of and associated with whiteness, white supremacy, racism, and anti-Blackness (Alemán et al., 2011; Khalifa et al., 2013; Love, 2013, 2016, 2019; Milner, 2007b; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Chezare Warren, 2016b; Chris Warren, 2012). Thus, the desire for race to be obsolete, or at the least be a non-factor in the outcomes and experiences of Black students, only reinforces notions of postracialism and the blatant refusal to talk about, acknowledge, or recognize race and its role in reproducing inequitable access, opportunities and outcomes in education. In other words, despite the strong desire for race to *not* matter in society

writ large and in education particular, it does. The reality is that our schools and spaces of education are riddled with racist practices and policies that are overtly and covertly enacted and imposed upon Black youth on a daily basis (T. Brown, 2007; Darder & Mirón, 2007; Chezare Warren, 2016a, 2016b). With this understanding, conversations and discourse about how issues of race and racism impact Black youth's experiences are critical.

Carter Andrews and Tuitt (2013) contend that "naming and responding to the ways in which race and racism continue to be significant factors that affect the educational experiences and outcomes of students of color, [Black students in particular], is still a very *real* and necessary discussion" (p. 1). Despite this acknowledgement, many of us struggle to hold dialogue centering race, racism, and the racialized experiences of Black youth. Instead of talking about race, Black psychologist and educator Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum argues that we opt to live in a color-silent society. That is, a society where both adults and children are hesitant to talk about race, racial bias, racial inequities, and racial prejudice and/or "have learned to avoid talking about race [and racism all together]" (Tatum, 2017, p. 24). What is most concerning about not talking about race and racism, however, is the implications that this silence has on Black youth's racial understandings, racialized experiences, racial identities, and their overall construction and perception of self.

Real Talk: Why Conversations About Race and Racism Among Black Youth Matter

We are living in a culture where racial violence, police brutality towards Black people, police shootings of unarmed Black people, race riots, and anti-Blackness or violence against Black people is pervasive and commonplace. We are living in a climate where Black youth are policed, surveilled, and/or killed by police more than any other demographic in this country (Edwards, Lee, et al., 2019; Fine et al., 2003; Hattery & Smith, 2017; McNamarah, 2018;

Nordberg et al., 2018; Rios, 2011; Stewart et al., 2009). Thus, *not* talking about race and the impact that race and racism has on the lives and experiences of Black youth is *not* an option. In her national bestseller, "*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race* (2017), Tatum emphasizes the importance of talking about Black youth's "understanding of race, racial identity, and how to combat racism in daily life" (p. 76). She highlights why race talks, particularly among Black youth, matter not only at home, but in schools and other spaces of education. Like other scholars whose works center and explore the racial and racialized experiences of Black youth (e.g. Buckley, 2018; Carter, 2007; Carter Andrews, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Nasir, 2012; T. Perry, 2003; R. Reynolds, 2010; Rockquemore et al., 2009; Spencer, 2007), Tatum reminds us that the racial milieu in which Black youth exist, the meanings and stereotypes attached to race, and the racist encounters they endure, deeply impact how they come to know, see, and understand themselves and their places in the world. Thus, how Black youth understand themselves racially (*racial identity*), how others view them racially (*racial identification*), and how society perceives and treats racial groups differently (*racialization*), all play an important role in how they construct their sense of self within society (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Rowley et al., 2014).

I argue here that it is necessary for us (i.e. researchers, teacher educators, school administrators, and practitioners) to engage Black youth in what I term "real talk". In this dissertation, real talk is conceptualized as a social phenomenon and as social discourse. As a social phenomenon, real talk is the physical act of engaging in candid conversations about critical, yet difficult topics (e.g. race, racism, gender, gendered norms and behaviors, academic identity and expectations, etc.). It is grounded in the idea that one can honestly and without censor express their viewpoints, understandings, and experiences free of judgement and

criticism. This type of conversational space and experience can be both formal or informal, allowing for the exchange of multiple voices and viewpoints while also revealing both similar and different experiences. It is important to note that although this dialogic space centers the voices and experiences of youth, the role of the adult in these critical, conscious-raising conversations is to be more than a facilitator. Rather, the adult has the responsibility to connect youth's perspectives and experiences with unequal and unjust distributions of power, social systems and institutions, structural forces, sociopolitical and historical contexts, and other social phenomena, and the roles they play in shaping those perspectives and experiences. Further, the adult goes beyond simply acknowledging youth's understandings, interactions, ways of knowing and being, etc. to pushing them to recognize, reflect, and think more critically on how to respond to the cultural and institutional forms of oppression and inequities in their lives.

Real talk as social discourse reflects and relates to the unique and distinctive way that this phrase is used in written language and oral communication and the meanings attached to them (Gee, 2010). When written, real talk indicates the seriousness of the topic or issue being discussed, analyzed, explored, etc. It emphasizes importance and criticality, with an unfiltered tone. This can be found in titles of music and literature, media headlines, talk show segments, news articles, etc. When spoken, real talk is often used as a segue into or start of an important conversation. It is a purposeful move by the speaker that signals that the ensuing dialogue is forthright and meaningful. At the same time, using "real talk" in conversation can also be understood as a statement of affirmation and empowerment. It can be used to affirm and validate the thoughts, ideas, and experiences that are being expressed and shared. "Real talk" shifts from being a lead-in to a powerful gesture that can encourage speakers to continue sharing their stories as others listen attentively and/or it can suggest admiration and respect regarding one's

experiences. In either case, there is a sense of learning from and with others about who they are, what they've experienced, what they think, and how they understand the world.

For example, in our current racial climate, there is an increasing need for Black parents and guardians to have explicit, candid conversations with their Black sons, grandsons, nephews, etc. about managing encounters with police, racial profiling and targeting by police, and in general, being a Black boy in America (Dottolo & Stewart, 2008). Moreover, as racial violence towards Black boys increase and the murders of unarmed Black boys and men, like Michael Dean, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Elijah McCain, and others continue to occur, it is necessary to engage in real talk not only about our nation's history of racial injustice, oppression, and patriarchal system, but the impact that these past and current incidents have on the daily lives of Black boys. Based on these conceptualizations, this dissertation uses real talk in three ways.

First, as the title suggests, it emphasizes the need to critically engage Black boys in explicit conversations about racialization and gendering, or the ways in which Black boys and their experiences are read and framed through a lens of race and gender. I argue that having these type of difficult, but necessary conversations, can create opportunities where Black boys can experience and process *being* and *becoming* according to their own conceptions and perceptions (A. Brown & Donnor, 2011; Carter, 2007; Carter Andrews, 2016; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Howard & Reynolds, 2013; Nasir, 2012). Second, it centers and prioritizes the voices, experiential knowledge, and narratives of Black boys. In doing so, real talk becomes a vehicle to unapologetically share the *real*, authentic, vulnerable life stories about what it means to be Black and a boy in the face of racism, racial and gender stereotypes, racialized and gendered issues, race-based and gendered implications, and racist and patriarchal ideologies (Carter Andrews,

2016; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Nasir, 2012; Nasir et al., 2009; Rowley et al., 2014), and in the contexts of hegemonic notions and narrow constructions of what it means to be a boy (Davis, 2001; Ferguson, 2010; McCready, 2004, 2010; Staples, 1982; Way et al., 2014). Third, it designs conversational spaces for *real*, explicit discussions that explore and examine the myriad of factors that impact Black boys' life outcomes, opportunities, and sense of self. I contend that open conversations and honest dialogue about the *realness*, legacies, and material consequences of race, racism, racialization, and gendering are not only necessary to facilitate the understandings, examinations, and meanings of Black boys' realities, but to also help us (i.e. adults engaged in teaching students) learn how to better support them across their experiences and to engage in affirming pedagogies and practices daily. Unfortunately, Black boys are rarely, if at all, given opportunities to engage in such conversations (Carter Andrews & Tuitt, 2013; Ferguson, 2010; Flynn, 2012; Tatum, 2017) and thus, highlights the need for this type of work.

Problem Statement

Forgotten Boys: What's Happening to Black Boys in Middle School?

The middle school years, ages 11 to 14, are arguably one of the most critical stages in the educational, emotional, and social development of early adolescence (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Nakkula, 2015; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, et al., 2006). It represents a challenging time for many youth as they are grappling with physical and emotional changes, social pressures, increased educational expectations, and the transition towards independence (Educational Testing Service & Children Defense Fund [ETS & CDF], 2012). However, adolescence has largely been framed around the Eurocentric, hegemonic notion that youth are subconsciously experiencing an identity crisis or a crisis of self-understanding (Erikson, 1950, 1968). Unfortunately, this perspective does not acknowledge that youth are in fact very conscious, aware and perceptive of the many aspects

of their lives, nor does it take into account how social factors, cultural contexts, and structural forces contribute to adolescent processes and experiences (Sadowski, 2015). Further, the "identity crisis" narrative does not consider the significant influences that race, racial identity, racism, and/or racialization has on adolescents' thinking, self-understanding, and self-concepts, or perceptions of self (Tajfel, 1978). Moreover, the ways in which gender is socially constructed and performed and the variability of adherence to gender norms and ideologies and how they play out for adolescence is narrowly fixed along patriarchal and gendered lines of understanding. This is one of the reasons why I chose to use *boy* throughout this dissertation and not *male*. I recognize that gender is socially constructed and that behaviors, expectations, performances, scripts, etc. are influenced by cultural and social norms for masculinity and femininity and what it means to be male and female (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016). However, identifying as a boy allows one to express their gender as they see fit, perhaps challenging and resisting the privileges of patriarchy and the ways society and social institutions socialize boys and girls.

Thus, for Black boys, many whose already complexed lives are compounded when race, racism, and exposure to racialized and gendered messages are factored (Duncan, 2002; Ferguson, 2010; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2008, 2015), they do not fit into the narrative. That being said, Black boys' processes and experiences are critical to how we understand and examine adolescence writ large, how we frame and discuss racial discourse and racial socialization processes (e.g. racial discrimination, racial biases, racial microaggressions, racial stereotype awareness), how we take up notions of gender, and how we think about the impact of racialized and gendered experiences on their self-concepts in the context of schooling.

Using a race-gender lens, I argue first, that Black boys occupy a liminal space between Black boyhood and Black manhood, where their rights to be and exist as adolescents are erased.

Dumas and Nelson (2016) contend that Black boys are "subjected to an adultification that erases their right to childhood and their status as children" (p. 30). Scholars like Ladson-Billings (2011) note that "the notion of little Black boys as cute does not last long before they are moved to a category that resembles criminals, [where] teachers and other school officials begin to think of them as 'men'" (p. 10). In other words, although they *are* boys, they are placed in the framing of men. As a result, Black boys do not get the same opportunities to engage in and learn from the complex social learning processes during adolescence, especially as it relates to race and gender (Dancy, 2014b; Nakkula, 2015; Rogers et al., 2015; Sadowski, 2015; Tatum, 2017). Rather, the "normal" processes and changes that adolescents undergo (e.g. exploring and experimenting with who they are, developing certain skills and motivations, changes in attitudes and behaviors) are perceived and made more sinister and criminal when enacted by Black boys and policed and surveilled by others (Dancy, 2014a, 2014b; Ferguson, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Howard, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Stevenson, 2004). For example, while white boys are perceived as innocent, curious, capable, and full of promise, Black boys are confronted with pervasive stereotypes that perpetuate them as criminal, at-risk, juvenile-bound, and in need of discipline and control (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; T. Brown, 2013; Dancy, 2014a; Donnor & Brown, 2011; Ferguson, 2010; Goff et al., 2014; Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Monroe, 2005). Ferguson (2010) terms the paradoxical position of Black boys as "double displaced". That is, "as Black children, they are not seen as childlike but adultified; as Black [boys], they are denied the masculine dispensation constituting white [boys] as being 'naturally naughty' and are discerned as willfully bad" (p. 80).

Second, middle school serves as a critical juncture for Black boys where many of the values, habits, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, etc. that they are developing are likely to move with

them into adulthood, which have larger implications with regard to long-term and future success in both school and society (Carter Andrews, 2016; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Nakkula, 2015). I posit that many of the educational and social inequities that *seem* to manifest in high school, in the form of widening achievement and opportunity gaps (Ferguson, 2010; Mickelson & Greene, 2006; Polite & Davis, 1999), the overrepresentation of Black boys in special education (Carter Andrews, 2016; Porche et al., 2004), the disparities in suspension and expulsion rates (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Ferguson, 2010; Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Skiba et al., 2002), the increase in dropout rates (ETS & CDF, 2012), for example, are in fact evidenced in middle school. Dumas and Nelson (2016) reveal that designing and implementing interventions, programs, projects, and initiatives that are often "aimed at "correcting" Black [boys] behaviors and attitudes" (p. 43) happen *after* disparities and inequities in educational and social outcomes become apparent. Further, a lot of our scholarly attention and efforts are devoted to addressing concerns among Black boys in high school and college, versus attempting to understand their perspectives and experiences *during* the middle school years where many of the gaps begin. If we shift to understanding and examining the multiple and varied processes experienced during middle school, then perhaps we can gain a better sense of the educational and social trajectories of Black boys as a whole, potentially help address adverse outcomes of Black boys prior to them happening, and curb inequities and disparities before they magnify.

Third, the construction of Black boys' adolescence is demarcated with strict lines about what it means to be Black, a boy, and a youth. In this critical stage in life, Black boys are not given space to be and exist as youth. We have erased their right and possibility "to self-determine, to speak for themselves, to imagine their own present and presence in the world" (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 31). How then do Black boys fashion and make sense of their

Blackness and boyhood in these contexts? Moreover, how can Black boys see themselves and their possibilities beyond society's fears when they are not given the space or right to do so. What does this mean then for the daily experiences of Black boys in our society, and how does this impact how they come to see and understand themselves? Knowing that race, racism and anti-Blackness is deeply embedded in our country and social institutions, Black boys are immersed in "conditions that marginalize them [and] place them beyond love in schools and in the broader society" (Duncan, 2002, p. 131). It is these oppressive systems and conditions that inform the historical, cultural and ideological frameworks where discourse on and about Black boys remain fixed in society. Thus, the deficit narratives and dominant tropes of deviant, criminal, uneducable, and problems to be dealt with, continue to define the existence and possibility of them (T. Brown, 2013; Duncan, 2002; Donnor & Brown, 201; Ferguson, 2010; Howard, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011). What is most troublesome, however, is that the values, practices, pedagogies, and rhetoric that Black boys are exposed to normalize and perpetuate racism and anti-Blackness, while also becoming a part of the imaginations of Black boys themselves (Duncan, 2002; Howard, 2013).

To that end, the specificity of this work emphasizes the intersection of race, gender, and age group occupied by Black boys. How *they* experience, understand, and make sense of themselves is not only "mitigated by perceptions [and conceptions of their] own Blackness, maleness, racial makeup and history of the neighborhood and city, social class, etc." (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 28), but also in the ways they read and process the messages society sends them about what it means to be Black and a boy. This underscores the importance of investigating the experiences specifically among Black boys, and in doing so, put their experiences at the center of discussion and analysis so that *they* can shed light on how race, racism, racialization, and

gendering are key staples in their daily experiences (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Duncan, 2002; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2003, 2008, 2015).

Forgotten Voices: Who's Framing the Conversation about Black Boys in Middle School?

A substantial amount of scholarship indicates that race, experiences with racism, and race-related occurrences shape how Black youth explore identity, how they understand themselves in and across multiple contexts, and how they make sense of who they are and who they are becoming (e.g. Carter, 2007, 2008; Chavous, Bernat, et al., 2003; Leath et al., 2019; Nasir, 2012; Noguera, 2003, 2008; T. Perry, 2003; Sellers, Morgan, et al., 2001; Sellers, Smith, et al., 1998). Likewise, there is no shortage of literature documenting the racial experiences of Black boys, Black boy identity discourse, or the educational inequities and social disparities Black boys face in school and society (e.g. E. Anderson, 2009; A. Brown, 2011; Brown & Donnor, 2011; Dancy, 2014a; Dancy, 2014b; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Howard, 2013; Schott Foundation, 2012; Toldson & Lewis, 2012). However, there is little research that addresses these racialized and gendered topics specifically from the perspectives of Black boys in middle school (Buckley, 2018; Carter Andrews, 2016; Ferguson, 2010). This failure to include Black boys' voices within Black boy discourse writ large and as a separate topic of inquiry renders Black boys forgotten and invisible notably in the critical areas of examining the marginalization and exclusion of Black boys in schools and society, the impact of the manifestation of racism, anti-Blackness, and racial politics in the day-to-day functioning of society and schools on Black boys, the role of gender and gender identity development in middle school contexts, in and the implications that these collective experiences have on educating and engaging with them. Thus, as it stands, Black boys are rarely, if at all, invited to the process of critically interrogating popularized, racialized and gendered depictions of themselves or provided opportunities to think

through its impact on their lives, understandings, experiences, or conceptions of self (Carter Andrews, 2016; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ferguson, 2010).

Currently, research regarding Black boys mirrors the larger daunting narratives around educational attainment, academic achievement, and social outcomes that we repeatedly hear about Black boys writ large and that are commonly perpetuated in literature, policy, and the media (A. Brown & Donnor, 2011; Donnor & Brown, 2011; Howard & Reynolds, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011; McGee & Pearman, 2014). That is, when compared to their white counterparts, Black boys in middle school grades six through eight are three times as likely to grow up in poverty, ten times more likely to attend an impoverished high school, three times as likely to be suspended, and are disproportionately retained, unfairly punished, and more likely to drop out prior to graduation (ETS & CDF, 2012). As these data suggest, Black boys in middle school are seen as 'problems' in schools and society (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Rowley et al., 2014). However, these data fail to consider the impact that historical, political, and contemporary issues of prejudice, discrimination, and institutionalized racism, for example, has on their daily experiences and their overall educational and social outcomes (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Dumas, 2016; Dumas & ross, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Howard, 2013). Moreover, these numbers craft a monolithic narrative of the trajectory of Black boys and ignore the multiple identities that Black boys have and the myriad of factors that shape and inform their sense of self (Awokoya, 2012; Buckley, 2018; Tatum, 2017). In doing so, society and public discourse has minimized the complex processes of adolescence for Black boys and have done so without their first-hand experiential knowledge.

Unfortunately, we have placed Black boys in a position where they must contend with, counter, and/or challenge racialized and gendered perceptions and stereotypes of themselves,

while also learning how to accept and become themselves. Instead of just *being*, Black boys have to find ways to resist, agitate, and tear down the dehumanizing and devalued representations of themselves that society continues to uphold (Love, 2019). To do this, however Black boys must be given space to engage in, lead, and frame the conversation about themselves and their experiences. A. Brown and Donnor (2011) argue that "when Black [boys] are given an opportunity to speak candidly about their educational experiences, a much more nuanced narrative surfaces, which accounts for the structural and discursive constructs that constrain their lives" (p. 29). When one considers the *real*-life conditions and realities of race, racism, racialization, and gendering that Black boys are expected to live, work, and thrive in, it is particularly noteworthy to put their voice and experiences at the center of these discussions. Thus, how race, racism, race-related incidents, and racialized and gendered socialization processes are framed and discussed among and about Black boys, is just as important as who's involved in the framing and discussion.

Addressing the Problem

Let's Talk: Centering Black Boys as Social and Cultural Actors

This dissertation recognizes the importance of providing space for Black boys to talk and share their realities as a way to unearth and address the racialized and gendered complexities in their lives. In doing so, this research relies on their experiences and understandings to also reveal the impact that structural forces (i.e. racism and anti-Blackness) have on their constructions of self as they navigate society and while attending a predominantly white school. While it is understood that many Black boys contend with dehumanizing and devalued racialized and gendered perspectives of themselves in society and in schools (Goff et al., 2008; Goff et al., 2014; Love, 2019), this research shifts public and educational discourse by centering Black boys

as social and cultural actors and self-authors. That is, Black boys lead and frame conversations about themselves according to *their* subjectivities. They bring attention to their multiple identities, within group similarities and differences, and the myriad of factors, individual and systemic, that shape and impact their lives (Awokoya, 2012; Buckley, 2018; Tatum, 2017). Notably, they can speak and exist as Black boys without the fear of being accosted as Black men, and they can be assured that their voices and experiences matter and are valid sources of knowledge and contributions to research and society writ large. Further, the repositioning of Black boys should also encourage researchers to (re)think how these students, their identities, and self-concepts are shaped by and reflected in schools and society, (re)consider what messages are being conveyed to them, and (re)evaluate what stories are being told and by whom (Duncan, 2002; Ferguson, 2010; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2008, 2015; Tatum, 2007).

Research Questions

Using narrative research (Creswell et al., 2007) grounded in phenomenology (Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Schutz, 1967), this study interrogated how Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school made sense of and experienced race and racism and the impact of racialization and gendering on their self-concepts. Using qualitative interviews, student artifacts, and non-participant observations, *Real Talk* focused on the experiential knowledge, voices, and stories of eight Black boys to highlight the role of race and gender in their daily lives, while identifying ways to better support their experiences and identity-related processes. Given the historical and contemporary framings surrounding Black boys; the salience of race, racism, and anti-Blackness in society and schools; the heteronormative and hegemonic ideas of gender inflicting schools, spaces of education, and society; and the dearth of research about the

racialized and gendered experiences of Black boys from their point of view, this study addressed three questions:

1. How do Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school understand and experience race and racism?
2. How might these understandings and experiences inform their self-concept as they enter and move through the middle school grades?
3. What practices and structures create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school?

Theoretical and Conceptual Influences

In theorizing and interrogating the racialized and gendered experiences of Black boys, this study draws on the conceptualizations of Black boyhood, Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education, and anti-Blackness in education. Together, they provide context for how Black boys are reframed around "racialized representations of gendered subjects" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 96), and how individual and collective racialized and gendered understandings and experiences interact and emerge within the contexts of schools, education as a discipline, and in society writ large.

Black Boyhood

The experiences of Black boys in school and society are often paradoxical where "mainstream perceptions of them vacillate between making them babies and making them men" (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 10). The various ways in which Black boys are situated along dichotomous lines of love/hate and infant/man, for example, position them as desired and intriguing, yet feared and in constant need of control (Dancy, 2014a; Ferguson, 2010; Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Love, 2013). Thus, the idea of Black boys' existence as

children "evaporates before they are eight or nine-years-old when fear and control appears to be activated and the once 'cute' boys become problematic 'men'" (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 10). With this understanding, scholars are engaging in work that examines and challenges the discourse and rhetoric that diminish Black boys' rights to be children and opportunities to experience childhoods (e.g. Baldridge, 2014; Dancy, 2014a; Ferguson, 2010; Goff et al., 2014), bringing attention to the sociocultural experience of Black boyhood.

Informed by critical childhood studies (Stephens, 1995; Wyness, 2012), which provides key insights into how childhoods are understood and constructed, Dumas and Nelson (2016) conceptualize Black boyhood as "the material and discursive social phenomenon of childhood for Black boys" (p. 28). Instead of reading Black boyhood as a fixed, developmental stage leading into Black manhood, Dumas and Nelson frame Black boyhood as individualized experiences where Black boys are sociocultural agents who make sense of the world according to *their* subjectivity, experiences, and understandings. Recognizing that there is heterogeneity in Black boys, the notion of Black boyhood acknowledges the multiple ways in which "cultural identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and nationality) and social contexts (e.g., family, peers, and school) shape and are shaped by [the] boys themselves" (Way & Chu, 2004, p. 2). On the one hand, there are various, overlapping contexts, factors, and processes that occur at home, school, and in society that shape and inform Black boys' identities, sense of being, and existence. On the other hand, as Dumas and Nelson (2016) explain, the boys also "participate in the making of his own being in the world and in the broader society's understanding of him as a child in the world" (p. 28). This conceptualization, however, is often hard to imagine within our society given the impact and consequences of systemic cultural prejudice, racism and anti-Blackness, the heteronormative constructions of gender (Davis, 2001; Ferguson, 2010;

McCready, 2004; Staples, 1982; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003, Way et al., 2014), and the hegemonic notions of childhood (Chu, 2014; Orellana, 2009; Polakow, 1992; Stephens, 1995). This is especially challenging among Black boys who are often referred to and treated as "young men", while simultaneously erased from Black boyhood (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ferguson, 2010).

It is well established in the literature that Black boys are confronted with societal stereotypes that perpetuate them as criminal, at-risk, juvenile-bound, and a problem in need of discipline and control (e.g. Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; T. Brown, 2013; Dancy, 2014a; Donnor & Brown, 2011; ETS & CDF, 2012; Ferguson, 2010; Howard, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002). Moreover, the behaviors and interactions that Black boys engage and participate in, that countless adolescents do every day, are scrutinized and refracted through a lens that only apply to *them*. Ferguson (2010) describes this socialization process as adultification where "their transgressions are made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naïveté" (p. 83). This interpretive framing shifts the discourse and rhetoric regarding Black boys from boys to men, denying them of their rights to Black boyhood (Dancy, 2014a; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2011). In doing so, this (re)positioning and (re)framing of Black boys as Black men underlines the pervasiveness and institutionalization of race, racism and anti-Blackness in society and consequently in social institutions like school, such that their childhood has been confined along racialized and gendered lines void of humanity.

For this study, centering Black boys' boyhoods foregrounds their agency and authorship to share their livelihoods and self-determine their worldviews according to their perspectives, understandings, and interpretations. It brings insight into the multiple factors and forces that

inform and shape their childhoods, in and out of school settings, that society writ large and adults specifically may not have considered as key to their existences. Moreover, if we consider and value Black boyhoods as critical to understanding their racialized and gendered experiences, then perhaps we can begin to see Black boys anew, without fear, terror, or anxiety, and through a lens that "privileges how [they] imagine and express their own senses of self" (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 38).

Critical Race Theory in Education

Since its inception in the mid 1970s, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has become one of the "most visible frameworks for critically studying and researching race" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 11). It is a paradigm that examines and challenges the relationship among race, racism, and the unequal and unjust distribution of power at structural levels (Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ledesma & Solórzano, 2013; Taylor, 2016). Moreover, CRT has become an avenue to discuss and address the ways in which race and racism are deeply rooted in our society through ideology, law, policy, and practice (Bell, 1995; Tate, 1997). Seeking to "expose the historical, ideological, psychological, and social contexts in which racism has been declared virtually eradicated" (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p. 10), CRT scholarship has also extended into other disciplines and fields, namely education.

In the mid 1990s, CRT in education emerged as "a powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequity that people of color experience" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18). Rather than simply study race as a category within school contexts, CRT in education focused on and studied the racialization of the system of education and how race and racism "saturate the entire schooling process" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 3). In doing so, this framework not only challenged hegemonic and Eurocentric perspectives, pedagogies, and practices in education, but it

transformed the way educational experiences of students and teachers of color were told and heard (Kohli, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). Although CRT in education has a relatively short history, over the past few decades the framework has been employed as a multi-dimensional anti-racist approach to address structural issues in schooling, a theory that grounds qualitative research methods and methodological approaches, a guide for research design and data collection, and tool of analysis (Kohli, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2013). This dissertation uses CRT as theoretical framework, a guide for research design, and a tool of analysis to examine and explore Black boys' understandings and experiences with race, racism, and their racialized and gendered experiences as they entered and moved through a predominantly white middle school. In doing so, this study was able to build upon and extend three of the six CRT tenets in the following ways:

1. **Race as a social construction.** Race is a social construction that groups individuals based on phenotypic differences. It is assumed with clear implications on one's life experiences and outcomes, yet race is not universally defined or understood (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Leonardo, 2013; Parker & Stovall, 2004). This study interrogated how Black boys understood and experienced race and what factors contributed to such notions and ideas as a way to reveal the complexities in and associated with race.
2. **The centrality of race and racism.** CRT in education acknowledges and centers the pervasiveness of race and racism within the context of schooling, teaching, learning, and education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate,1995; Leonardo, 2013). It recognizes the multiple and varied ways race and racism infiltrates education and the ways in which it is institutionally perpetuated. This study focused on race, racism,

racialization, and other racial socialization processes in the lives of Black boys, unmasking and revealing the racial nature of their experiences in and out of schooling contexts.

3. **Intersectionality and anti-essentialism**. CRT rejects the dominant perspective that people of color are monolithic in their experiences, understandings, epistemologies, and overall existence (Kohli, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). This study specifically challenged the myopic narratives of Black boys by centering and highlighting their diverse experiences with race and racism and its interaction specifically with notions and constructions of gender, maleness, and masculinity, as well as other social identities that contribute to how they experience being and becoming.

Anti-Blackness in Education

Anti-Blackness in education interrogates how and in what ways hostile attacks and volatile assaults manifest against Black students in schooling contexts. Dumas (2014) contends that for many Black students, schools and systems of learning have become sites in "which the possibility of educational access and opportunity seems increasingly (and even intentionally) elusive" (p. 3). He argues that this subjects Black students, families and communities, to a malaise of "unearned" mental, physical, emotional, and psychological discomfort and pain, or what he terms "Black suffering". Further, because of the permanence of structural racism in schools, Black suffering in the form of Black bodies in overcrowded classrooms, Black students being ignored by teachers, Black students policed by school personnel, and the devaluing of creativity and intellectual ability of Black students, for example, become repetitive and mundane (Dumas, 2014; Dumas & ross, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Love, 2019).

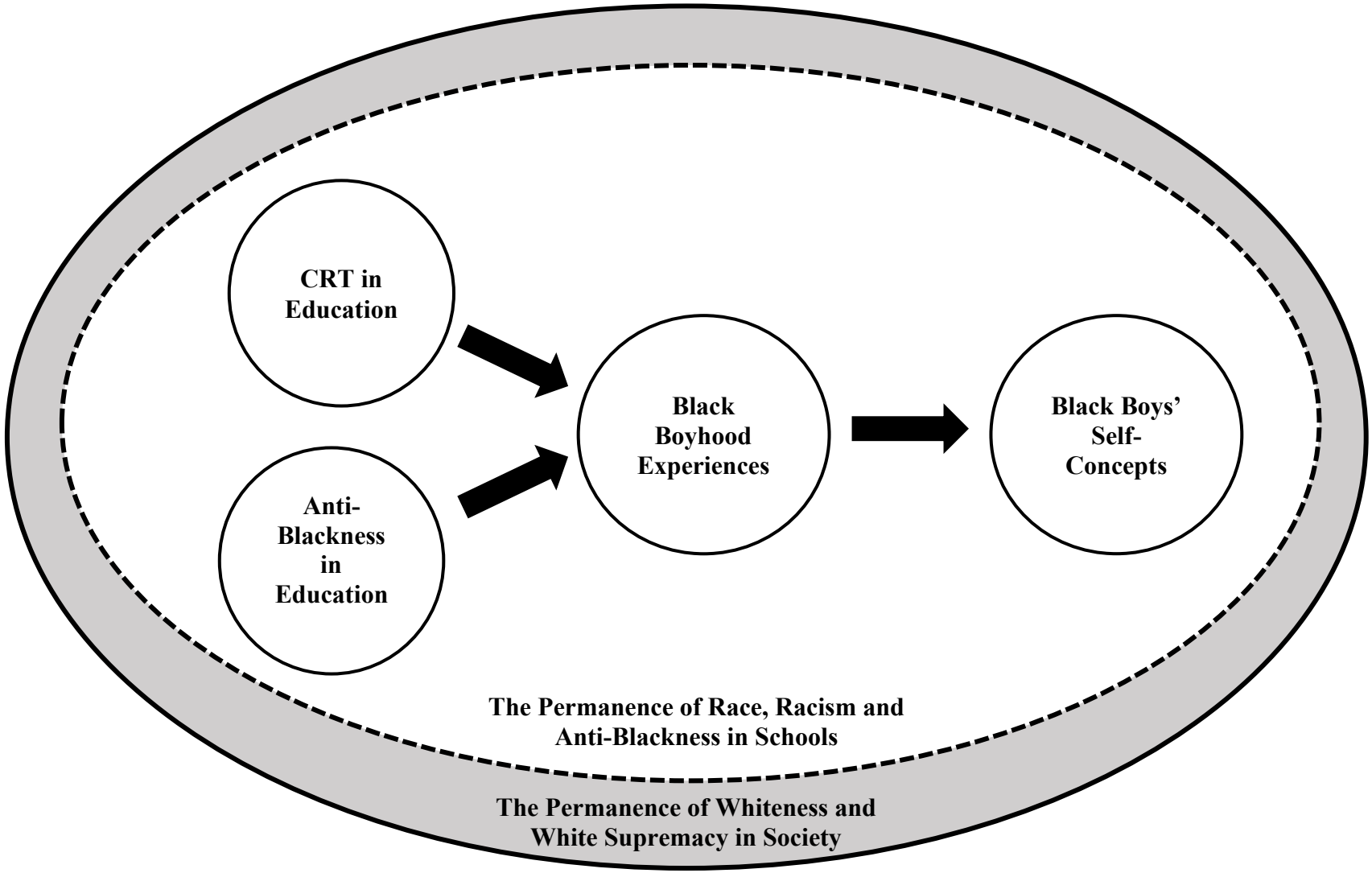
For Black boys, their Black bodies are persistently seen as a proverbial problem, constructed as nonhuman and uneducable, and perceived as a threat to everything and everyone else (Dumas, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Howard, 2013; Love, 2013; Sexton, 2008). This manifestation of anti-Black assaults and violence is illustrated by their overrepresentation in special education and underrepresentation in advanced and gifted programs (National Research Council [NRC], 2002;), the disproportionate rates of surveillance and policing in society and school settings (Edwards, Lee, et al., 2019; Fine et al., 2003), and the disproportionate rates of retention, suspension, and expulsion among any other student group (NCES, 2019a). This translates to the chronic adultification, criminalization, and dehumanization of Black boys that recursively erase their humanness, promise, and possibility. What is even more disconcerting according to Howard (2013), is that "the intensity and persistence [of] these social ills continue to have a deleterious effect on Black [boys] well into adulthood in ways that it does not affect other populations" (p. 55). Yet and still, the ways in which Black boys are profiled, judged, perceived, and treated because of their race/Blackness and gender/maleness, especially in school contexts, is hardly discussed or recognized (Love, 2013). Moreover, there is little inquiry into the impact and influence that anti-Black experiences and the psychological, physical, mental, and emotional trauma associated with it have on Black boys' sense of self, specifically from their voices and perspectives. Thus, I argue that examining how Black boys make sense of and experience race, racism, racialization and gendering, and the residual impact that these understandings and experiences have on their conceptions and perceptions of self is critical in reforming and reshaping how we engage in daily practices and pedagogies with them.

Connecting the Theoretical and Conceptual Influences

Tatum (2007) explains that Black youths' "sense of self-definition [and self-concept] is very much shaped in childhood by what is reflected back to them by those around us" (p. 24). With this understanding, framing this dissertation around the conceptualization of Black boyhood, CRT in education, and anti-Blackness in education provide a unique framework for understanding how Black boys understand and experience race and racism and how their racialized and gendered experiences impact their self-concepts (see Figure 1).

Through this framing, we come to see that there is an inseparable link between how Black boys see and understand themselves, how racialized and gendered experiences manifest during their childhoods, and how power and privilege operate across various settings (i.e. home, school, society) alongside racism, anti-Blackness, whiteness, and white supremacy (Love, 2013). It illustrates that Black boys' self-concepts are informed by their Black boyhood experiences, which are informed by their cultural identities (i.e. racial socialization processes intersected with their maleness and gendered socialization processes) and social contexts (e.g. family and home life, friendships, peers, school relationships, etc.), all of which function within the oppressive structures that undergird our society. For Black boys, their identities, sense of self, self-concepts, and overall existence becomes restricted around a racialized and gendered context that society authored. This materializes through "adultification that erases their right to childhood and their status as children" (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 30), through normative categories of whiteness and "marginalized and de-legitimated categories of Blackness" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9), through hegemonic notions and narrow constructions of gender (Davis, 2001; McCready, 2004, 2010; Staples, 1982; Way et al., 2014), and through recursive exposure to racism, racial discrimination, and anti-Black experiences in schools and spaces of education (Chambers & Tabron, 2013;

Figure 1: : Connecting the Theoretical and Conceptual Influences



Fisher et al., 2000; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, et al., 2006; Stevenson, 2004).

Dissertation Overview

In this dissertation, I examine the racialized and gendered experiences of Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school in a small Midwestern suburban city. I specifically look at how eight students understand and experience race and racism, how those understandings and experiences inform their self-concepts, and in doing so unveil the practices and structures needed to create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for them. To provide context and background for the study, Chapter Two explores the literature that connects the major topics of this study. This body of work focused on the institutionalization of race, racism, and anti-Blackness within schools and spaces of education in general and in predominantly white middle schools specifically and their impact on Black boys' experiences. Chapter Three gives a detailed look into the methodology used to conduct the study. It outlines the purpose, research design, and sampling and recruitment process of the study, provides information about the research site, participants, and researcher-participant collaboration, then ends with a review of the data collection and data analysis processes, my positionality and epistemological perspective, and challenges of the study. Chapters Four through Six focus on the major findings of the study, each chapter highlighting prominent themes regarding Black boys' racialized and gendered experiences while attending their predominantly white middle school. The dissertation concludes with Chapter Seven, which is a discussion of how parents, school practitioners, education researchers, and those of us in leadership positions in education and policy can begin to reframe Black boys in society, school, and research. It highlights the implications for future work in educational research and looks at how we can engage in inquiry

that explores the complexities of their lives from more affirming, supportive, and student-centered positions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter draws on educational, school counseling, psychology, and sociology research to help frame the discussion around the racialized and gendered experiences of Black boys in schools. The chapter begins with an overview of anti-Blackness in education to examine the racially hostile environment of schooling towards Black youth writ large. Next, I discuss how Black boys specifically experience race, racism, race-related incidents, and racial socialization processes in schools. Using an intersectional perspective, I then review literature regarding Black boys' racial and gender identities and their connections with self-concepts. The chapter ends by discussing what is known about the academic and social experiences of Black boys in predominantly white middle schools. Together, these topics help link adolescent development with messaging about race and gender and the perceptions associated with being a Black boy. In doing so, the literature brings attention to the individual and structural factors that further marginalize, isolate, and exclude Black boys in schools and spaces of education.

Black as "Othered": Anti-Blackness in Schools and Spaces of Education

Given the heightened marginalization, disregard, and disdain for Black bodies, particularly in the United States, it is important to consider how one's existence as a Black person is targeted and the impact that this assault might have on the understanding and conception of one's self writ large, and racial self specifically. While racism is undoubtedly tied to race, Kohli (2009) posits that "racism is not always acted out based on racial categories. It can also manifest as discrimination based on factors [or assumptions] *affiliated* with race" (p. 237). Despite the historical imprint that racism has collectively had on this country, *how* it manifests in society for specific racial groups varies. This is not to compare or determine the weight or severity of a racial group's oppression. Rather, examining the specificity of racism against a

particular racial group can be key to understanding its influence on the understanding and perception of one's self. For Black people and communities, this specificity of racism is called anti-Blackness.

Anti-Blackness as a form of racism is theorized as an epistemic, ideological, social, cultural, material, and spiritual disregard for and violence against Black people (Day, 2015; Dumas, 2016; Patterson, 1982; Wilderson, 2010). Informed by the Afro-pessimist idea that "Black is *other* than human" (Dumas, 2016, p. 13), the manifestations of anti-Blackness have been examined from various disciplines including theology (Keenan, 2018; Washington, 1981), philosophy (L. Gordon, 1997), critical media (Wilderson, 2010), sociology (Curry & Curry, 2018), and African and African American Studies/Black Studies (Sexton, 2008). Across and within these disciplines, scholars denote the multiple ways that Black humanity is consistently and increasingly denied, silenced, erased, surveilled, and murdered (Day, 2015; Goff et al., 2008; Goff e al., 2014; Love, 2016). Recognizing the prevalence of anti-Blackness in society and subsequently in social institutions like schools, intellectual inquiry on anti-Blackness has also been studied in education, specifically in P-12 settings (Love, 2013, 2016), higher education (Dancy et al., 2018; Mustaffa, 2017; Williams et al., 2019), and education policy (Dumas, 2014, 2016; Dumas & ross, 2016; Gillborn, 2006).

According to Love (2016), many Black children in elementary and secondary schools endure a slow death of the spirit "through systemic, institutionalized, anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence" (p. 1). Enacted by school officials, teachers, and peers through practice, policy, and rhetoric, she argues that the murdering of the spirit is a result of the racist structures that deny Black children the things they need to be and feel human and to be educated, like "inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance " (Love, 2013, p. 302). Like Dumas, Love has also

found that the spirit murdering of Black children extends beyond P-12 settings. In fact, the slow "killing of Black children by murdering their spirits through intentional actions, physical assaults, and verbal stabbings" (Love, 2016, p. 22) is present and persistent in higher education via anti-Black education violence (Mustaffa, 2017), anti-Black oppression, institutional anti-Blackness (Williams et al., 2019), and the erasure and dismissal of Black students and institutions.

The higher education system in the U.S. has historically been a catalyst of racial hierarchies, white supremacy, and anti-Black violence (Mustaffa, 2017; Stein, 2016; Wilder, 2013). Mustaffa (2017) argues that Black individuals laid the economic foundation, exerted the mental and physical labor, and established the epistemological grounding for predominantly white institutions (PWIs) to exist. Yet, these are the same institutions and systems that constrain, devalue, and kill Black people (Mustaffa, 2017). As Dumas and Love posit, this violence goes beyond the physical destruction, intimidation, assault, and disregard for and of the Black body. This type of anti-Black violence "functions in interpersonal relations and at the structural, cultural, and direct levels" (Mustaffa, 2017, p. 712). For example, enslaved Black people served as material and expendable goods for colleges and universities. Their labor was exploited to physically start, build and sustain institutions, while only being considered three-fifths of a person (Stein, 2016; Wilder, 2013). Moreover, the physical violence of slave labor, the beatings, killings, and selling of Black bodies, the psychological and emotional violence of dehumanizing the Black spirit, and the cultural violence of denying the education and freedom of Black minds, subjugated Black individuals to a callous cycle of anti-Black education violence. Keep in mind that all of this was occurring to Black people who were not students at these institutions, but

enslaved Black people living and working in anti-Black communities (Mustaffa, 2017; Wilder, 2013).

Dancy and colleagues' (2018) contributions to anti-Blackness scholarship in higher education suggests that higher education systems have been, and remain, more vested and invested in maintaining "an institutional and social relationship of ownership with Black people" (p. 177) than educating them. This reflects the larger and deeper commitment to Black disregard that is reproduced and perpetuated through institutional provisions where the Black body is policed, surveilled, and perceived as disposable labor and property for the benefit of institutions, with no regard for the existence and experiences of Black people (Dancy et al., 2018; Stein, 2016; Wilder, 2013; Wilderson, 2010). This was found in other scholars' works where Black bodies were used as resources to establish and maintain the perpetuity of institutions (Mustaffa, 2017; Stein, 2016; Wilder, 2013). This form of anti-Blackness illustrates the construction of Black humanity as invisible and expendable, but also extends to the devaluation and degradation of Black institutions.

Williams et al. (2019) posits that historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) contend with "the persistent imagery and discourse that construct them as institutions devoid of value" (p. 571). They and others argue that HBCUs are depicted as institutionally fragile, lacking leadership, and wrought with financial challenges, low alumni support, and low graduation rates (J. Anderson, 1988; Gasman, 2007; Williams et al., 2019). Anti-Blackness in this context functions to tarnish the reputations of HBCUs and undermine the value of them. Moreover, the proliferation of deficit narratives ignores and demoralizes how and why these institutions were established, contributing to the further marginalization of Black students who attend these institutions. In doing so, these anti-Black assaults and attacks not only position HBCUs as

deficient and inadequate, but it attempts to erase HBCUs from higher education altogether. Unsurprisingly, this perpetuation of Blackness as disposable, unimportant, and invalid mirrors society's calculated efforts to rewrite and expunge the histories and legacies of Black people (Dumas, 2014; Love, 2016).

In sum, anti-Blackness in and across P-20 settings is the result of multiple social and cultural forces acting against Black existence as well as the convergence of these forces with the legacies and histories of race, racism and anti-Black disregard (Day, 2015; Dumas, 2014, 2016; Love, 2013; Mustaffa, 2017). Irrespective of the type or level of institution, anti-Black rhetoric, attitudes, behaviors, practices, and policies are blatantly and routinely enacted on Black students by administrators, teachers, school practitioners, parents, and students. The crude and candid usage of racial epithets and slurs by teachers and students (Crain, 2019; Griffith, 2019; Pilarski, 2019), the enforcement of "hair policies" where Black students are forced to cut, straighten or change their natural hair or be disqualified from competitions (Ahmed, 2018), suspended from school (Battle, 2017), or face other disciplinary actions (Frazier, 2018), and the excessive use of force and "takedowns" of Black students by security guards (Blue, 2019; Klein, 2018), are just a few examples of the assaults and violence against Black students. As these incidents illustrate, Black students are increasingly subjected and exposed to hostile, anti-Black experiences in education. This is evidenced among Black boys who are disproportionately subjected and targeted to anti-Black, racialized and gendered experiences in schools and spaces of education (Carter Andrews, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Love, 2013; Tatum, 2017).

A "Problem" to Reckon With: Black Boys' Experiences with Race and Racism in Schools

A significant amount of research indicates that Black youth begin to examine and explore race, racial identity, and race-related processes during early adolescence or the middle school

years (e.g. Carter Andrews, 2016; Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Leath et al., 2019; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Phinney & Tarver, 1988; Tatum, 1992, 2017; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). However, as Black adolescents begin to expand their social circles, build relationships outside of the home, and become more independent, they are more likely to increase their exposure to racism, racial discrimination, and other racial socialization processes particularly in schools and spaces of education (Chambers & Tabron, 2013; Fisher et al., 2000; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, et al., 2006; Stevenson, 2004; Tatum, 2017). This is especially true for Black boys who are already labeled as troubled, aggressive, problematic, and other racialized and gendered stereotypes that often make daily tasks challenging and in some cases fatal (Carter Andrews, 2016; Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Dancy, 2014a; Ferguson, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2011). This is evidenced, for example, by the pervasive adultification and criminalization of Black boys and the disproportionate rates of surveillance and policing of these students in school settings as well as in society (Dancy, 2014a; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Edwards, Lee, et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2010; Fine et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2011). Thus, the constant exposure to and experiences with race, racism, and racialized interactions not only influence how Black boys perceive themselves and how they make sense of and take up notions and orientations of race/Blackness and gender/maleness, but it also impacts how they are perceived and treated by others.

A close examination of research on Black boys reveal that they experience a myriad of academic and social inequities in schools and spaces of education. For example, Black boys in middle school experience increased levels of racial bias, racial discrimination and negative treatment in classroom and peer contexts (Chambers & Tabron, 2013; Fisher et al., 2000). Moreover, they experience various forms of racial microaggressions where their feelings and

actualities are invalidated (Henfield, 2011). Further, Black boys encounter individual and systemic acts of racism in school that trigger an examination of their race and racial identities (Carter Andrews, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Tatum, 2017), and grow more aware of racialized and gendered stereotypes and expectations in class settings (Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Copping et al., 2013; Noguera, 2015). Additionally, Black boys are overrepresented in special education classes, underrepresented in advanced placement courses and gifted programs (Carter Andrews, 2016; Henfield et al., 2008; NRC, 2002; Polite & Davis, 1999; Porche et al., 2004), and are subjected to more disciplinary actions from teachers, administrators, and school practitioners where disciplinary power is unjustly enacted and consequences are hasher (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; T. Brown, 2013; Dancy, 2014a; Donnor & Brown, 2011; Ferguson, 2010).

As Black boys navigate structural and systemic forms of racism and anti-Blackness in their classrooms and schools and among their peers and teachers, they are also contending with recursive narratives that they are uneducable, underperforming, and underachieving (Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Ferguson, 2010; Mickelson & Greene, 2006; Noguera, 2008, 2015; Polite & Davis, 1999). In sum, research indicates that schools and spaces of education frame, perceive, and interact with Black boys largely from deficit and damaging perspectives. These perspectives not only marginalize the experiences and existence of these students, but they stereotypically connect racial identity to academic outcomes and social behaviors, rendering Black boys as "problems" to reckon with and "problems" that schools must fix (Dancy, 2014a; Howard, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

In Anne Ferguson's *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, for example, the Professor of Afro American Studies and Women's Studies looked at how twenty fifth and sixth grade Black boys constructed, co-constructed and reconstructed their sense of self

in a schooling environment where they were labeled and treated as "jail-bound", "at-risk" for failing, "unsalvageable", and always "getting into trouble" (Ferguson, 2010). In this work, she chronicled the unique experiences, daily interactions, thoughts, and reflections of what it meant to be a Black boy in middle school from the perspectives of students, their teachers, school staff, parents, and society writ large. In doing so, Ferguson highlighted and examined the various messages the boys received about race, gender/gender performance, academic and social identities, and their overall existence as Black boys in this country. She found that misbehavior, inattention, disrupting class, fighting, and questioning authority, for example, were normative practices of masculinity and performances of gender. However, these "normal" acts were made more sinister and criminal when enacted by Black boys. Claude, one of the known Troublemakers in Ferguson's study, explained, "Everybody gets into trouble sometimes. Laura [a white girl in the class who is a very good worker], even she gets in trouble sometimes" (p. 169). But for Claude, the appeal of getting into trouble was "easier than staying good" (p. 168). This sentiment was shared among the Troublemakers whose transgressive acts and disruptive behaviors were part of their daily classroom and school performances that sought to challenge teacher-student power dynamics and school routines.

Contrary to the deficit narrative that suggests Black boys develop an "oppositional identity" (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1986, 2003) for fear of doing well in school, Ferguson points out that these students were not only aware of the meanings of rules and understood the consequences of getting into trouble, but they also recognized that labels were attached to specific behaviors and performances and that they knew teachers' practices, treatment, and positioning of them were based on those labels. In what appears as a contradictory process for these Black boys, Ferguson (2010) explained that even in a racially hostile and violent school

setting, “making a name for yourself through identity work and self-performance, even if the consequence is punishment, becomes a highly charged necessity” (p. 169). Thus, the notion of Black boys making a name for themselves that is not predicated on academic identity or achievement highlights the many difficult choices and complicated negotiations that they have to make in order to construct and maintain certain types of identities related to their orientations and understandings of race, gender, masculinity, etc., many of which lead to disciplinary actions. However, this neither excuses or condones the negative treatment and inequitable disciplinary actions these boys receive, nor does it disregard the institutional racist policies and practices that schools enforce or their perpetuation of racialized and gendered stereotypes regarding Black boys and behavior (Ferguson, 2010; Noguera, 2015).

Ladson-Billings (2011) argues that “in many schools the primary focus of Black boys’ educational experience is maintaining order and discipline rather than student learning and academic achievement” (p. 7). This is evidenced through the copious amounts of research that examine the disproportionality in discipline and punishment endured by Black boys (e.g. Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; T. Brown, 2013; Carter Andrews, 2016; Donnor & Brown, 2011; Ferguson, 2010; Henfield, 2011; Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Skiba et al., 2002). As Ladson-Billings and others observe, there is little focus on their learning, sense of becoming, or the individual and structural factors that impact their academic, social, and developmental processes. Further, the targeted solutions that have been implemented to address the “problem” with Black boys’ behaviors often “de-emphasize the historical importance and structural role race [and racism] play as life opportunity shaping variables” (Donnor & Brown, 2011, p. 2). Thus, when race and racism is overlooked or dismissed as key variables in the ways that Black boys experience school, it further “marginalizes a group that has experienced numerous forms of racism and exclusion”

(Howard & Flennaugh, 2011, p. 106). In other words, there is not enough emphasis on how race and racism inform school policies and practices or the consequences that they have on the overall schooling experiences of Black boys. The lack of attention to these factors suggests that the schooling experiences and outcomes of this group of students continue to be framed and perpetuated as an individual and personal "problem" that is reflective of *them* rather than the larger oppressive systems in the schools in which they learn.

Despite the multiple ways Black boys are promulgated as "inherently capable of committing wrongful acts" (Henfield, 2011, p. 151), there is a growing body of research that examines how they thrive academically and socially in the presence of race, racism, racial stereotypes, racial bias, etc. (e.g. Berry, 2005; J. Brown, 2010; Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Gordon et al., 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; McGee & Pearman, 2004). Within this literature, scholars stress how students' agency, self-motivation, self-empowerment, resilience, personal responsibility, and positive identities, for example, help counter negative stereotypes and perceptions regarding their learning, academic success, and overall schooling experiences. For example, McGee and Pearman (2014) interviewed thirteen mathematically high-achieving Black boys and found that while it was difficult to challenge normative deficit characterizations that they "can't do math, are lazy, are unintelligent, go to jail not college, or can only go to college through basketball and football scholarships" (p. 381), students were able to develop healthy racial and academic identities that contributed to their overall academic achievement and success. Students believed that their intrinsic motivation to learn, internal drive, aspiration to achieve, and personal agency to succeed allowed them to overcome racial stereotypes, lack of teacher support, and other negative factors impacting their academic performance. One student recalled that instead of getting frustrated with his math teacher for moving too fast through the

material, he got a math tutor instead. In his words, "I would not let one bad teacher interfere with my mathematics learning" (McGee & Pearman, 2014, p. 13).

Along this same topic of inquiry, other studies have examined the role of participation in co-curricular activities as counters and social buffers against racialized and gendered stereotypes, negative perceptions regarding learning, and deficit based academic identities among Black boys. Researchers found that engagement in mentoring programs, sports/athletics, clubs, music, and religious activities, for example, served as protective factors that supported academic success (McGee & Pearman, 2014), contributed to the development of positive racial identities and self-concepts (Berry, 2005), increased students' overall confidence regarding their academic abilities (J. Brown, 2010), and had positive influences on educational aspirations and goals (Hawkins & Mulkey, 2005). This suggests that expanding social circles and building relationships in schooling contexts can support the healthy development of identity, racially, academically, and socially. Further, these social opportunities and networks can serve to build students' self-esteem and self-efficacy as it relates to their overall social and emotional processes as adolescents, as well as in the construction of their academic identities, their beliefs and attitudes towards school, their understandings of success, and their overall academic engagement (Berry, 2005; Ford & Harris, 1996; Ford et al., 1998; Tyler & Boelter, 2008). According to Carter Andrews (2016) "developing and nurturing boys' self-efficacy about their academic abilities, is a necessity, given the social positioning of adolescent Black boys in this country [and in schools]" (p. 54).

Although school systems have been framed as safe and equitable spaces of learning and opportunities for academic, social, and emotional growth and development, our schools and spaces of education operate and exist as a function of and within our raced, racist, and gendered society (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). For many Black boys, schools have become "institutional

settings where they have been categorized as problems or as failures" (Ferguson, p 97). The convergence of their race/Blackness and gender/maleness not only shape their day to day experiences, but it also impacts their schooling experiences, often to their disadvantage (Duncan, 2002). Given the amount of time these students spend in such racially fraught and heteronormative environments then, it is important to look at how schooling contexts provide or deprive the social-emotional resources and affirming and supportive spaces necessary for Black boys to configure a sense of self through a lens outside of society's notions of normativity. Thus, ensuring that Black boys recoup their sense of self and identity is critical to their ways of being and becoming in schools and in society.

A "Balancing Act": An Intersectional Perspective on Racial and Gender Identity and Self-Concept Among Black Boys

Identity theory research asserts that adolescence is a time of identity formation and self-construction, where multiple, overlapping processes and interactions are happening that help youth make sense of who they are and who they are becoming (Awokoya, 2012; Buckley, 2018; Rogers, et al., 2015). Notably, these important yet complex, social processes are neither individually or independently constructed, nor is there one way to experience them (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016; Nasir, 2012; Rubin, 2007; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012). That is, how, where, and with whom these processes occur contribute to how adolescents organize and construct their identities and how they perceive themselves. An individual's self-concept or perception of self (Tajfel, 1978) is "derived in part from the knowledge and feelings about being a member in social groups and the importance ascribed to those memberships" (Buckley, 2018, p. 313). It is understood to be "an individual's evaluation of their abilities and personal characteristics that also include an overall judgment of how the person may feel about themselves" (Flennaugh,

2016b, p. 6). For Black boys, race and gender are two social groups that provide critical information about their identities and play a key role in how they evaluate, perceive, and feel about themselves (Carter Andrews, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Rogers et al., 2015; Turner & Brown, 2007). However, establishing a sense of identity and self as a Black boy within the contexts of our society and schools can be particularly challenging.

Black boys' identities are largely connected with racialized and gendered stereotypes that are "deeply rooted in the history of slavery, reinforced by media portrayals of Black male violence, criminality, and policing" (Buckley, 2018, p. 311). As noted in the previous section, literature about Black boys often focus on underachievement and underperformance and discipline and punishment. Consequently, public discourse and research portray and view Black boys "as a monolith rather than a heterogeneous group with multiple intersecting identities" (Buckley, 2018, p. 311). That is, Black boys' social and academic outcomes and experiences tend to focus on a single explanation approach (Howard & Reynolds, 2013). Instead, scholars argue that the lives and realities of Black boys should be examined from an intersectional lens to illustrate how identity group memberships fit together and to provide a more nuanced, comprehensive account and understanding of them (Buckley, 2018; Howard & Reynolds, 2013; Rogers et al., 2015). This perspective, sometimes framed as "Black male" social identity, considers how their experiences of race/Blackness interact with meanings of gender/maleness, revealing the diversity among them.

Studies that examine the role of racial identity in academic achievement (e.g. Berry, 2005; Chavous, Bernat, et al., 2003; Chavous, Rivas-Drake, et al. 2008; Ferguson, 2010; Gordon et al., 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Lee, 1996), for example, offer insight into the complexities of Black boys 'identities and the variability in how race and gender interact. Within

these studies, scholars recognize that there is no consensus on *how* race and racial identity impact academic achievement or its role in academic outcomes. Moreover, it is unclear the extent to which racial identity, independent of other factors, namely gender, impact their academic outcomes. It is not assumed, for example, that a strong racial identity and deviation from traditional male ideologies and expectations will result in high academic achievement, positive academic outcomes, or garner a positive identity or conception of self. Rather, scholars realize that there is significant variation in *how* racial identity and its intersection with gender is understood and experienced among Black boys which impact their academic achievement, level of academic engagement, and overall academic identity (Buckley, 2018; Chavous, Bernat, et al., 2003; Chavous, Rivas-Drake, et al. 2008; Ferguson, 2010; Rogers et al., 2015).

For instance, positive racial identities and self-definitions were identified as sources of academic success and contributed to high academic performance among some Black boys (Berry, 2005; Gutman & Midgely, 2000). For others, mentoring programs and sports supported their academic achievement and development of positive identities (J. Brown, 2010; McGee & Pearman, 2014), as did parental involvement, parents' attitudes toward learning, and/or living up to parents' expectations (Berry, 2005; McGee & Pearman, 2014; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Still others chose to distance themselves from Blackness in order to "perform" and "do well" in school and to remove themselves from "negative expectations and demands of adults and peers [associated with being a Black boy]" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 212). For some of the boys in Ferguson's study, however, these choices had adverse effects on their relationships with peers, put their gender identification and maleness under question, and posed dilemmas regarding their overall perception of self as a Black boy and as a learner (Ferguson, 2010). These studies collectively reveal the complexities and increasing pressures for Black boys to maintain a

"balanced" identity in proving one's Blackness and performing one's maleness while also being "committed" to school and being accepted by peers and social networks (Carter Andrews, 2016; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Henfield et al., 2008; Wingard, 2000).

Thus, the idea of Black boys having to "balance" their identities and sometimes choose between them, highlights the ways in which their academic experiences and outcomes are recursively filtered through a racialized and gendered lens. This is also evidenced when examining gendered behaviors and communication patterns. Black boys are stereotypically confined to gender-typed beliefs of hypermasculinity, hegemonic notions of maleness, and masculine behaviors about what a 'real man' is with little room to deviate from traditional male ideologies and norms (Cunningham et al., 2013; Davis, 2001; Ferguson, 2010; McCready, 2010; Santos et al., 2013; Way et al., 2014). Noguera (2015) argues that many Black boys feel the need to "project the image of a tough and angry young black man" (p. 24) because to behave differently or to stray away from these raced and gendered norms would put their masculinity in jeopardy. For Black boys, infringing the rules, fighting, challenging authority, and inappropriate interactions with girls, for example, align with behaviors that are constructed as hegemonically male and masculine. At the same time, however, these behaviors are also deemed inappropriate, threatening, and dangerous according to Eurocentric cultural standards (Dancy, 2014a; Ferguson, 2010; Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Love, 2013). In other words, when male behaviors are examined through a lens of race, whiteness is seen as normal and right and Blackness as egregious and illegitimate. Consequently, this translates into harsher punishments and consequences for Black boys compared to their counterparts (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; T. Brown, 2013; Donnor & Brown, 2011; Ferguson, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002).

As these experiences suggest, Black boys' identity and understanding of self has been "complicated by societally imposed constructions of who these students should be as *Blacks* and as *young men*" (Carter Andrews, 2016, p. 48). Moreover, it becomes clear that "their racial and gender identities are inextricably linked through a history of oppression in a white male supremacist society, with negative societal stereotypes that have been socioculturally constructed" (Carter Andrews, 2016, p. 48). With this understanding, scholars like Carter Andrews emphasize how race and gender are historically positioned in our society where Blackness and maleness interact in harmful ways, which result, more often than not, in the exclusion and marginalization of Black boys in society and schools (Dancy, 2014a; Dumas, 2016; Duncan, 2002; Howard, 2013; Howard & Reynolds, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011). Further, the multiple ways in which race is experienced, valued, and regarded among Black boys (Chavous, Bernat, et al., 2003; Rogers et al., 2015; Sellers et al., 2006), and the varying levels of adherence to or rejection of hegemonic and heteronormative notions of gender, gender-type behaviors, gendered norms, maleness, and masculinity (Davis, 2001; McCready, 2004; Staples, 1982; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003, Way et al., 2014), reveals the multiplicities in what it means to be Black and a boy (Ferguson, 2010; Gates, 2011; Howard & Reynolds, 2013). Thus, the overlap of racial and gender understandings, expectations, narratives, and stereotypes have important implications for Black boys. This not only informs their identities and influence their self-concepts, but it helps explain why Black boys attribute different meanings to their experiences (Awokoya, 2012; Carter Andrews, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Nasir, 2012; Sellers et al., 2006).

It is important to note, however, that very few studies examine racial and gender identities among Black boys from an intersectional perspective (e.g. Buckley, 2018; Rogers et

al., 2015; Turner & Brown, 2007). While there is a substantial amount of scholarship regarding racial identity and racial identity development among Black boys, gender identity is underexamined and less established in the field both independent from racial identity and in relation to it (Rogers et al., 2015). Accordingly, research that has sought to analyze these identities concurrently have found that more emphasis is placed on the racial identities of Black boys and less on the complexities of gender roles and identities (Buckley, 2018); that the centrality, regard, and identification with gender identity will vary among Black boys (Buckley, 2018; Rogers et al., 2015); and that gender identity is context-dependent and is often contingent upon other aspects of Black boys' identities and identity-related experiences (Rogers et al., 2015; Turner & Brown, 2007). In sum, scholars are challenged with lifting gender in studies examining social identities among Black boys from an intersectional lens. This reinforces the need and opportunity for researchers to bring more attention to the unique role that gender identity has in identity processes and experiences and its significance in relationship to racial identity among Black boys.

"It Just Feels Like School": Black Boys' Experiences in Predominantly White Middle Schools

Discourse about student achievement, academic performance, identity construction and formation, race-related experiences, and racial socialization processes among Black youth in predominantly white schools is a critical topic of inquiry across many disciplines, including education and psychology (e.g. Carter, 2007; Carter Andrews, 2009, 2012; Chambers & Tabron, 2013; Diette, 2012; Fleming, 1985; M. Holland, 2012; Hope et al., 2015; Ispa-Landa, 2013; Leath et al., 2019; Solórzano et al., 2000). Recognizing the importance of highlighting the different experiences of Black youth from a race-gender lens and the disparities and inequities

Black boys as a subgroup continue to face in schools and in society, smaller bodies of research have emerged that specifically examine the experiences of Black boys attending predominantly white high schools (e.g. Duncan, 2002; Hotchkins, 2016) and predominantly white colleges and institutions of higher learning (e.g. Amechi et al., 2016; Harris, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008, 2014). In general, these bodies of research highlight overt and covert acts of racism inflicted upon Black boys, explore the manifestation and institutionalization of anti-Blackness in education via curricula, policy, and pedagogy, and examine Black boys' experiences where race and gender overlap with other identities (e.g. religion, sexuality, academic achievement, athletic performance). Together, this research presents a more nuanced understanding of the various identities that Black boys reflect, while also highlighting similarities and differences within and between these students (Amechi et al., 2016). While these studies are necessary and important in exploring the racialized and gendered experiences of Black boys and contribute to the larger understanding of the trajectories of Black boys in predominantly white PK-20 settings, these findings are insufficient as it relates to the research questions in this study, which focus specifically on Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school.

Currently, there is a paucity of research that examines the academic and social experiences of Black boys attending predominantly white middle schools. A systematic search of literature reveals that inquiry into this subpopulation of students *is* being done, however, most of the scholarship is dissertation works across multiple fields including, education, school counseling, psychology, and sociology. These studies, for example, have examined the lived experiences of Black boys attending predominantly white middle schools (Kauffman, 2018), have sought to understand perceptions of the Black-white achievement gap from the perspective of high-achieving Black boys (J. Brown, 2010), analyzed relationships between Black boys and

their white female teachers (Hardy, 2010), and investigated Black boys' attitudes and perceptions of their schools and teachers (Harden, 2016; Wingard, 2000). Further, Black boys attending predominantly white middle schools have also been included in comparative dissertation studies with Black girls regarding racial identity beliefs, racial discrimination and academic engagement (Leath et al., 2019), with non-Black boys regarding self-esteem, self-concept and aggression (Byrd, 2005), and with non-Black students regarding racial stereotype awareness and endorsement (Copping et al., 2013). Findings from these studies were organized around three themes: (1) racial bias, racial discrimination and other racial socialization processes; (2) academic identities, academic performance and anti-intellectualism; and (3) anti-Blackness and the absence of Black culture. Each highlighted individual and structural factors impacting the academic and social experiences of Black boys attending predominantly white middle schools.

Racial Bias, Racial Discrimination and Other Racial Socialization Processes

Racial socialization processes refer to experiences, messaging, interactions, and communications that shape and inform an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and understandings about the history, culture, values, etc. of their racial group (Anyiwo et al., 2018; Nasir, 2012). They can be overt and covert, implicit and explicit, but reveal the ways in which other people, groups, and institutions view, perceive, challenge, accept, or appreciate an individual's history, culture, values, etc. (Stevenson, 2004). These processes, which can occur at home, school, and in public spaces can be taken up by both adults and peers inside and outside an individual's social circle.

For Black boys attending predominantly white middle schools, the literature indicates that most of these students are not only aware of the pervasiveness of race and racism within their classrooms, schools and neighborhoods, but they are cognizant of the various racial

socialization processes that they are a part of (Harden, 2016; Henfield, 2011; Kauffman, 2018; Wingard, 2000). These processes, like racial biases, racial discrimination, racist pedagogies and practices, and the perpetuation of racialized and gendered stereotypes, are often enacted across multiple levels from individuals and within systems, i.e. peers, teachers, administrators, and the school as a whole (Harden, 2016; Henfield, 2011; Kauffman, 2018; Wingard, 2000). For example, some students reported that they were perceived by teachers and administrators as behavioral problems, deviant, and oppositional to authority (Henfield, 2011), described as troublemakers, prone to fight, and not follow school rules (Harden, 2016), and received disproportionate disciplinary actions and consequences compared to their peers (Kauffman, 2018; Wingard, 2000). In Harden's (2016) ethnographic study that examined five Black boys' attitudes and perceptions of their white teachers, one student explained, "I'm not saying it's because they're racists, but one student may do the same thing I do, get off scot-free, but I'll get in trouble because I'm a different race or they see me as a troublemaker sometimes" (p. 109). Thus, the perpetuation of racialized and gendered stereotypes by teachers coupled with inequitable school disciplinary actions and feelings of being treated unfairly made for very uncomfortable schooling environments for many Black boys (Harden, 2016; Wingard, 2000).

While some Black boys could easily identify racial biases and racial discrimination towards them, other students believed that racism was nonexistent (Henfield, 2011) or that they were not treated differently because of their race (J. Brown, 2010; Kauffman, 2018). As explained in Henfield's (2011) qualitative case study analysis, one student revealed, "I don't think anyone at this school is racist, it's not that bad, there's just barely any African American students here, so it's not that different [for me]" (Henfield, 2011, p. 147). This is not to say that racial socialization processes were not happening within these predominantly white spaces.

Rather, “the normalized and elusive nature of whiteness, [racism, and white supremacy] allow it to go undetected and unquestioned” (Carter Andrews et al., 2019, p. 7). As one student summarized, the racialized and gendered conditions of schooling and the experiences that he had regarding teaching and learning, “just feels like school” (Harden, 2016, p. 114).

Academic Identities, Academic Performance and Anti-Intellectualism

Irrespective of the topics examined regarding Black boys attending predominantly white middle schools, students referenced to various degrees the development of their academic identities, experiences related to academic performance, and/or perceptions related to anti-intellectualism as important elements in their schooling (J. Brown, 2010; Cokley, 2003; Harden, 2016; Kauffman, 2018; Wingard, 2000). Unsurprisingly, many of the racial socialization processes, in particular with teachers, contributed to how many Black boys came to see and understand their academic abilities as well as their intellectual value in the classroom (Wingard, 2000). Some students, for example, identified unfair treatment by teachers, teachers ignoring them during class, teachers’ lack of motivation and interest in their learning, and teachers making them feel invisible as contributing factors to their apathetic perspectives regarding their academic identities, intellectualities, and level of classroom engagement (Harden, 2016; Kauffman, 2018). Others recalled feeling “less confident, less secure, and perceived themselves to be viewed as less important students by administrators and teachers” (Wingard, 2000, p. 59), while others noted that some teachers “made them feel undervalued and unimportant because they gave [them] less work” (Kauffman, 2018, p. 57). That is, Black boys seemed to equate lowered academic expectations, the amount and type of work given, and being overlooked by teachers with intellectual inferiority and perceptions of being “slow”, “dumb”, or “inept” (Harden, 2016, p. 111).

Unfortunately, these types of negative associations with academic performance led some students to disassociate themselves with doing well in school. For others, the fear of "acting white" or excelling academically encouraged them to develop what Wingard (2000) described as "elaborate coping mechanisms (e.g. acting like the class clown, forming alliances with bullies, sharing tests and homework answers) to deflect attention away from their academic achievements" (p. 57). Thus, many of the racial socialization processes these students endured negatively impacted the development of their academic identities, the value they placed on academic achievement, and notions related to academic success (J. Brown, 2010; Harden, 2016; Kauffman, 2018; Wingard, 2000). Although these experiences were presented at the individual level towards Black boys, other racial socialization processes were evidenced at the school level that further impacted students' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences regarding academic identity and academic performance.

Analogous with studies that have detailed the overrepresentation of Black boys in remedial and special education classes and their underrepresentation in advanced placement courses and gifted programs (Carter Andrews, 2016; Henfield et al., 2008; NRC, 2002; Polite & Davis, 1999; Porche et al., 2004), researchers observed this disproportionate and segregating tracking practice in predominantly white middle schools as well (Harden, 2016; Kauffman, 2018; Wingard, 2000). In general, Black boys have noted that learning in predominantly white spaces can be uncomfortable, unsupportive, and overall, frustrating (Harden, 2016; Henfield, 2011; Wingard, 2000). In Harden's (2016) study, for example, he found that despite being identified as gifted, talented, and/or high-performing, Black boys were denied opportunities to take gifted courses and were instead placed in less rigorous inclusion classes. Students in special education courses endured similar treatment, including "not being able to get assistance from the teacher

when asked" (Harden, 2016, p. 113). On the contrary, in J. Brown's (2010) ethnographic study, students revealed that experiences in their honors classes were mostly positive and that they had good relationships with their teachers. Further, Black boys did not report instances of racial discrimination, racial bias or susceptibility to racialized and gendered stereotypes from their teachers. Again, this does not assume that negative racial socialization processes did not occur. Rather, students may not have been aware of the structural and systemic nature of racism in their school.

In sum, Black boys expressed various degrees of attitudes towards school, schooling, teaching, and learning. Students acknowledged that their interactions and relationships, negative and positive, with peers and teachers helped shape their academic identities and feelings about their own academic abilities. Further, in spite of Black boys' actualities to meet or exceed high academic expectations or their desire to perform well academically, teachers held firmly to and perpetuated negative connotations and perceptions regarding their academic performance (Harden, 2016; Henfield, 2011; Wingard, 2000). Moreover, many teachers, administrators, and other adults in these schools held high expectations in sports and athletics for Black boys, rather than in academics (J. Brown, 2010; Henfield, 2011; Wingard, 2000). Even though students' athletic participation provided opportunities to build social and peer networks, craft an athletic identity alongside an academic identity, and/or related to students' future goals, teachers and coaches often saw Black boys' athletic participation as a racialized and gendered stereotype (Harden, 2016; Henfield, 2011). Thus, the paradox of being hypervisible regarding sports and athletics, but invisible in classrooms and during instructional activities speaks to the structural nature of racism, whiteness, and anti-Blackness that permeates schools and the ideologies of teachers, practitioners, and other adults working with Black boys.

Anti-Blackness and the Absence of Black Culture

Much of what has been discussed thus far illuminates how anti-Blackness as a form of racism has devalued, demeaned, and disadvantaged the daily academic and social experiences of Black boys attending predominantly white middle schools. Their experiences regarding racial socialization processes and academic identities and performance give insight to how Black boys are immersed in racially hostile, microaggressive conditions that marginalize and exclude them within various contexts and spaces. Recognizing that anti-Blackness is the epistemic, ideological, social, cultural, material, and spiritual disregard for and violence against Black people (Day, 2015; Dumas, 2016; Patterson, 1982; Wilderson, 2010), these students' experiences have revealed the manifestation of this oppressive system in education in multiple ways. For example, students reported racialized student-teacher interactions where they felt disrespected and overlooked (Harden, 2016), where their academic expectations were low/lowered (Henfield, 2011), where teachers' pedagogies and instruction lacked cultural relevance (Kauffman, 2018), and where teachers' level of encouragement and motivation was minimum (J. Brown, 2010). These examples of Black suffering illustrate how the permanence of structural racism has become recursive, mundane, and a permanent fixture in schools (Dumas, 2014; Dumas & ross, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Love, 2019).

The erasure of and lack of attention to Black culture and history in curricula, the dearth of Black teachers and adults, the eminent presence of white culture and values, and the overall absence of Black culture, are other examples of the manifestation of anti-Blackness in many predominantly white middle schools (Harden, 2016; Henfield, 2011; Kauffman, 2018). For example, one student indicated that "the majority of what is taught in his class comes from the book which is dominated by the white culture with very little attention, other than slavery, given

to the prominence and contributions of African Americans" (Harden, 2016, p. 124). Further, students' reported that when instruction lacked cultural relevance, is irrelevant to their lives as Black boys, does not reflect their communities or neighborhoods, or does not highlight issues within the Black community (e.g. Black Lives Matter), they are more likely to be disengaged in learning and less likely to participate (Harden, 2016). Students noted that it was these type of classroom experiences that led to further feelings of being ignored and disparaged (Kauffman, 2018).

Despite learning and playing in a school culture and climate that tells Black boys that they are disposable and that they do not matter, students were still able to "find Black joy in the midst of pain and trauma in the fight to be [perceived and treated as] fully human" (Love, 2019, p.119). That is, some students were able to take ownership of their education (Harden, 2016; Kauffman, 2018), challenge and critique Black boy stereotypes (Kauffman, 2018), and/or build strong academic identities (J. Brown, 2010. This type of socio-culture and academic resilience and agency is not uncommon among Black youth in general, or Black boys specifically. Rather, resilience and agency are social buffers and protective factors that allow these students to thrive in racialized, gendered, anti-Black environments (McGee & Pearman, 2014; Wingard, 2000).

Chapter Summary

The permanence of race, racism, and anti-Blackness in and across schools and spaces of education is a reflection of the oppressive systems and structures that undergird our white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society (hooks, 2003). For Black youth, navigating these racially hostile learning environments, where Black suffering and anti-Black disregard is commonplace, can be particularly difficult and psychologically, emotionally, and physically exhausting (Dumas, 2014, 2016; Love, 2013, 2016). Further, Black youth's exposure to anti-

Black rhetoric, attitudes, behaviors, practices, and policies from teachers, parents, peers, and school personnel not only contribute to their marginalization and exclusion in and out of school, but they also impact how these students make sense of themselves and the world (Awokoya, 2012; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Duncan, 2002; Ferguson, 2010; Howard, 2013). This is especially evidenced among Black boys who are already labeled as troubled, aggressive, problematic, and other racialized and gendered stereotypes that make daily experiences challenging (Carter Andrews, 2016; Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Dancy, 2014a; Ferguson, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

For Black boys, whose social interactions and processes are dictated and compounded by their race and gender, their experiences with race, racism, and racial socialization processes require a unique examination. Howards and Reynolds (2013) assert that the "depths and breadth of the challenges faced currently and historically require a more thoughtful, nuanced, and complex set of explanations which rest on a wide set of variables" (p. 233). This means using an intersectional perspective that considers the multiple ways that experiences of race/Blackness interact with meanings of gender/maleness and the contexts in which these processes are occurring, including predominantly white middle schools. In doing so, scholars reveal the diversity of social and academic experiences, the multiplicities of identities and self-concepts that exist among Black boys, and the various notions regarding what it means to be Black and a boy. Thus, these understandings from the reviewed literature are imperative to this dissertation by providing context to how society frame these youth and the ways in which race and gender enter school spaces and "structures the interactions of the school day" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 198).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The methodology chapter begins by outlining the purpose and rationale for using qualitative approaches to answer the research questions under study. Next, I detail the basis of my research design, specifically why I chose to implement narrative research grounded in phenomenology and its connections to the theoretical and conceptual influences used in the study. Next, I explain my sampling and recruitment methods, followed by a description of the research site and participants. I then provide insight into the collaboration between the research site, participants, and myself. The next section outlines the data collection process and provides a detailed look into the data analysis process and the importance of conducting humanizing research. The chapter ends with me describing my positionality and epistemological stance as it relates to research in general and this study in particular, before discussing the challenges of the study.

Methodology Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to use narrative research grounded in phenomenology to examine what Black boys' understandings and experiences with race, racism, racialization, and gendering reveal about their self-concepts. Using conversations and artifacts as processes for storying and narration, Black boys engaged in critical reflection and dialogue about their racialized and gendered experiences within and across multiple environments (e.g. home, school, neighborhood/community) to paint a nuanced picture of their daily lives in an effort to highlight the factors that shape and impact their existence. Guided by the conceptualization of Black boyhood, Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education, and anti-Blackness in education, the primary goals of this qualitative work were to center Black boys' understandings and experiences of race/Blackness and gender/maleness, while also learning from them practices and

structures that extend identity-affirming and supportive experiences. The following research questions were developed to meet these goals:

1. How do Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school understand and experience race and racism?
2. How might these understandings and experiences inform their self-concept as they enter and move through the middle school grades?
3. What practices and structures create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school?

Research Design

To best understand how Black boys made sense of and experienced race and racism and the impact of racialization and gendering on their self-concepts, this study was rooted in qualitative research methodologies. In general, qualitative research methodologies are useful approaches in addressing research problems and questions that seek to explore and uncover human experiences (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). It offers researchers the opportunity to gain deeper insights and understandings into groups or subgroups of people, unique cases, or vaguely understood situations and phenomena (Creswell, 2003; Creswell & Poth, 2017, Denzin, 2008). At the same time, "qualitative methods are also important in their own right as a way of generating research knowledge" (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011, p. 57). The primary goal of this study was to uncover and examine the racialized and gendered understandings and experiences of Black boys, while "attempting to make sense of, [and] interpret, [these] phenomena in terms of the meanings [they] bring to them" (Denzin, 2008, p. 313). Thus, it was important that the best research design was chosen. According to Cheek (2008), research design "refers to decisions about how the research is conceptualized, the subsequent conduct of a specific research project,

and ultimately the type of contribution the research is intended to make to the development of knowledge in a particular area" (p. 762). Based on the framing of my research questions, the theoretical and conceptual influences used to ground the study, the data sought, the method of data collection, and the methods of analyses used, narrative research grounded in phenomenology was best suited for the study.

Narrative Research

Narrative research has many forms, employs a variety of analytic strategies, and can be both a phenomenon to be studied *and* a method to be used in a study (Creswell et al., 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). In this dissertation, narrative research was used as a method in which "narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 17). Drawn from education, sociology, psychology, and other social sciences and humanities disciplines, narrative research "begins with experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 67). The premise behind this methodology is that first-hand stories can provide greater insight and detail into understanding the experiences and perspectives of individuals, while also paying attention to how social, cultural, familial, and/or chronological contexts influence or impact those experiences and perspectives (Creswell et al., 2007).

In general, implementing narrative research requires "studying one or more individuals, gathering data through collecting their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 240). These data are often collected through interviews, group conversations, documents, and observations (Creswell et al., 2007). In this study, individual stories about how Black boys understand and

experience race and racism and the impact that racialization and gendering have on their self-concepts were collected through qualitative interviews (i.e. student interviews), student artifacts (i.e. identity map), and non-participant observations. As an additional piece to these narratives, administrative interviews were also conducted with the school's principal and assistant principal, both of whom were viewed as stakeholders in the study and key players in constructing and shifting the culture and climate of the school.

While there are numerous inquiry traditions and approaches to engage in qualitative research, narrative research was chosen for the study for three reasons. First, narrating or storying aligned well with the topics of study and the research questions being asked. Providing space and opportunity for Black boys to self-author about their individual experiences with race, racism, racialization, and gendering was critical to their identity and shed light on how and why they came to know and see themselves in the manner in which they did (B. Jackson, 2012). This also opened up opportunities to recount racialized and gendered experiences and experiences related to various forms of oppression, i.e. racism and anti-Blackness, that may not have been realized or made sense of (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Second, narrative research draws on experiential knowledge to tell stories, in this case the stories of individuals who are often unheard, ignored, or invalidated by dominant culture (Delgado, 1993; Matsuda et al., 1993; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It offered new understandings into the details of the social and cultural realities and daily racialized and gendered experiences of Black boys, and in doing so, challenged and critiqued common narratives perpetuated about Black boys. Third, narrative research supports employing multiple analytic frameworks and lenses, "gathering many different forms of data, [and] using varied strategies [for analysis]" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 69), all which are essential to this type of qualitative study. As noted before, this dissertation was framed

around three theoretical and conceptual influences. Each offered a unique perspective to the format and design of the study, supported the type of data collected and the method of collection (i.e. interviews, student artifacts, and non-participant observations), and how data was analyzed (e.g. open coding, theory-based coding, thematic coding, restorying).

Although narrative research seeks to emphasize individual detailed experiences, it is important to note that this type of research is a collaborative effort between the researcher and participant and "requires a clear understanding of the context of the individual's life" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 73). To that end, it is important to consider how additional methodologies might contribute to a deeper understanding of the multidimensional aspects and complexities in and across narrative research while keeping the participants' voices as the focus. Thus, phenomenology (Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Schutz, 1967) was used to develop a composite picture of what Black boys might have in common in how they conceptualize race and racism, as well as how they experience the larger "objects" or phenomena of racism, racialization, and gendering. To be clear, this is not an attempt to essentialize or minimize the experiences and perspectives of Black boys. Rather, it is an analytical approach to make sense of their collective reported experiences.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a method of philosophical investigation that centers the human experience (Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Schutz, 1967). It is a school of thought, method of inquiry, and tool of analysis that seeks to answer meaning and sense-making questions of a given phenomenon for an individual from *their* own understanding and perspective (Eberle, 2014; Moran, 2002; Creswell et al., 2007; van Manen, 2014). Rather than relying on outside narratives or ideas to conceptualize, theorize, or make sense of individuals' experiences,

phenomenology "prioritizes and investigates how the human being experiences the world: how the patient experiences illness, how the teacher experiences the pedagogical encounter, how the student experiences a moment of success or failure" (Adams & van Manen, 2008, p. 616). This aspect of phenomenology is especially important to this dissertation because Black boys' perspectives takes center in how they understand, make sense of and experience race, racism, racialization, gendering, etc. In doing so, this approach makes Black boys' lived experiences a valid source of knowledge and information, requiring the researcher to learn and understand "what the world is like according to their perspective" (Pietersma, 2000, p. 5).

Accordingly, social science and humanities researchers who apply a phenomenological lens to their work argue that phenomenon is best understood by collecting data through first-hand accounts, like interviewing, written documents, and observations (Adams & van Manen, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2017; van Manen, 2014). Scholars like Moustakas (1994) suggest collecting these viewpoints and perspectives "from persons who have experienced the phenomenon to develop a composite description of the essence of what they experienced and how they experienced it" (as cited in Creswell et al., 2007, p. 252-3). This notion supports the phenomenological idea of the insider's or participant's experiences as *truth-value* (Pietersma, 2000). Truth-value is when significance, power and space is given to participants' perspectives as *they* see and experience life. It is *their* truth and understanding, contrary to what outsiders believe, perceive, or have experienced themselves (Pietersma, 2000). Thus, what is gained from Black boys' perspectives, point of views, and truths are philosophical assumptions based on their experiences as they are lived daily (Creswell et al., 2007).

Giving space to reveal and examine truths, as told through the narratives and stories of Black boys, not only supported framing the research questions, the theoretical and conceptual

influences of the study, and the data collection and data analysis processes, but also the perspectives and experiences of the Black boys themselves. As such, narrative research grounded in phenomenology was best suited for this work because it provided methodologies that authentically captured and explicitly centered the voices, experiences, understandings, and perspectives about race, racism, racialization, and gendering directly from the source, Black boys.

Sampling and Recruitment

Sampling and Rationale

This dissertation is situated in a time and space where conversations about race, racism, racialization, and its intersection with gender are happening around Black boys, but not necessarily with and among them. Moreover, because of the permanence of race, institutionalized racism, and patriarchal discourse in our country and schools, Black youth are undoubtedly experiencing, exposed to, and/or witnessing racism, anti-Blackness, and racial suffering on a daily basis (Dumas, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Love, 2019). Recognizing the need to investigate the impact and influence of the racialized and gendered experiences on the self-concepts of Black boys specifically, it is important to draw directly from their voices, narratives, and stories.

In the current study, the research site and participants were chosen using a criterion-based purposeful sample approach (Fraenkel et al., 1993; Patton, 2002). This meant that in order for schools and participants to engage in the study, they must have met a particular set of characteristics or criterion. The rationale for this type of approach is centered around the ability to sufficiently collect data that would answer the research questions with quality and depth of understanding and explore the phenomena under study from multiple perspectives (Creswell et

al., 2007; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). Thus, the criterion that was put into place optimized the understandings of participants, as well as provided the most concise picture of their individual and collective experiences. Relatedly, the inclusion of certain characteristics helped ensure that the data represented an accurate depiction across all reasonable possibilities related to the research questions and goals.

Research Site Criteria

To answer the questions under study, the inclusion criterion for a research site was determined to be a school or educational program, described as a program offered to students whose goal or target focused on academic or educational achievement. To be considered for recruitment, the research site must:

1. Serve grades 6, 7 and/or 8;
2. Have at least 20% of the total student population identify as Black or African American;
3. Located in a small (<100,000 residents), mid-sized (< 250,000 and ≥100,000 residents) or large (≥250,000 residents) city as classified by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2006).

The first criterion was established to account for the various structures of grade level bands across multiple school districts and cities. Specifically, the research site criterion had to be inclusive of schools or educational programs that served students across the middle school grades. Given the recent restructuring of several elementary and secondary schools, many middle school grades were split between elementary and secondary buildings. For example, some districts are structured to serve middle school-aged students in K-8 buildings, 4-6 buildings, 6-8 buildings, 7-8 buildings, and 7-12 buildings. The second criterion focused on the racial demographics of the school or educational program. At least 20% of the total student population

at each potential research site must identify as Black or African American. This ensured that (1) participants were more reflective of the city's and/or school district's racial demographics, and (2) that no participant (s) was spotlighted or singled out to participate in the study. Lastly, schools located in small to heavily populated cites were included instead of school sector (e.g. public, private, or charter) or school location (e.g. urban, suburban, or rural) to increase the likelihood of successfully identifying a research site in accordance with the other two criterion.

Participant Criteria

Based on the research goals, questions, and design of the study, the inclusion criterion for participants encompassed three elements. To be eligible to participate in the study, participants must:

1. Self-identify as Black or African American;
2. Self-identify as a boy;
3. Currently enrolled in grades 6, 7 or 8 at the identified research site.

These three criteria were chosen first, to reflect the population of study, Black boys. Second, the research questions focused on the understandings and experiences of Black boys as they entered *and* moved through the middle school grades. Thus, it was important to ensure that the participants were collectively represented across grade levels as best as possible. This was in an effort to diversify the group and to engage "multiple voices and characteristics of similarity, dissimilarity, redundancy and variety [in the study]" (Shenton, 2004, p. 65). Further, a diverse group of students helped provide insight to shared experiences and perspectives within *and* across grade levels and ages that may have been otherwise missed if only one grade level was chosen.

Recruitment

The recruitment process for this study spanned nine months, from May 2019 to January 2020. Guided by the outlined research criteria, recruiting was conducted in four phases: (1) identifying a research site; (2) identifying participants; (3) distributing research flyer, consent form, and assent form; and (4) protecting participants.

Phase 1: Identifying a Research Site

Using my research site criteria as a guide, I initially identified eight sites within the greater metropolitan area of a Midwestern city as eligible to participate in the study. Of the eight sites, six were schools and two were categorized as educational programs. This included a K-8 building, 4-6 building, 7-8 building, and three 7-12 buildings. The two educational programs were part of two different non-profit community organizations, both serving students in grades 7-12. After identifying potential sites, I conducted a series of meetings with the principals and program directors via phone, email, and in person to discuss the aims and goals of the research study. Initially, the 4-6 school agreed to participate in the study in May 2019 and again in September 2019. Because only sixth graders would be eligible to participate, however, I needed to identify an additional school or educational program in order to recruit seventh and eighth graders as participants. After conversations with the principals from all three of the 7-12 buildings and the 7-8 building, none of whom expressed interest in the study, greater efforts were made into recruiting one of the educational programs as the second potential research site. The first educational program was deemed ineligible to participate in the study because the total number of students attending the program was too small (i.e. 20 students). This included both boys and girls and students of various racial groups. This meant that there were not enough potential participants available at the site and thus did not fit the second criterion of identifying

research sites with at least 20% of the total student population identifying as Black or African American. At the same time, efforts towards recruiting the other educational program were discontinued in December 2019 after four months of emails, phone conversations, and texts, with no progress towards meeting in person or agreeing to participate. Also, during this time, the initial research site (4-6 building), was experiencing some challenges of their own and was not able to actually engage in the research study beyond the initial recruitment process. Despite attempts to set up additional meetings with both the principal and sixth grade teachers, efforts towards further recruitment ended in December 2019.

As a result, in January 2020, it was decided to expand the radius of recruitment to nearby cities as far as 20 miles south and 10 miles east of the initial metropolitan area. This included suburban, rural and charter schools. Using my personal and professional contacts (i.e. colleagues, teachers, elementary principals, former interns), a ninth site, Metro Middle School (MMS) was identified and deemed eligible to participate in the study. Soon after, I contacted the principal via email, introduced myself and the study. The principal agreed to participate; however, within MMS's school district all research projects have to be approved by the central office in addition to the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon approval, I met with the principal in person to review the study again, answer any questions or concerns, and develop a recruitment plan to identify students according to the participant criteria.

Phase 2: Identifying Participants

The principal identified potential participants according to the three-item participant criteria outlined in the research study. Using school records, the principal compiled a list of 77 boys whose parents identified them as Black or African American or Biracial with one Black or African American parent. Biracial boys where included as potential participants in the study to

reflect the inclusivity of identifying as Black (see Appendix A) and to allow space for students to self-identify as Black or African American as they saw fit. All students were in grades 6, 7 or 8 and varied across levels of social and school engagement activities, participation in extra-curricular activities, family backgrounds, etc.

Phase 3: Distributing Research Flyers, Consent Forms and Assent Forms

Based on conversations about the best way to successfully enroll participants into the study, the principal and I decided that we would distribute the *Information Packet* simultaneously to parents/guardians and eligible students. The *Information Packet* included the research flyer (see Appendix B), consent form (see Appendix C), and assent form (see Appendix D). First, parents/guardians of the seventy-seven eligible participants were sent an email introducing the aims and goals of the study along with *Information Packet*. They were asked to review the flyer with their child to see if he would be interested in participating in the study. Parents/guardians would then print and sign the consent form and return it to the principal within five school days. After the emails were sent, the *Information Packets* were then distributed directly to the seventy-seven eligible students. They were asked to take the information home and discuss it with their parent/guardian. If they were interested in participating in the study, then they were to bring back the signed consent form within five school days in order to set up days and times to begin the data collection process. This two-step approach was used to limit any potential miscommunication between parents, students, the principal, and myself, and it was an attempt to reduce the likelihood of losing documents between school and home.

Within the first week of distributing the *Information Packet*, participation and consent forms were slow to return. My initial thought was that parents/guardians wanted to know who was conducting research with their child prior to agreeing to participate, recognizing that this

particular school and the district as a whole participates often in university research projects and studies. As such, I asked the principal if it was possible for me to attend any upcoming programs, events, or activities where parents/guardians would be in attendance. That way if parents had any questions, concerns or wanted to learn more about the study, they could do so in an informal setting. While the principal thought this was a good idea, she thought it was not necessary as she believed that many of the parents would be interested in having their students participate in the study without having met me. Even still, I decided to update the research flyer to include headshots of both the Primary Investigator (PI) and myself to allow parents to *see* who their students would be working with. I sent the updated flyer to the principal suggesting that the new flyer could possibly garner more interest. Although the updated versions of the flyers were not used or distributed, it is a recruitment strategy to consider for future studies where there is no formal or informal in-person introduction to parents/guardians.

Phase 4**: **Protecting Participants

Although included here as part of the recruitment phase, protecting participants is part of the entire research process. As the researcher, my primary goal and ethical responsibility is to protect participants and the possibility of uncovering sensitive information (Crow, 2008). Thus, it was critical that parents/guardians consented to students' participation. Even though the language used in the assent form is clear, concise and age-appropriate for middle school students, informed consent, i.e. signatures from both parent/guardian and student, was non-negotiable. If students did not have informed consent, they could not participate in the study. Additionally, protecting participants also meant that I explained and met the four core principles of modern research ethics. That is: (1) voluntary participation; (2) respect for persons through informed consent; (3) beneficence such that participants are not harmed and their participation is mutually

beneficial; and (4) and justice, which is the fair opportunity to become a participant (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). This also included assuring confidentiality and anonymity before, during and after all research processes as outlined in the consent and assent forms (see Appendices C & D).

Research Site

Metro Middle School

Metro Middle School (MMS) is located in a small, Midwestern suburban city (see Table 1). With less than 50,000 residents, the city is mostly white (75.5%) with a small percentage of residents identifying as Asian (12.1%) and African American/Black (7.8%). Despite housing over 2,500 companies, new developments, new housing subdivisions, and student apartments, close to half (42.5%) of the city's residents live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). This is most likely due to the large number of full-time students attending the city's nearby university and the large number of university faculty, staff, and families residing in nearby charter townships.

MMS is a sixth, seventh and eighth grade building with a student population of 900 students from the tri-county area (see Table 1). MMS is part of a very small school district, serving about 3,500 students across seven school buildings and is the district's only middle school. MMS prides itself on its quality curriculum offering "a wide range of academic and social opportunities for students" (MMS, 2019). For example, students are able to earn high school credits in math, science, and foreign languages. Demographically, MMS is mostly white (58%) with a fifth of the student population identifying as African American or Black (20%). More than a third of MMS's students qualify for free or reduced lunch (38.9%). In terms of gender make-up, a little over half of the students identify as male (54%), with the remaining

students identifying as female (46%). MMS is a pseudonym used to protect the confidentially and privacy of the school.

Table 1: Metro Middle School (MMS) Profile

Demographic	City Profile [a]	District Profile [b]	MMS Profile [c]
Population	47,988	3,571	900
Race/Ethnicity	7.8% African American/Black 75.5% White 4.6% Hispanic 12.1% Asian 3.5% Biracial/Multiracial	16% African American/Black 58% White 9% Hispanic 8% Asian 8% Biracial/Multiracial	20% African American/Black 58% White 9% Hispanic 7% Asian 6% Biracial/Multiracial
SES	42.5% poverty rate	33% free/reduced lunch	38.9% free/reduced lunch
Gender	49.2% male; 50.8% female	46% male; 54% female	54% male; 46% female

Note: Racial and ethnic groups reflect the categories used by the United States Census Bureau and school districts of the proposed research sites. [a] United States Census Bureau (2018). AmericanFactFinder. Retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/. [b] Michigan School Data (2019). MI School Data. Retrieved from https://www.mischooldata.org. [c] Retrieved from MMS.

Interest in Metro Middle School

As the only middle school in the district, MMS receives students from all five elementary schools within the district and students from neighboring districts, counties and cities. The influx of students from various areas has largely contributed to the racial and economic diversity within the school (see Table 1). Some have argued that it has also contributed to behavioral problems and safety concerns. Within the past few years, for example, MMS has been publicly criticized over its suspension policies, the mishandling of behavioral issues on campus, and bullying (Lake, 2019; Whyte, 2019). Consequently, MMS's administrative staff has worked diligently to be more proactive in addressing behavioral issues and conflicts among students. This specifically

included implementing restorative justice practices and pedagogies within the school and incorporating strategies that support students in "demonstrating appropriate behavior to ensure a safe learning environment" (Martin, 2020). These efforts have focused more on problem solving, building relationships, accepting responsibility, setting expectations, and cultivating empathy, rather than offering referrals, suspensions, and expulsions.

Recognizing MMS's efforts to incorporate teaching practices that better understand and address disparities in achievement, performance, social, and discipline outcomes across racial groups (Minority Student Achievement Network [MSAN], 2019), as well as develop a school culture that is more supportive and affirming of its students, interest in conducting this study was twofold. First, the principal indicated that the lack of teachers and staff of color were of great concern, especially given the fairly large number of students of color attending MMS. In her opinion, the lack of racial diversity among teachers and staff not only presented challenges to teach and discuss issues of race, culture, power, privilege, etc. in significant and authentic ways (Flynn, 2012), but she also believes that the lack of representation of teachers of color impact the daily experiences of students of color. To that end, the principal has been intentional in soliciting and identifying opportunities, projects, and programs for MMS to engage and participate in to address these needs. For example, MMS has teamed up with an all-Black, male mentoring program that specifically addresses the academic, social and cultural needs of Black boys and is led by Black men from professional groups, fraternal organizations, churches, etc. in the greater metropolitan area. Seeing the type of relationships between mentor and mentee and the high level of interest and engagement from MMS' Black boys, the principal is currently seeking similar opportunities for MMS's girls of color. Secondly, in past years, the principal has noted her attempts to engage in race talk and discussions with students, specifically among students of

color. In doing so, the principal has recognized her limitations in taking up this type of work and practice specifically as a white woman. Thus, she acknowledges the benefits in joining a coalition like MSAN as a way to learn about equity-based and justice-oriented practices, initiatives, and professional development resources to better serve all of her students, especially her students of color (MSAN, 2019).

Participants

Ten participants (n = 10), eight students and two administrators, consented to participate in the study. A summary of demographic information for each group is provided below, followed by a brief profile of each participant. All names were changed to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants.

Students' Summary

Seventy-seven Black or Biracial boys were eligible to participate in the study. Of these, eight consented to participate (n = 8), all of whom identified as Black and ranged in age from 12 to 14 years old (see Table 2). Most participants were in seventh grade (75%) at the time of the study, with a smaller portion of students in sixth grade (12.5%) and eighth grade (12.5%). All of the students participated in a sport, usually basketball and/or football, and 75% of students participated in an extracurricular activity or club. Notably, a large portion of students (62.5%) participated in an all-Black, male mentoring program, where students met bi-weekly to discuss a variety of topics related to history, culture, schooling, and society. Most students (62.5%) lived within 3 miles of the school's campus, but it was not considered walking distance to the school. The remaining 37.5% of students lived outside of the city. These data were captured via the *Student Demographic Form* (see Appendix E) and summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Student Demographics

Students	Age	Grade	Extra-Curricular Activities/Clubs	Sports/Athletic Activities	Neighborhood Location
Josh	13	7	After-school program, mentoring program	Basketball, football, lacrosse	< 2 miles from school
Mario	14	8	-	Basketball, football, lacrosse	Outside city limits
John	13	7	Orchestra, mentoring program	Basketball, football	<1 mile from school
James	12	7	Mentoring program	Basketball, football, track	Outside city limits
Sean	12	7	-	Football	Outside city limits
Charles	12	7	Mentoring program	Basketball, football	< 2 miles from school
Brian	13	7	Mentoring program	Basketball, football	3 miles from school
Isiah	12	6	Band, art	Basketball	3 miles from school

Note: All students' names were changed to protect their privacy and confidentiality. All data was self-reported via Students' Demographic Form (see Appendix E).

Student Profiles

Josh

Josh is a 13-year old seventh grader who lives with his mother and four siblings in a large multi-family non-profit housing corporation a short distance from MMS. Josh is not very talkative; however, he noted that he cares deeply about his family and siblings. Like many of the boys in this study, Josh plays sports, which to him, plays a key role in his identity.

Mario

Originally from Philadelphia, Mario is a 14-year old eighth grader. He has four siblings, including two brothers with autism. Mario plays three sports, football, basketball, and lacrosse, and in general believes himself to be a "hard worker" and a "good kid." He believes that in many cases Black boys in middle school are not depicted positively even though "we are smart and don't get into trouble."

John

John is a 13-year old seventh grader who lives with his grandmother, mother and sister on the Southside of the neighboring city. John is very active at MMS, participating in orchestra, a mentoring program, basketball, and football. Upon entering middle school, John hoped that this new stage in his academic journey would be "fun and not filled with prejudice," but soon realized two months into his sixth-grade year that things were "different." He recalls being blamed for things that were happening in class that he did not do, but since then, has focused on building good relationships with other teachers that know him well.

James

James is a 12-year old seventh grader who lives with his parents and five siblings in a charter township about 10 miles south of MMS. James has been an athlete for most of his life,

playing basketball and football since the age of six and more recently track and Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) basketball. Sports and athletics are large parts of James' life and identity. He notes that being in middle school is fun especially since "Varsity coaches and scouts get to come see you play."

Sean

Originally from Georgia, Sean is a 12-year old seventh grader who enjoys playing football and video games. Sean lives with his mom and is the youngest of three children. Although he lives in a full house, Sean is fairly quiet and stays to himself. In school, Sean describes himself as funny and talented but can sometimes get into trouble with his teachers because he jokes around a lot.

Charles

Charles is a 12-year old seventh grader who was born and raised in Ohio. Prior to middle school, he and his family relocated to Michigan to be closer to his mother's family. Charles is particularly close to his cousin and his younger sister, who will join him at MMS in the upcoming school year. Charles mentioned that one of best things about being a Black boy in middle school is being able to "participate in groups like this" where he can have conversations and discussions with other Black boys, similar to the mentoring program that he is a part of. He said that he enjoys that he is able to "learn new things" within these spaces.

Brian

Brian is a 13-year old seventh grader who was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. He lives with his mother, grandmother and three siblings. Brian noted that one of the challenges of being a Black boy in middle school is that "some people are scared of him" but because he has "lots of friends and makes good grades" that does not bother him much.

Isiah

Isiah is a 12-year old sixth grader who was born in Japan to a Black mother and Ghanaian father. Isiah's family lived in Japan for most of his life before his grandmother invited him, his mother and younger sister to live with her in Michigan. Isiah enjoys band, art, and basketball and notes that he enjoys having conversations with his grandmother and mother about various topics, including issues surrounding race and racism.

Administrators' Summary

Of MMS' five possible administrative staff members knowledgeable of the practices and structures within MMS that create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys, two were asked to participate in the study, the Principal and Assistant Principal (n = 2). Both identified as white, with one participant identifying as a woman and the other a man. At the time of study, both administrators had an average of 16.5 years of educational experience, including serving in various teaching and administrative roles.

Administrator Profiles

Ann

Ann has 21 years of educational experience. Eleven of those years she spent as a middle school teacher, three years as a special education teacher, two years as a special education administrator, and five years as a middle school principal. Ann has also served in various teacher-leadership roles in different capacities. These experiences and background have lent themselves well to serving her in her current role as MMS building principal.

Jack

Jack is in his tenth year of assistant principalship at MMS. Prior to his current role, Jack served as a school counselor and elementary principal. His background in counseling encouraged

him to seek administrative positions because he believed "that the traditional approach to school discipline wasn't effective and he wanted to use his skills to change the paradigm to a supportive/counseling/teaching approach rather than a punitive one."

Researcher and Participant Collaboration

It was imperative that the study's research design incorporated methodologies that centered participants' voices and experiences, "positioned [participants] alongside [the researcher] in a shared inquiry of mutual interest and benefit, [and ensured] the research was *with* them rather than *on* them" (Pushor, 2008, p. 92). Thus, the intentional focus on learning from and with participants called for collaboration between researcher and participants and the presence of reciprocity.

In this study, researcher-participant collaboration and rapport building took place primarily during the qualitative interviewing process. The student interviews provided an intimate space for participants to share with me their *real* life stories about what it means to be a Black boy in the face of racism, racialized stereotypes, racialized issues, race-based implications, and racist ideologies in the contexts of hegemonic notions and narrow constructions of gender, masculinity, maleness, and manhood, and at their intersections. In our dialogic spaces of mutual learning, participants used identity maps to illustrate how they understood themselves and how they believed they were treated and perceived as racialized and gendered beings in other contexts and spaces (i.e. home, school, neighborhood, society). By me providing the space and opportunity for participants to talk and participants giving me honest and undistorted access to themselves and their lives, knowledge, experiences, views, etc., I had to constantly consider and evaluate "what [I was] taking from them as well as what [I was] giving to them" (Crow, 2008, p.

740). This balanced relationship of give and take, or reciprocity, was critical throughout the research process.

The same can be said in reference to the research site. Due to the strong desire for Metro Middle School (MMS) to participate in the study, it was equally important to ensure the presence of reciprocity for administrators and the school as a whole. As such, I invited two administrators to participate in the study, framing their participation around what can be gleaned from the study long-term, how should this information be shared with MMS stakeholders and constituents, and in what ways can we ensure that these types of dialogues continue to happen in responsible, socially-just, and non-harmful ways? Reciprocity in this way was discussed during the recruitment process with the principal, during the administrative interviews, and during the informal debriefing sessions with the principal after the study concluded. During the recruitment process, for example, the principal noted that she saw the need for a project like *Real Talk* at MMS. Her interest in race talk, equity work, and restorative justice practices further contributed to her interest in the study. After hearing the aims and goals of the study, the principal also discussed with me creating a curriculum specifically for middle school students to learn how to engage in conversations about difficult topics, including race and racism. There was also discussion of establishing a long-term project or program at MMS specifically for students of color to have an opportunity to reflect on their lives, develop a platform to voice their thoughts and experiences, and a space to have candid conversations not only about race, racism, racialization and gender, but other topics pertinent to their growth and development as youth. Thus, the possibility for *Real Talk* to become an institutionalized and structural fixture at MMS serves as reciprocity for participants, administrators, and MMS writ large.

Data Collection

Building from A. Brown and Donnor's (2011) assertion that "when Black [boys] are given an opportunity to speak candidly about their educational experiences, a much more nuanced narrative surfaces" (p. 29), the primary form of data collection in this study was qualitative interviews from students and administrators. Additional sources of data were also used, including a written and visual student artifact (i.e. an identity map) and non-participant observations. Gathering data via multiple methods not only generated thick descriptions of the phenomenon under study, but it also strengthened the credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and defensibility of the study (Anfara et al., 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Patton, 2002; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). The data collection period lasted ten weeks, with the data collection methods detailed below.

Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews were used to confidently capture and represent the views of the eight Black boys and two administrators who participated this study (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). The goal of these interviews was to "understand informants on their own terms and how they make meaning of their own lives, experiences, and cognitive processes" (Brenner, 2006, p. 357). A total of eighteen qualitative interviews were conducted, rendering close to eleven hours of data. Student interviews were conducted in small, private conference rooms in the administrative wing of Metro Middle School (MMS), while administrator interviews were conducted virtually via phone and email (additional information as to why is provided in the section headed *Challenges of the Study).* It is important to note that during the interviewing process, (1) interviews took place on different days and across different weeks; (2) given the length of each interview, some questions were modified and adjusted to account for participants'

tolerance and stamina for interviewing and time restrictions; and (3) all interview data were recorded via a digital audio recording program, *Voice Memos*, and was securely saved and stored on a password protected computer accessible to only me and the research team.

Student Interviews

Each student participated in two individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) lasting between 30 and 50 minutes each. Individual IDIs required students to speak at length with the researcher surrounding a particular topic, problem, or concern that they have directly experienced (Patton, 2002; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). Each individual IDI was guided by a semistructured interview protocol covering a range of topics related to race, racism, gender, identity, etc. (see Appendices F and H). Each protocol contained several sections, with each section capturing specific data using open-ended questions. Open-ended questions warranted explanations rather than brief responses and provided participants opportunities to open up and share candid experiences (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). Thus, one of the many advantages of these type of protocols is that although participants were asked the same core questions, there was freedom and flexibility to ask follow-up and probing questions based on the type of responses given and received (Brenner, 2006). This allowed participants to voice their thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions in their own words, while encouraging rich, detailed, in-depth answers and thick descriptions, which proved helpful for later analysis (Patton, 2002; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011).

Administrator Interviews

At the end of the data collection period, administrators participated in one brief interview, lasting between 20 and 30 minutes. Using a semistructured interview protocol, administrators discussed practices and structures they believed created and maintained affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys attending MMS (see Appendix I). Because the focus of the

study was on the experiences, understandings, beliefs, and opinions of Black boys, the interviews were not lengthy and multiple interviews were not conducted. This was because administrative interviews were considered a secondary source of data that allowed for confirming of findings and for supporting or contradicting participants' experiences (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011).

Student Artifact

Student artifacts can be used to support and/or challenge previously collected audio data as well as generate discussion during interviews (Glesne, 2016; Patton, 2002; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). In this study, identity maps played a key role in building rapport between the researcher, provided an additional methodological tool that centered the voice and experiences of participants, and allowed for participants to self-author and narrate their lives according to their subjectivities and understandings (Crow, 2008).

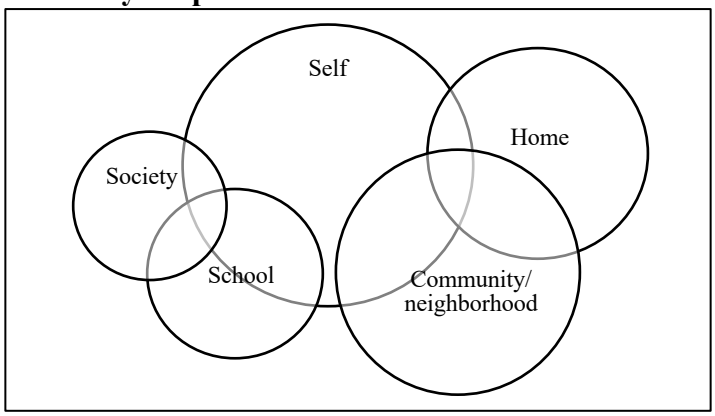
Identity Maps

Similar to ecomaps, Venn diagrams, circle maps, and bubble maps, identity maps or social identity maps use circles in various sizes to show the relationships and complexities that exist between and amongst different aspects of an individual's identity. Within education research, identity maps have been used to graphically represent how students understand multiple aspects of their academic identity in relation to other parts of themselves as well as how students see themselves in relation to schooling, teaching and learning (e.g. Beach et al., 2002; Flennaugh, 2016b). Building from these ideas, in this dissertation, identity maps are described as a collection of overlapping and/or disconnected circles that represent various aspects of identity within and across multiple spaces and contexts.

Participants were asked to create an identity map to visually represent how they understand themselves and to examine the relationships between how others perceive and/or treat

them. During Student Interview 1, participants were asked a series of questions related to identity (see Appendix F). Using their responses as a starting point, participants were guided through creating an identity map. First, participants were shown Figure 2 and walked through the example to get a better understanding of what each of the five circles represented, the meaning of the overlapping and disconnecting circles, the significance of circle size, and the contents of each circle (see Appendix G).

Figure 2: Example of Identity Map



Next, participants were given a letter-sized piece of white paper and colored markers and instructed to draw a circle that would represent *Self*. The size of the circle would be according to the significance of influence of that context on their identity. For example, a large *Self* circle would indicate that *their* conceptions, perceptions, ideas, beliefs, etc. played a significant role in their identity. In the *Self* circle, participants were asked to input content or ideas, thoughts, and aspects of themselves that are important to their identity (e.g. race/racial group, gender, religious affiliation, academic profile/identity, athletic profile/identity). Participants were reminded of their previous verbal responses but were not required to list those ideas. This process was repeated with the remaining four circles. The difference here was ensuring that participants remembered to, (1) draw the circle size based on significance or degree of influence on their identity; (2) overlap circles if similarities existed within the circles or to disconnect the circles if

the content was not connected to their identity; and (3) to make sure the content of each circle was reflective of how they believed they were portrayed, received, interpreted, (mis)understood, perceived, and/or treated in other spaces.

There are two things worth noting in participants constructing their identity map. First, the five contexts seen in Figure 2 were intentionally chosen, recognizing that social context plays a significant role in the construction and unfolding of identities, self-perceptions, and self-concepts (Flennaugh, 2016b; B. Jackson, 2001, 2012; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016; Nasir, 2012; Nasir et al., 2009). Including different contexts, allows both the participant and researcher to see the multiple and varied ways Black boys are perceived, treated, etc. Second, beginning with *Self* was a purposeful move to encourage participants to center their own personal understandings first and to provide them the opportunity to engage in deep, critical reflection about who they are and who they are becoming *before* they begin to look outwardly into other social contexts. This was an attempt to build from a micro-level perspective outward to a mezzo- and macro-level understanding.

Thus, using identity maps to explore the relationships between how Black boys see themselves and their place(s) in the world, helped both participants and the researcher visually see the multiple aspects and nuances of identity and how they can function differently in different spaces. Paying close attention to how and where constructions and ideas related to race and gender overlapped, how one's Blackness and maleness was constructed, discussed, and examined, and how one aspect of identity was advantaged over the other, for example, lent insight to participants' awareness of racialization, racism, anti-Blackness, gendering, and other structural forces. Further, identity maps, when used alongside semistructured qualitative interviews, can "serve as a tool to better understand how participants relate their [racial and

gender] identity to the other aspects of their identity" (Flennaugh, 2016b, p.15) and other aspects of their lives. Thus, identity mapping emerged as a critical source in illustrating the complexities of identity and conceptions of self, while holding participants' voice as valid and powerful in the study.

Non-participant Observations

Conducting observations is a key qualitative method where researchers observe the participants under study as well as the setting/environment in which they are situated (Jorgensen, 1989). Observations is a useful approach to gathering qualitative data because it can bring a multidimensional perspective to the study, while providing contextual details. Importantly, observations exist on a participation-observation continuum, wherein researchers can choose to be directly/indirectly involved in the study as well as determine their level of participation or activity, i.e. active/inactive (Gold, 1958). Due to the limited and brief interactions outside of the interviewing processes, for example, entering and exiting the building, walking to the interviewing area, non-participant observations were included as a data source as an informal way to collect data about the research site.

Non-participant observations require the researcher to adopt the role as participant-as-observer wherein he/she/they "visits the setting, typically only on one of just a few occasions, to conduct interviews with people" (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011, p. 73). To be clear, I was not seeking to observe participants outside of the interviewing context. Contact and interaction with participants were brief outside of interviewing. Thus, attempting to observe participants in this short span was more likely to generate misunderstandings from and about both the researcher and participants (Gold, 1958). Instead, my goal was to observe the research site itself. These observations were indirect and informal, meaning there was no scheduled time to conduct them.

This also meant that the level of participation and activity was limited or inactive. For example, I observed the infrastructure of the school space, took note of what was present and absent in the school's communal spaces, and surveyed the physical make-up of the areas where I conducted interviews. These were practical ways to gather data without actively immersing myself into the study. These observable details, which were captured using written fieldnotes (Brodsky, 2008), proved to be useful when providing context and descriptions of the research site in later discussions. More importantly, this type of unobtrusive observation reduced the risks of unintentionally influencing behaviors and interactions between researcher and participants, or creating potential ethical dilemmas (Gold, 1958; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011).

Data Analysis

Based on the data collected, a comprehensive approach to analyzing data was conducted using emic, etic, theory-based, and thematic coding. Emic and etic coding helped generate thick descriptions of the phenomenon under study, while theory-based and thematic coding was used as lenses to guide the interpretation of data and generate larger themes. These approaches collectively helped in assessing the research credibility of the study (Anfara et al., 2002). The data analysis period was an ongoing process and lasted over five months, from the time data was first collected to the final revisions of the dissertation. The data analysis process for each form of data source are detailed below.

Qualitative Interviews

In general, all qualitative interviews were audio recorded using a digital audio recording program, *Voice Memos*. Recordings were transcribed using the state-of-the art, advanced speech-recognition, online digital software program, *TEMI. TEMI* transcribed the audio recordings and generated itemized transcripts. Each transcript was reviewed for errors and missing information

and edited prior to analysis. All qualitative interviews began with an open-coding process and then went through a four-cycle coding process to identify major themes and findings. Each step is detailed below.

Codes and Open Coding

Analysis began by grouping raw data into broad categories or codes using an open coding strategy. In this approach, a code, which is a label that represents a "summative and salient theme or idea" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 4), was assigned to data portions "to identify as many ideas and concepts as possible without concern for how they relate" (Benaquisto, 2008, p. 87). Adopting this stance was challenging given the research goals and topics of the proposed study, knowledge in the field, and my previous experience with similar research and data. However, using open coding supports phenomenological approaches to analysis where the researcher allows the data to speak for itself without offering causation or interpretive generalizations (Adams & van Manen, 2008). Moreover, open coding forced me to be more aware of other concepts, ideas, and themes different from my prior knowledge and experiences (Benaquisto, 2008).

Cycle 1: Emic Coding

In the first cycle of coding, open coding was used to create emic codes, or codes that are generated from the participants' point of view or emic perspective (Fetterman, 2008). For emic codes, single words, phrases, sentences, and/or paragraphs that reflect salient data to the study were extracted verbatim from transcripts. These portions of data offered insight into how participants understood concepts, how they made sense of their experiences, how they perceived the world around them, etc. (Fetterman, 2008). Using Q10 from Student Interview 1 as an example, participants were asked, "Based on how you understand race, what race/racial group do

you identify with? Explain." Responses included, BLACK, AFRICAN AMERICAN, AFRICAN AND BLACK, BLACK MIXED WITH NATIVE AMERICAN. While these responses were helpful in capturing participants' direct thoughts, using these responses as emic codes were not especially helpful in discerning what participants were explaining without revisiting the entire transcript. Thus, a second cycle of coding was necessary.

Cycle 2: Etic Coding.

In the second cycle of coding, I reread each transcript using the open coding approach, but this time, I reorganized emic codes to etic codes (see Table 3). Etic codes reflect understandings of the data from the researcher's perspective or point of view (Fetterman, 2008). Thus, my experiences and training as a former middle school teacher, social worker, teacher educator, and education researcher helped to create clearer, but more distinct codes that both captured participants' ideas, explanations, and experiences and reflected the social meanings and descriptions of those codes. For example, I recategorized the emic codes of BLACK, AFRICAN AMERICAN, AFRICAN AND BLACK, BLACK MIXED WITH NATIVE AMERICAN to RACIAL IDENTITY. This was because participants responses shifted and varied from ideas that described RACIAL IDENTITY to ideas that reflected RACIAL UNDERSTANDINGS even though questions were similar. As such, I generated descriptions to indicate the nuances between the codes. For example, RACIAL IDENTITY emphasized ascribing membership to racial categories, while RACIAL UNDERSTANDINGS described ideas related to race and racial groups but did not necessarily reference racial categories.

Cycle 3: Theory-based Coding

Theory-based coding was used as a focused strategy that thoroughly and systematically reviewed data based on concepts and ideas related to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks

Table 3: Examples of Emic and Etic Codes Used to Analyze Data

Student Interview 1 Qs	Emic Codes	Etic Codes	Description
Q8. If you had to explain to someone, a peer, a sibling, etc., what race is, what would you say?	THE COLOR OF YOUR SKIN DIFFERENT PEOPLE'S SKIN COLOR	RACIAL UNDERSTANDINGS	References conceptions, ideas, notions, etc. related to race and racial groups but do not necessarily reference racial categories.
Q9. So, what does race mean to you?	HOW YOU LOOK I SEE RACE AS DIFFERENT SKIN COLORS...	RACIAL UNDERSTANDINGS	References conceptions, ideas, notions, etc. related to race and racial groups but do not necessarily reference racial categories.
Q10. Based on how you understand race, what race/racial group do you identify with?	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN AFRICAN AND BLACK BLACK MIXED WITH NATIVE AMERICAN	RACIAL IDENTITY	References to how individuals ascribe membership to racial categories, including their own. [a]
Q17. Describe a time where you were treated differently because of your race.	A MAN CUSSED US OUT…HE GOT MAD FOR NO REASON. HE BLAMED US FOR COUGHING DURING THE MOVIE.	RACISM	References to or experiences of individual and institutional oppression based on race.
		RACIALIZATION	References to or examples of how society perceives and treats racial groups differently.[b]

Note: Examples of etic codes are based on author's previous research related to the topic and group under study. [a] Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016; Nasir, 2012; Renn, 2012; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012. [b] Nasir, 2012; Rockquemore et al., 2009.

of the study (Benaquisto, 2008). Like emic and etic codes, theory-based codes required rereading data with a new perspective, which involved examining the data subjectively and keeping the major theoretical and conceptual ideas in mind. Unlike emic and etic codes, which are often merged or separated throughout the analysis process (Ayres, 2008), theory-based codes structure, ground, and connect data to the larger concepts and framings of the study, and thus, are rarely, if at all, changed (Benaquisto, 2008). While this process may seem repetitive and extensive, Benaquisto (2008) reminds us that "laying out procedures and calling for clarity and transparency in the reporting of how researchers proceed in the coding of their data go a long way toward dealing with the issue of reliability of qualitative research" (p. 88).

In this study, theory-based codes were applied according to how the data best reflected the descriptions of Black boyhood, Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education, and anti-Blackness in education (see Table 4). A total of six theory-based codes were developed and assigned to the data: one code for Black boyhood (i.e. BLACK BOYHOOD), three codes reflective of CRT (i.e. RACE _CRT, CENTRALITY OF RACE/RACISM_CRT, and INTERSECTIONALITY_CRT), and two codes for anti-Blackness in education (i.e. ANTI-BLACKNESS *WITHIN* SCHOOL/EDUCATION and ANTI-BLACKNESS *OUTSIDE* OF SCHOOL/EDUCATION). Viewing these codes side-by-side with the raw data in context and the emic and etic codes, you were able to see the progression and connection of the raw data to the larger contexts of the study (see Table 5). Thus, these six codes served as an analytic tool to organize and connect data to the research questions, spoke directly to the research design of the study and data collection methods, and proved salient for data analysis specifically relating to race, racism, racialization, other racialized and gendered experiences and understandings.

Table 4: Theory-based Codes Used to Analyze Data

Theory-based Codes	Description
Black Boyhood [a]	
BLACK BOYHOOD	References experiences where Black boys are sociocultural agents who make sense of the world according to their subjectivity, experiences, and understandings.
Critical Race Theory [b]	
RACE _CRT	References to race as having no biological, genetic or scientific reality, but rather society has constructed categories that rely on phenotypic differences as a way to organize people, create and uphold hierarchies, and maintain white supremacy.
CENTRALITY OF RACE/RACISM_CRT	References that recognize race and racism as normal structure that exists, operates in, and permeates American society.
INTERSECTIONALITY_CRT	References the overlapping of identities and the interactions of race with other social identities in various ways and across various settings revealing the intersection of sites of oppression.
Anti-Blackness as a Form of Racism [c]	
ANTI-BLACKNESS WITHIN EDUCATION/SCHOOLS	References to or examples of epistemic, ideological, social, cultural, material and/or spiritual disregard for and/or violence against Black people in schools, educational contexts, and spaces where teaching Black students take place.
ANTI-BLACKNESS OUTSIDE OF EDUCATION/SCHOOLS	References to or examples of epistemic, ideological, social, cultural, material and/or spiritual disregard for and/or violence against Black people outside of schools, educational contexts, and spaces where teaching Black students take place.

Note: Theory-based codes were developed from the two theoretical and conceptual influences of the study. [a] Dumas & Nelson, 2016. [b] Bell, 1980, 1995; Crenshaw, 1988; Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2013; Tate, 1997. [c] Day, 2015; Dancy et al., 2018; Dumas, 2014, 2016; Dumas & ross, 2016; Gillborn, 2006; Love, 2013, 2016; Mustaffa, 2017; Patterson, 1982; Sexton, 2008; Wilderson, 2010; Williams et al., 2019.

Table 5: Examples Using Emic, Etic and Theory-based Codes to Analyze Data

Student Interview 1 Qs	Emic Codes	Etic Codes	Theory-based Codes
Q8	THE COLOR OF YOUR SKIN DIFFERENT PEOPLE'S SKIN COLOR	RACIAL UNDERSTANDINGS	RACE _CRT
Q9	HOW YOU LOOK I SEE RACE AS DIFFERENT SKIN COLORS...	RACIAL UNDERSTANDINGS	RACE _CRT
Q10	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN AFRICAN AND BLACK BLACK MIXED WITH NATIVE AMERICAN	RACIAL IDENTITY	RACE _CRT
Q17	A MAN CUSSED US OUT…HE GOT MAD FOR NO REASON. HE BLAMED US FOR COUGHING DURING THE MOVIE.	RACISM RACIALIZATION	CENTRALITY OF RACE/RACISM_CRT ANTI-BLACKNESS OUTSIDE OF EDUCATION/SCHOOLS

Note: Full-length questions can be found in Student Interview 1 (see Appendix F).

Cycle 4: Thematic Coding

The final cycle of coding organized data into broad themes using a thematic coding approach. Ayres (2008) describes thematic coding as an "analysis strategy where qualitative data are segmented, categorized, summarized, and reconstructed in a way that captures the important concepts within the data" (p. 868). This can begin with a list of anticipated themes the researcher expects to find in the data or by building from previously used codes in the data analysis process. This strategy is useful because it helps organize data in ways that can easily be renamed and reorganized into later findings. In this study, thematic codes were generated from an anticipated list of themes based on the review of the literature, previous experience with similar research studies, and the existing emic, etic and theory-based codes.

In the thematic coding process, phrases were attached to recurring ideas and patterns that emerged within and across data. By attaching themes to "identify occurrences, meanings, activities, or phenomena, the researcher begins to group instances or events that are similar, and to distinguish those that differ" (Benaquisto, 2008, p. 87-8). In doing so, "portions of data will be separated from their original context and labeled in a way so that all data bearing the same label can be retrieved and inspected together" (Ayres, 2008, p. 868). The key, however, is making sure the thematic codes reflect the data by developing a criteria or description that is explicit, yet flexible and robust (see Table 6). This helps in determining which codes best fit the data.

Like theory-based coding, thematic coding follows the same reread-examine-assign process. After three cycles of coding, the raw data extracted from Q10, for example, was organized beginning with an emic code, reorganized to an etic code, and then assigned a theory-based code. This is represented as: BLACK, AFRICAN AMERICAN, AFRICAN AND BLACK, BLACK MIXED WITH NATIVE AMERICAN to RACIAL IDENTITY which reflect

Table 6: Examples of Thematic Codes Used to Analyze Data

Thematic Codes	Description
CONCEPTIONS AND NOTIONS OF RACE AND/OR RACIAL IDENTITY	References to or examples of how participants conceptualize, make sense of, and define race and/or racial identity.
RACIALIZED AND GENDERED MESSAGES	References to or examples of ideologies, messages, expectations and lessons taught and sent about what it means to be a Black boy from home, school, society, etc.
RACIAL AND GENDER STEREOTYPES AS NARRATIVES	References to or examples of the adoption, perpetuation, resistance, challenge, critique, or questioning of racial and gender stereotypes.
RACE AND SPACE	References to or examples of how and where racial discourse and topics and issues related to race and racism are/are not taken up, discussed, examined, visible, etc.
ANTI-BLACKNESS	References to or examples of epistemic, ideological, social, cultural, material and/or spiritual disregard for and/or violence against Black people.
SUPPORTIVE SPACES	"Same-peer networks gathered in specific physical spaces within a school environment" (Carter, 2007, p. 542).

RACE _CRT. To this, the thematic code CONCEPTIONS AND NOTIONS OF RACE AND/OR RACIAL IDENTITY was added (see Table 7). This was decided because participants' responses to Q10 reflect how they conceptualized and made sense of race. In this example, it is clear how the data, codes, theory, and theme relate. This proved useful when accounting for similarities across data and variability among participants (Ayres, 2008). Thus, for this type of qualitative study, using multiple codes and strategies for data analysis was necessary. It ensured that the conclusions drawn covered the scope of the research questions, aligned with the theoretical and conceptual influences that grounded the study, evidenced the reviewed literature, supported the research methodologies used, and corroborated the types of data collected.

Student Artifact

Although the student artifact in this study (i.e. identity map) was a written and visual artifact, it was accompanied by audio data from students' interviews. Engaging in additional conversations about the artifact allowed participants more opportunities to share stories and explain their understandings related to race, gender, and other factors that contributed to their identities. Both the artifact and conversations revealed unexpected ideas and relationships about how Black boys made sense of and experienced race, racialization, and gendering, and helped to theorize their connections to the larger systems of racism and anti-Blackness.

Identity Maps

Looking at identity maps alone, researchers can make inferences and deductions about how participants see themselves, how others see them, and how they understand the world. This conjecture would be based on how and from what perspective the researcher analyzes: (1) the various aspects of identity written in each circle; (2) the overlapping, intersecting, and spacing of circles; and (3) the size or significance of circles (Flennaugh, 2016b). Thus, to avoid assumptions

Table 7: Examples of Using Multiple Types of Codes to Analyze Data

Student Interview 1 Qs	Emic Codes	Etic Codes	Theory-based Codes	Thematic Codes
Q8	THE COLOR OF YOUR SKIN DIFFERENT PEOPLE'S SKIN COLOR	RACIAL UNDERSTANDINGS	RACE _CRT	CONCEPTIONS AND NOTIONS OF RACE AND/OR RACIAL IDENTITY
Q9	HOW YOU LOOK I SEE RACE AS DIFFERENT SKIN COLORS...	RACIAL UNDERSTANDINGS	RACE _CRT	CONCEPTIONS AND NOTIONS OF RACE AND/OR RACIAL IDENTITY
Q10	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN AFRICAN AND BLACK BLACK MIXED WITH NATIVE AMERICAN	RACIAL IDENTITY	RACE _CRT	CONCEPTIONS AND NOTIONS OF RACE AND/OR RACIAL IDENTITY
Q17	A MAN CUSSED US OUT…HE GOT MAD FOR NO REASON. HE BLAMED US FOR COUGHING DURING THE MOVIE.	RACISM RACIALIZATION	CENTRALITY OF RACE/RACISM_CRT ANTI-BLACKNESS OUTSIDE OF EDUCATION/SCHOOLS	RACIALIZED AND GENDERED MESSAGES RACIAL AND GENDER STEREOTYPES AS NARRATIVES

Note: Full-length questions can be found in Student Interview 1 (see Appendix F).

and misinformation from the researcher, explanations of the identity map was gathered directly from the source, the participants themselves (Flennaugh, 2016b).

After completing the identity map, participants were asked to provide a "grand tour" of their map, explaining their interpretations and understandings of what they created and constructed. As outlined in the *Identity Map Guidelines* (see Appendix G), participants were asked four questions:

1. What aspects of yourself are most important to your identity?
2. When looking at your identity map,
    a. What do you notice about the other circles?
    b. The size of the them?
    c. What's in the circles?
    d. The overlapping and spacing of the circles?
3. What do you notice about your identity in different spaces?
    a. Why do you see yourself in the manner that you do?
    b. Why do you think others see you in the manner that they do?
    c. What influences you to see yourself one way versus another?
4. What else do you notice?

Providing participants the opportunity to story and narrate their identity maps not only built additional rapport between the participant and researcher, but it revealed new ideas and findings that were not discussed during Student Interview 1, and it provided a segue into Student Interview 2. Further, the grand tour encouraged participants to rethink or reframe prior interpretations and understandings about their identity, specifically along the lines of how others perceived them in various spaces, that they had not considered. Although these discussions were

centered around the artifact, they were captured during Student Interviews 1 and 2 via audio recording and were transcribed and coded as described under the *Qualitative Interview* section under *Data Analysis*.

Non-participant Observations

Data gathered from non-participant observations were captured using written fieldnotes. Fieldnotes is a primary recording method used in qualitative research to capture descriptions, ideas, reflections, hunches and reactions within the context of the research study (Glesne, 2016). In this study, fieldnotes were written using in-depth, descriptive details about the research site (see Table 8). They were systematically done before, after, and/or between interviews. Based on the methodology and research design of the study, fields notes sought to provide "descriptive elements that recordings [could not] capture" (Brodsky, 2008, p. 342). As such, fieldnotes excerpts were analyzed using thematic coding. While some themes or thematic codes were pre-determined and pre-existing based on analysis from qualitative interviews, other thematic codes were generated according to the data collected from fieldnotes.

Humanizing Research and Assessing Research Credibility

Engaging in qualitative research that seeks to understand and learn from Black youth's experiences, thoughts, and perspectives about race, racism, racialization, and gender in the contexts of racism, anti-Blackness, and other forms of oppression and marginalization, requires building genuine relationships with them and fostering authentic participation among them (Edwards, McArthur, et al., 2016; Paris, 2011; Paris & Winn, 2013). In this study, building relationships between myself and Black boys was the most important part of the research process and was critical to establishing authenticity and trust. Building relationships based on authenticity, trust, and mutual understanding reflect what Paris (2011) describes as humanizing

Table 8: Fieldnotes Excerpts of Metro Middle School

Date/Time	Location	Fieldnotes	Thematic Code (s)
02/04/2020 10:55am	Main office and corridor	No reflections of Black History Month in or around the main office and corridor. Valentine's Day decorations on the main windows of the administrative wing.	RACE AND SPACE ANTI-BLACKNESS
02/07/2020 11:30am	Administrative wing	Black boy isolated in a small conference room.	RACIALIZED AND GENDERED MESSAGES
02/10/2020 1pm	Main office	Black boys assisting the administrative assistant with office responsibilities. Black boys meeting with administrators.	RACIALIZED AND GENDERED MESSAGES
02/14/2020 1pm	Administrative wing	A small group of Black boys gathered in a small conference room eating lunch together.	SUPPORTIVE SPACES
02/19/2020 12:15pm	Main office	Black boys and parent meeting with administrators. Black boys were sent home for fighting.	RACIALIZED AND GENDERED MESSAGES
03/03/2020 12:15pm	Administrative wing	Black boy sitting alone in a small conference room completing learning tasks/assignments.	SUPPORTIVE SPACES RACIALIZED AND GENDERED MESSAGES

Note: Descriptions of thematic codes can be found in Table 6.

research, or "a methodological stance, which requires that our inquiries involve dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of dignity and care for both researchers and participants" (p. 137). He believes that the "researcher's efforts must coincide with the students' to engage in critical thinking about the problems and issues of interest as both the researcher and participants seek mutual humanization through understanding" (p. 137). Thus, I intentionally framed and conducted this study in ways that avoided Eurocentric research methodologies, practices, theories, and paradigms. Instead I focused on the participants themselves and centered their knowledge, voices, experiences, and thoughts to "humanize through acts of research."

With this understanding, I used humanizing research as a frame to assess the credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and defensibility of the study and to guard against research bias (Anfara et al., 2002). This included: (1) establishing authenticity; (2) using reflective memoing; (3) employing member checking; (4) adopting the code-recode strategy; and (5) implementing triangulation. It is important to note that even with these safeguard methods in place, no research study is error-free and thus, potential research biases can still emerge especially when conducting a qualitative research study alone.

Authenticity

An important issue in the larger context of research and in qualitative research in particular is the establishment of authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, 2005; James, 2008). Authenticity refers to whether or not and/or to what extent the research is worthwhile, meaningful, and of some benefit to the participants and/or communities engaged in the study. In establishing authenticity, Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln identified five criteria to "ensure that the conduct and evaluation of research are genuine and credible not only in terms of participants'

lived experiences but also with respect to the wider political and social implications of research" (James, 2008, p. 45). Of these five criteria, three were found to be most significant to the study and are described below:

1. **Fairness.** To ensure the research relationship is mutually beneficial and that participants have access to the inquiry beyond the research context, this dissertation incorporated narrative research, qualitative interviews, and student artifacts to center participants' voices. Adopting this approach encouraged participants to be more vested in ensuring that the research outcomes were reflective of their experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, 2005; James, 2008).
2. **Ontological authenticity**. This criterion focused on participants developing a greater, and perhaps deeper understanding and awareness of the social framings and context being examined and studied (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, 2005; James, 2008). This criterion aligned well with the research goals and questions in the study and the research methods used to uncover students' thoughts, understandings, and experiences with race, gender and their intersection. This also incited a greater understanding and awareness of the larger, structural issues and topics in the study, e.g. racialization, racism, anti-Blackness, self-concept.
3. **Educative authenticity.** James (2008) notes that "research should demonstrate that individuals appreciate the viewpoints of people other than themselves through cultural, social, and organizational engagement" (p. 45). This understanding of educative authenticity was illustrated in several ways throughout the study. First, participants shared their individual racialized and gendered experiences in student interviews. Based on the type of questions asked, responses given, and the ensuring dialogue, participants

demonstrated an understanding of the multiple perspectives and viewpoints expressed about race, gender, racism, identity, etc. Second, participants shared their student artifact with me which allowed them to engage in additional storying and conversation about their lives. These artifacts are personal in nature and reflected thoughts, ideas, and experiences different from others, including societal norms and expectations. Through questioning and prompting, I helped expand participants' perspectives, understandings and thoughts, not only about themselves, their peers, and the research topics of study, but about their school, community, and the world as well (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, 2005; James, 2008).

Reflective Memoing

Reflective memoing involves "recording reflective notes about what the researcher is learning from the data" (Groenewald, 2008, p. 506). Often times, these memos are single words or phrases that summarize key concepts, ideas, and categories about the research process. Because these notes were recorded across various stages of research, my memos evolved as the research evolved (Groenewald, 2008). In this study, after each interview, I wrote down phrases, questions, key words, categories, interactions, thoughts, etc. about what I was learning. These memos were captured in the *Reflective Memos* section of both interview protocol cover sheets (see Appendices F & H) and then recorded in a table (see Table 9). Memoing not only added to the "credibility and trustworthiness of research and provided a record of the meanings derived from the data" (Groenewald, 2008, p. 506), but it served as a guide for the development of potential themes as well.

Table 9.: Reflective Memo Excerpts

Student	Student Interview 1	Student Interview 2
Josh	Acknowledges how he is viewed differently across various spaces.	Really centered around family; has very few friends; does not believe he is treated differently because he is a Black boy.
Mario	Very proud of his Blackness; engages in conversations often with parents.	Racially aware and conscious of how Blacks are treated and perceived, including himself.
John	"I like talking about this" [experiences as a Black boy].	Values the conversations that he has with his grandma regarding race and the personal experiences that she shares
James	Strong familial ties and bonds; strong familial influence on self-concept?	Is gender more "visible" than race? "I don't get treated differently because I'm Black"
Sean	"I'm pretty sure I get treated differently because I'm Black, I just don't remember"	Acknowledges that he sees himself in both a positive and negative way; responded to a lot of questions with "I don't know".
Charles	Keenly aware of being treated differently and surveilled by teachers	Starting to look at his day-to-day interactions differently; paying attention to how non-Black students are being treated.
Brian	Unsure why peers "fear" him [Brian has a small frame and doesn't *present* as alarming.]	Overwhelming notion that Black boys are perceived as "bad".
Isiah	Born and raised in Japan and father is from Ghana; Will there be a global context or influence on understanding Blackness?	"I was despised because I was American and Black"; what is the role of nationality and understanding race, Blackness, etc.?

Note: All students' names were changed to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Member Checking.

Sandelowski (2008) defines member checking as "a strategy most often used to optimize the [credibility] of qualitative research findings" (p. 502). In this study, participants were asked to evaluate whether their experiences corresponded to the aims and goals of the research, and whether or not their thoughts were fully captured. This included asking participants at the end of each interview if there were additional thoughts, ideas, or questions to be shared. Participants were also given the opportunity to review their identity maps to add any additional information or to delete previous thoughts and ideas. Taking these steps guided in the assessment of the credibility and dependability of the study (Anfara et al., 2002; Sandelowski, 2008).

Code-recode Strategy

The code-recode strategy applies to the repeated reviewing, coding, and recoding of data (Benaquisto, 2008). In this study, qualitative interview data were coded via the 4-cycle coding process. Data was reread, reexamined, reorganized, and recategorized so that "links between various codes [were] made and relationships among categories solidified" (Benaquisto, 2008, p.88). These steps ensured consistency within the analysis process and strengthened the dependability of the research and findings (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002).

Triangulation

Triangulation in qualitative research is a multidimensional approach where the topics under inquiry can be "understood best when approached with a variety or a combination of research methods" (Rothbauer, 2008, p. 893). Although triangulation is most often used during data collection and data analysis processes, it can also be applied to data sources (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002; Rothbauer, 2008). In this study, triangulation of methods, theory triangulation, and triangulation of data sources were used to address concerns to the validity,

dependability, and confirmability of the research study and research findings (Anfara et al., 2002; Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002).

Triangulation of methods coupled qualitative interviewing with non-participant observations. Data was collected at different times, from multiple perspectives, and from different places with the goal of uncovering varied, yet complementary data (Rothbauer, 2008). Theory triangulation combined three different theoretical and conceptual influences to collectively frame the study and analyze data. The idea was that multiple lenses provided a multidimensional perspective to the study, offered different insights to the research, and enabled a deeper understanding of the data (Creswell, 2003; Creswell et al., 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Triangulation of data sources drew evidence from various data sources. This included qualitative interviews, student artifacts, and non-participant observations. Using multiple data sources "yields different evidence that in turns provides different insights regarding the phenomena under study" (Rothbauer, 2008, p. 894). This increased the credibility of the research findings. Taken together, these three triangulation strategies allowed for the exploration and examination of multiple dimensions within the study and thus strengthened and enriched the findings, discussions, and implications of the research (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002; Rothbauer, 2008).

Researcher Positionality and Epistemology

In this study I sought to understand how Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school made sense of and experienced race and racism and the impact of racialization and gendering on their self-concepts. I entered this discussion and space understanding that my positionality as a Black daughter, sister, former middle school teacher, social worker, and scholar-practitioner affected how I took up this work. Thus, much of what I knew about Black

boys and how they understood and experienced race, racism, racialization, and their intersections with gender and gendering, was from a Black woman's lens. My perceptions and perspectives were influenced from my personal relationships with Black men (i.e. my grandfather, father, and brothers) and stemmed from my professional experiences and interactions with Black boys as their teacher, social worker, after-school coordinator, tutor, and coach. Accordingly, these collective and varied experiences, from child to present, shaped how I positioned myself in relation to the context of this study and influenced every stage of the research process.

From "the way questions are constructed, designed and conducted to how others are invited to participate, the ways in which knowledge are constructed and acted on, and the ways in which outcomes are disseminated and published" (W. Rowe, 2014, p. 628), acknowledging the positions of power, privilege, and influence one has and possess is critical. Like Love (2013), I too cannot "exclude myself from this [work] because I cannot ignore the role I play as a former schoolteacher and now a teacher educator who works with, theorizes about, and researches Black [boys]" (p. 293). Thus, my positionality impacted how I interacted with and learned from Black boys, how I conceptualized and read research, scholarship, and non-academic literature about them, how I made sense of policy, practice, pedagogies, and interventions regarding them, and ultimately, how I engaged in this dissertation.

Growing up in an all-Black neighborhood and attending an all-Black school for my K-12 academic career, I recognized the intellectual, social, and cultural experiences of Black boys were noticeably different from mine. I noticed that teachers often extended more grace and patience towards Black girls. I saw how Black boys were disciplined more often and more harshly than others (T. Brown, 2013; Donnor & Brown, 2011; Ferguson, 2010; Howard, 2013). I noticed that the language often used to describe Black boys' overall existence was deficit laden,

discouraging, and rooted in racial and/or gendered stereotypes. What I know now is that I was witnessing the policing and erasure of Black boyhood or the opportunity for Black boys to be children (Duncan, 2002; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2011). As I entered middle school, the dominant tropes of Black boys as "bad", "deviant", "always getting into trouble", or "constant problems" persisted. These narratives appeared to be fixtures in how society writ large and teachers and adults in education in particular framed and perceived Black boys, but it seemed more assertive and intense. That is, the discourse was more racialized and gendered. It was harsh, direct, and pointed to Black boys as the proverbial problem as to why their outcomes and experiences were more deleterious than other children (Howard, 2013). But as a child, I was not sure how to name or frame what I was seeing or what to attribute those differences in treatment and perceptions to. I knew that there was some common, underlying factor if Black boys had similar interactions and experiences and if the same type of messages were being sent to them even though they had different teachers, coaches, principals, etc. What I did not know or understand at that time was that the marginalization, dehumanization, and criminalization of Black boys was historical and systemic (A. Brown, 2011; T. Brown, 2013; Donnor & Brown, 2011; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Duncan, 2002; Ferguson, 2010; Goff et al., 2008; Goff et al., 2014; Howard, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

Shifting into my professional roles as teacher and social worker, I realized that as Black boys grew older, the ways in which they were perceived and treated by others, the attitudes towards them, and the academic and behavior expectations imposed on them changed, most noticeably as they approached and moved through the middle school grades. Middle school is arguably one of the most challenging, perplexing, and curious stages in our lives. Having taught middle school for six years and worked with middle-school aged children for over a decade, I am

very aware of the multiple and intertwining processes middle schoolers experience. In addition to coping with physical and emotional changes, social pressures, increasingly challenging educational expectations, and the transition towards independence (ETS & CDF, 2012), middle schoolers are also trying to "find themselves." For Black boys, these experiences and developmental processes are compounded when race, racism, racialization, and other race- and gender-related issues are factored (Carter Andrews, 2016; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Tatum, 2017). Unsurprisingly, what I witnessed in adolescence as a peer regarding the racialized and gendered experiences of Black boys, I also witnessed as a practitioner. As such, I started to learn more about what was happening to Black boys in middle school from an intellectual and scholarly standpoint, reflect on my own teaching and social work practice with Black boys specifically, and problematize the historical and current framing of Black boys. In the end, I attempted to do what Ladson-Billings (2011) says not enough of us do. That is "take a more measured and systematic approach to parsing out the parts of the problems that [I had] some control over" (p. 8). For me, that meant constructing an epistemological stance or systems of knowing grounded in and reflective of my identity, positionality, and experiences.

Hence, my epistemological stance is a direct reflection of being raised by two Black educators, my personal and professional experiences within Black schools and communities, my ongoing commitment to Black students, and my desire to (re)create supportive and affirming spaces where Black students in general and Black boys in particular can thrive and exist according to their own standards and expectations. Based on these contexts, I've explicitly adopted a critical race epistemology where my work builds upon and centers critical race scholarship and ideologies (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In general, a critical race epistemology

serves to counter Eurocentric and hegemonic ideologies, theories, and paradigms about race, racism, essentialism, racial justice, etc. and thus requires active intellectual work to view the world outside of dominant culture (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For my research, this meant intentionally seeking to understand and examine the social construction of race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), the permanence of race and racism (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998), the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness (Dumas, 2016; Dumas & ross, 2016; Love, 2016), and the construction of Black boyhood (Dumas & Nelson, 2016) and Black masculinity (A. Brown, 2011; Franklin, 2012; Majors & Billson, 1993). It also meant using these insights to interrogate their individual and collective impact on the experiences, opportunities, outcomes, and overall lives of Black boys. In doing so, it became evident that Black boys occupy an indiscernible space in both research and society, where they are often overlooked, forgotten, or erased from racialized and gendered discourse regarding their own experiences (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Duncan, 2002; Howard, 2013). Thus, I value voice and the power of narratives to share how and why I engage in the work that I do and how I construct meaning and analysis from it. But more importantly, narratives center, prioritize, and authentically represent the experiences, perspectives and experiential knowledge of who I am learning from and engaging in research with, i.e. Black people writ large and Black boys in particular.

Challenges of the Study

The challenges that arose in this study is organized around three areas: (1) researcher positionality, specifically as it relates to race and gender; (2) time spent in the field; and (3) modifying data collection processes due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Entering Metro Middle School (MMS), I was aware that there were very few teachers and adults of color in the building. Through conversations with the principal, I learned just how few that was. There were two men of color, one LatinX academic staff member and one Black history teacher, and the only Black women at MMS volunteered for a few hours a day as cafeteria monitors. While the principal acknowledged that the lack of teachers and staff of color posed challenges for students, specifically students of color who could benefit from interactions with adults of color, she saw my presence as an advantage for her students, particularly those Black boys participating in the study and other students of color who saw me in the building. I, on the contrary, saw my presence as a potential challenge of the study because I entered the predominantly white space as a Black teacher educator and former middle school instructor, where there are no teachers who were Black women and no women teachers of color. Moreover, I had direct knowledge and experience regarding the practitioner elements of the study, I shared social group membership with students in the study, I was familiar with the context of the study (e.g. former middle school teacher), and I also represented a prestigious university who had previous relationships with MMS. Together, these privileges allowed me the opportunity and access to connect and relate to students with an increased level of ease, comfort, and understanding. At the same time, these privileges could have presented issues regarding the validity, authenticity, and trustworthiness of the study as well as the threat of social desirability. For example, students may not have reported their honest thoughts and beliefs about race, racism, gender, self-concept, etc. because of what they thought would have been more socially acceptable to the study. Further, I could have been perceived as a researcher who had a disproportion of power and control within the study and/or someone who could use research participants to solely benefit themselves and colleagues (Glesne, 2016). With this understanding,

when designing the study, collaboration between researcher and participants and the presence of reciprocity was critical to buffering these potential challenges associated with my presence as a Black woman and educator working with and learning from Black boys in a predominantly white space. Moreover, I established rapport-filled relationships with all stakeholders throughout the research process, particularly prior to gaining access and permission to conduct the study. Further, to lessen the compulsion for students to respond in a way that was seemingly favorable to the study's outcomes, I consistently reiterated that this study was to learn about *their* experiences and perspectives as Black boys, that there was no right or wrong answer, and that this experience was completely voluntary.

Second, the amount of time spent in the field was limited and restricted due to the availability of students and MMS' daily instructional schedule. Each day, students have a 25-minute period of "Trojan Time" where they can complete homework, meet with coaches, counselors, or teachers, and/or engage in various academic- and social-related activities. Each grade level is allotted a specific time slot to partake in these activities while the remaining grade levels are at lunch. The principal and I saw this as the most feasible time to conduct student interviews as they did not interfere with instructional time and I could conduct interviews in a staggered manner and multiple times a day. However, there were times when students were absent from school, arrived late to school, arrived late to a scheduled interview, or were scheduled to meet with a visiting coach, etc. This meant that I had to reschedule interviews, conduct three interviews a day, and/or break up interviews across multiple days or weeks. As such, student interviews lasted over three months, which only presented a brief look into what I was able to capture given the time constraints and restrictions. Recognizing that the recruitment process for this study lasted significantly longer than anticipated, I would have like to spend

more time with participants beyond the student interview. Perhaps observations in the cafeteria or informal spaces of education would have provided different perspectives and insight to how students engaged in *Real Talk* outside of the formal structures of the study.

Lastly, there were unexpected circumstances that impeded the completion of certain parts of the research process as planned. Originally, the study was set to conclude with a focus group exit interview (see Appendix J) with students and the completion of student narratives via a writing prompt (see Appendix K). These additional sources of data were implemented in the study to corroborate similarities across participants to build trustworthiness in the findings, to uncover new and important topics, ideas and themes that were not previously shared during student interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011), and to yield different evidence to provide additional and/or different insights to the study to increase the credibility of the findings (Rothbauer, 2008). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were temporarily closed in mid-March and then eventually closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic school year. As a result, face-to-face research processes were prohibited by both the university and via federal law. The university specifically requested that researchers develop alternative methods to conduct any research processes requiring face-to-face participation or interaction, including virtual meetings, issuing surveys instead of interviews, communicating through email, etc. That said, the original in-person focus group exit interview was revised to take place via a virtual meeting using *Zoom*, a remote conference video communication service. Students were also sent the writing prompt via email and asked to submit their narratives via email as well. However, due to lack of response from both parents/guardians and students, concerns regarding access to the Internet, mobile devices, and/or tablets, and the overall concern for parents/guardians' and students' welfare and well-being during this crisis, scheduling and

completing a virtual focus group exit interview was not possible. This was also true for the writing prompt as no one submitted a narrative. For administrator interviews, the format also had to shift from face-to-face to other means of data collection. In this instance, I was able to successfully gather data via email communication. From these experiences, it is important to recognize the value and efficiency of technology usage in conducting research while also considering the social impact and implications of it too. This is something to consider when designing future studies requiring face-to-face interaction wherein interviews can be conducted in-person, over the phone, or via video with more opportunities to accommodate participants outside of work hours and weekdays, and account for unforeseen circumstances that may present challenges to participation.

CHAPTER FOUR: RACIAL AND GENDER IDENTITY BELIEFS

Race and gender have been cited as two key elements that Black boys draw on regarding identity formation and self-construction (Awokoya, 2012; Buckley, 2018; Carter Andrews, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Noguera, 2015; Rogers et al., 2015; Tatum, 2017). Recognizing the restricting ways that Black boys are positioned in society and schools where race and gender is at its center and where Black boyhood is ignored, it is important to examine how these students' racial and gender understandings and experiences provide insight about their identities and how they perceive themselves. When given the space to discuss their lives, boys in this study revealed the various interactions and socialization processes, mainly in the contexts of attending their predominantly white middle school, that informed how they see and understand themselves as Black boys. In this chapter, I focus on five themes that illuminate students' conceptions and experiences related to race, gender, identity, self-concept, and the larger structures of racism and anti-Blackness that have informed their boyhood experiences: (1) "I See Race as Skin Color": Conceptions of Race and Racial Identity; (2) "There's No Such Thing as *Too* Black": Negotiating Blackness and Black Identity; (3) "How Strong are You?": Notions of Maleness and Black Masculinity; (4) "I Just Try to Play it Cool": Racialized and Gendered Stereotypes as Narratives; and (5) "Race Does Matter, But It Doesn't": The Normalized and Elusive Nature of Race, Racism, and Anti-Blackness.

"I See Race as Skin Color": Conceptions of Race and its Influence on Identity

Across student interviews, boys reported various racial socialization processes and race-related incidents that contributed to how they conceptualized race. These learning processes, many of which occurred during their formative years (i.e. in pre-school and/or elementary school), highlighted their early exposure to race, racism, racial discrimination, and other racial

socialization processes. Many of these experiences played a role in how these boys constructed race, how they discussed racial experiences, how they made sense of identifying as Black or African American, and why race was/was not seen as a factor in the construction of their identities.

Recognizing the complex ways that race has evolved in this country and the ways in which race talk can be microaggressive and potentially triggering in nature, I segued into our discussion on race by posing the question, "If you had to explain to someone, a peer, a sibling, etc., what race is, what would you say"? Overwhelmingly, most boys responded that race *is* color or that race *is* skin color. For example, John described race as "people that are different colors", while his peer Sean explained that "Race is how you look." Two other seventh graders, Josh and James respectively added that "Race is someone's color" and "Race is different colors." Within their explanations, students also made references to places of origin, heritage, ancestry, culture, and ethnicity. These explanations hint at the complexity of racial identity, specifically as it relates to individuals who identify as Black with various ancestral roots or ethnic origins. For example, Charles identifies as Black although he stated, "My dad has told me his ancestors are from Africa, and my mom has ancestors who are Native American." The same can be said for Isiah who described both his parents as Black, noting that "My dad is from Ghana and my mom is from here (referencing the United States)." In these cases, students offer explanations of race in relation to themselves and their family background, which captures the nuances and "fullness" of race (Nasir, 2012). At the same time, these definitions highlight that the boys *are* very aware of phenotypic differences and perhaps some cultural differences but haven't yet grasped the hierarchal structure and social categorization of race. Hoping to garner a more detailed response, I asked several follow up questions regarding race and racial consciousness.

When asked, “What does race mean to you?,” most of the boys repeated their initial ideas regarding race as color or skin tone. However, three boys in particular, provided in-depth explanations that hinted at a more multidimensional perspective on race. Isiah, the only sixth grader in the study, initially replied that he was unsure what race was and that he “just didn’t know.” After taking a few moments to gather his thoughts, he explained with some uncertainty,

> Well I guess, race is different people's skin color or heritage. Like where they are from. Race means the type of person you are or where you are from. I wouldn't say race is from a country. It's more like…I see race as skin color. Like say Black or Puerto Rican.

Isiah’s response brings attention to two concepts that are related, but often conflated: race and color (T. Banks, 2009). On the one hand, he is aware of and can identify racial groups, but isn’t clear on the basis of which these groups are constructed. On the other hand, Isiah is also trying to make the connection between place and skin color and race and skin color. In the above comment, he is problematizing what race could and could not be. Being raised in Japan and identifying as Black, for example, suggests to Isiah that race is not attached to a country. Yet, he is unsure of the role that place plays in making sense of race. Thus, he concluded that race is somehow related to place or location *and* your skin tone. Through this definition, Isiah reveals the complexities in constructing race in different social contexts, especially when that context is a non-American setting and where race is constructed by conflating race, ethnicity, language, culture, class, and citizenship (Yamashiro, 2013).

Mario, the only eighth grader in the study, offered a similar perspective that acknowledged various racial groups and the notion of race also including “where you are from.” He explained,

> [Race] comes from your background. If you're like Mexican, you can say that your background is Hispanic. And if you're white, you can say that you're some percent European. And if you're Black, you can say you're a certain amount of African. [Race is] culture, where you're from, your ancestry, [but also] your skin tone. But we (Black

> people) have many different skin tones. But I don't know if that matters. Well, I feel like it matters…

In this conversation, Mario uses racial groups as an example to extend this idea of "where you are from," specifically tying race to ancestry and heritage. As he continues to think through what race is, Mario includes skin tone into this definition, where he recognizes that there are within group differences among racial groups, specifically among Black people. Although not noted here, Mario also pointed out within our conversations that other racial groups can have similar skin tones to Black people (i.e. biracial and multi-racial persons), but not racially identify as Black. This is where his explanation of race ends as he is unsure how variation in skin tones between racial groups relates to race as a social construct. Like Isiah, Mario is piecing together various elements that might help explain race, noting that race is still connected to skin tone in some form or fashion. Charles, a seventh grader, echoed similar thoughts,

> Race is where you come from, like your ancestors and stuff. What you look like, the color of your skin. Race [also] means my culture, how I grew up, and who my ancestors are.

Recognizing that there is no one way to understand or experience race, students illustrate various understandings of the components of the social construction of race. They highlight the nuances of race, how context shapes understandings and experiences with race, and why conversations about race are important. Equally important is how students came to these understandings and perspectives. Because many of their explanations and conceptions were similar, I began to explore the various experiences and racial socialization processes that these boys were exposed to that perhaps contributed to and informed how they made sense of race.

To further investigate students' conceptions of race, the boys were asked to describe the first time or one of the first times that they became aware of their race, racial identity, or own racial group. As the boys recalled their experiences, they were also asked to explain how, if at

all, their experience contributed to how they understood race. As noted earlier, many of the boys were exposed to racial socialization processes early in their childhoods where research suggests racial awareness and racial attitudes are present (Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016; Noguera, 2015; Swanson, Cunningham, Youngblood, et al., 2009). Josh, for example, was in the first grade when he was called the n-word for the first time. He recalled,

> This white kid named Oscar, he was grumpy, and I bumped into him and made him spill some water on his shoes. And then he started saying a whole bunch of stuff and then out of nowhere he calls me the "n-word" for no reason. I didn't even know what that means.

James experienced a similar incident with the n-word also in the first grade. He shared, "I was hanging out with one of my friends. I looked at my other friend and I saw that we were different. And he said, you are lucky you can say the n-word." Three of their peers, Mario, John, and Charles, were also in their formative years of schooling when they too realized that there was something "different" about their appearance. Mario revealed,

> I was in elementary school and I wanted to hang out with all of the white people in the cafeteria. There was a whole bunch of Black people at the other table. I looked at them and then I looked at myself and realized that I had a different skin tone.

For John, who attended a mostly Black Pre-school, he was told that he was Black, but that didn't necessarily contribute to his understanding of race. He explained,

> I was in Pat's Academy Pre-School and it was all Blacks there, not really a lot of whites. They, the teachers, told me that I was. I thought I was just a person, but they told me that I was African American.

On the contrary, Charles was the only Black student across all first-grade classrooms in his school. "I was the only Black student in my grade," he said. "I didn't really realize it, so I really didn't know I was different [racially]. I thought I just belonged." Although these early recollections of race through name calling, group separation, and race naming stood out as significant in these students' boyhoods in terms of an emerging awareness of race, many of the

boys stated that they still didn't *really* understand what was happening, what this difference in physical appearance meant, what race was, or what it implied. As John summed up, "My experience did but at the same time it didn't [help me understand race]. I was in Pre-school, so I was still learning about it. I didn't really understand race [and] it's still challenging [to do so]." This is one of the many elusive qualities of race, racism, and anti-Blackness in our society where racist rhetoric and discourse is normalized and functions as a part of our daily lives. Moreover, by sharing their stories and experiences, these boys highlight the type of Black boyhoods that they and many other Black boys are routinely exposed to, where Black boys are a "construction of the Other as not human, as less than human, and therefore undeserving of the emotional and moral recognition accorded to those whose shared humanity is understood" (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 29).

The racialized experiences that many of these boys endured in their early childhoods illuminate their awareness of race rooted in phenotypic differences. As preschoolers and first graders, race was skin color. It was not attached to deficit or negative perspectives, rather it was a marker of difference. Although the boys did not have the language to express the social and political significance of race or the clear implications that race has on one's life experiences and outcomes, they had some belief that race extended beyond skin color. This is reflective of Critical Race scholarship, which recognizes that race is a social construction that groups individuals based on phenotypic differences, even though race itself is not universally defined or understood (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). We know from psychology research, however, that the notion "race as color" was developmentally appropriate given that the "awareness of race and the significance of racial difference often begins in early childhood" (Noguera, 2015, p. 25). For many children, differences in skin tone is seen as *just* another difference in one's appearance.

However, the ways in which race, racial consciousness, and awareness of racial differences is experienced and framed in relation to social and cultural experiences and processes is critical (Clark & Clark, 1939; Horowitz, 1939; B. Jackson, 2012; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016). In other words, the construction of race and racial understandings are very context dependent.

Noguera (2015), for example, points out that in "environments where racist behavior is common, children may learn fairly early that racist speech is hurtful, but they may not necessarily understand the meanings of such words [i.e. the n-word] or know why their use inflicts hurt on others" (p. 25). This was evidenced among several boys who recalled hearing the n-word, being called the n-word, etc., but not understanding its meaning or associations. Not only is this reflective of the endemic nature of race and racism in schools and spaces of education as explored in Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education scholarship, but unfortunately, these are some of the earliest times during Black boyhood when Black boys begin to be "othered." To them, the n-word signified some form of distinction between individuals, which they then contributed to their skin color and not to a social construct or system of oppression (i.e. racism and anti-Blackness). As many of them indicated, there was little understanding regarding the role of power, control, exploitation, etc. that is connected to race or the larger issues of how racialization, racism, and anti-Blackness are woven into their schooling experiences. Given the boys' ages at the time, however, it makes sense that their ideas regarding race would be less complex. One would assume, however, that as these boys grew older and were exposed to more racial socialization processes that their understandings of race, racial consciousness, racial identity, racism, etc. would evolve into more complex perspectives (Clark & Clark, 1940; DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). This did not appear to be the case among most of the boys in the study.

As Black children enter adolescence, scholars argue that their understandings of race and racial identity begin to solidify, especially as they encounter situations and interactions that heighten their awareness of race or racial differences (Nasir, 2012; Noguera, 2015; Tatum, 2017). For many, these situations and interactions spark the exploration of race, the search for meaning in their racial identity, and how these understandings connect to their perceptions of self. As many of the boys grew older, their development of race as we understand it was not evidenced despite the various contexts and settings in which race (and racism) was present. Their processing and consciousness of race, from their earliest racial experiences to now, reflected their individual socialization processes, their racial and cultural experiences, and unfortunately, their limited opportunities to make sense of and problematize race. Whether at home, school, or in other spaces, many of these boys reported that they rarely discussed race, let alone the historical framing, social context, legacies, and life-consequences that are attached to race.

For example, many of the boys revealed that they hardly ever discussed race or racism at school unless it was in Social Studies class during Black History Month. Mario, John, and Isiah, however, purposely engaged in race talk with their friends and classmates. Mario shared, "Sometimes me and my friends will be having a conversation, and eventually it leads to sparking a conversation about race or racism or what certain people have done to Black people throughout history." In this instance Mario and others accepted the "burden" of teaching others about race as they themselves were *still* learning about how race and racism exists and operates within society. With little opportunity to engage in real talk throughout their Black boyhoods, especially in the contexts of schooling, many of the boys were unable to gage the nuances and complexities of race and what race meant for them as Black boys. Instead, these boys were left to their own

devices of trying to “figure it out”, often walking away from racialized experiences with the understanding that Charles had, “I just know there is a difference.”

Unsurprisingly, the boys’ loose understandings of race translated into half of them not identifying race as a key factor in their identities. Although Mario, John, Sean, and Isiah identified being Black as an aspect most important to their identity, only some of them noted it on their identity maps. Through conversations, Mario expressed that his “skin tone, name, what I think I am, [and] personality” all contributed to who he was and how he viewed himself. For John, “being Christian, loving God, having a loving family, being Black,” and where he was born was central to his conception of self. Sean referenced similar aspects that factored into his identity and self-concept, where he stated, “I’m funny, I’m Black, I believe in God, I’m good at video games and sports, I'm from Georgia, I love my family, and I think I’m smart.” Although not illustrated in his identity map, Isiah indicated that “skin color, personality, the different things that I can do that other people can’t because we are all different, my hobbies, [and] my abilities to do stuff” were key to how he constructed his sense of self. Even though there was variation in the construction and perceptions of race, these four boys viewed being Black as an integral part of who they are and how they understood themselves. They were intentional in naming and locating race as part of their identities and as discussed in the next section, what it means to be Black reflected different ideas and understandings, some stemming from stereotypes and others based on their personal experiences. As you will see, these individual stories and collective experiences speak to what CRT scholarship describes as anti-essentialism, or the idea that there is diversity among racial groups regarding their experiences, understandings, epistemologies, etc. (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997), which in this case, contributes to the boys’ overall unique existence and realities.

It is worthy to note, that it was not assumed that the four boys who did not identify being Black as an important aspect of their identity, did not value or see race as important to them or in the formation of their identities or perceptions of self. Rather, to them, identifying within their racial group was not viewed *as* important to their identities and perceptions of self as other aspects, like family, faith, sports, or where they grew up. According to psychology research, this is fairly common among adolescence (Damon & Hart, 1988). Turner and Brown (2007) assert that many youth tend to "place more importance on the social groups they can choose to belong to (e.g., groups based on common interests) than groups they belong to because of their birth" (p. 709). Moreover, centrality (the level of importance placed on a social group), public regard (how others view a social group), and private regard (the attitudes attached to a social group) regarding race and racial identity will vary (Chavous, Bernat, et al., 2003; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, et al., 2003; Sellers, Smith, et al., 1998). Rogers and colleagues (2015), for example, found that not all Black boys "view race as equally important to their identities" (p. 408). At the same time, attitudes and perspectives towards race will vary, and will ebb and flow depending on racial socialization processes and exposure to racial experiences that elicit positive or negative feelings. Further, these understandings highlight the complexities in the construction and understanding of race and the false notion that same racial group membership equates to the same experiences and understandings. As Nasir (2012) points out, "Race is a particularly challenging aspect of identity to study because it is lived and enacted subtly on multiple levels of experience" (p. 4).

"There is No Such Thing as *Too* Black": Negotiating Blackness and Black Identity

Ladson-Billings (1998) asserts that society's ideas of race are packaged into a "fixed-ness" where denotations of race "are submerged and hidden in ways that are offensive without identification" (p. 9). For example, "gangs, welfare recipients, basketball players, and the

underclass become the marginalized and de-legitimated categories of Blackness" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9). Unfortunately, these notions, many of which reflect racialized and gendered stereotypes, become normal discourse and rhetoric associated with and connected to Black individuals, Black culture, and Blackness. With this understanding, Blackness, like race, is also socially constructed and is often refracted through a lens of whiteness where whiteness is positioned as normal and Blackness as "differenced" (Ferguson, 2010; King, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Nasir, 2012). Also, like race, how individuals construct meaning from identifying as Black and identifying with Blackness is based on their own experiences, interactions, and processes and thus, will also vary.

Even though all of the boys racially identified as Black or African American, being Black and the idea of Blackness meant something very different to everyone. For some of these boys, identifying as Black and the manifestation and performance of Blackness was associated with sports, language usage, appearance, music, Black history, religion, and facing social injustices. For example, Brian, a 13-year old seventh grader who views himself as "strong, smart, and independent," believes that Blackness, Black identity, and Black culture all relate to history, civil rights (e.g. the Bus Boycott), and family. He talked about Black historical figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, and the dehumanization and murder of Emmett Till as important to Blackness and Black culture. Brian also mentioned how racial stereotypes are associated with Blackness and Black people, noting that society often thinks that, "We are bad, not smart, don't listen, and aren't respectful…stereotypes that everybody thinks." These seemingly paradoxical cultural representations of Blackness are not uncommon when Black individuals are processing and constructing their own sense of Blackness. This is possibly because Black adolescents are navigating white society's social, cultural, and institutional standards and values of what it

means to be Black, while also receiving a different set of socializing messages and experiences from their Black family and community (B. Jackson, 2012; Nasir, 2012; R. Reynolds; 2010).

For other boys like Josh and Sean, thinking about what it means to be Black never dawned upon them. Josh explained, "I really don't know. My mom asks me that all the time too, but I still don't know." Sean shared a similar sentiment stating, "I don't know, [but I know] white people try to be Black and want our culture." When asked to expound on this notion of "trying to be Black," Sean gave the example, "white girls saying the n-word and thinking it's cool [or] doing ghetto stuff." Although Sean initially stated that he didn't know what it meant to be Black, his explanations of white people trying to *be* Black illustrated notions and ideas related to Blackness, where scholars like Nasir challenge how and why characterizations of Blackness are often equated with racial stereotypes. She notes that stereotypes are a reflection of our broader systems and structures of racism, anti-Blackness, oppression, marginalization, discrimination, and exploitation wherein some students unconsciously adopt these views even if they don't see themselves or conceptualize their racial identities in that way (Nasir, 2012).

Another aspect of conceptualizing what it means to be Black and understanding one's Blackness, is that individuals may find themselves negotiating their Blackness or Black identity in different spaces and contexts. Although many Black youth are aware of the cultural representations that reflect Blackness, they are also aware of the racial labels, categories, and stereotypes that censure and ignore Blackness (Duncan, 2002; Love, 2013; Nasir et al., 2009). Thus, to avoid being associated with stereotypes, some individuals choose to shift or change their language use, demeanors, behaviors, appearance, etc. that might be associated with being Black or Blackness. This does not mean that Black youth adopt notions of whiteness or choose to "act white." Rather, their Blackness operates fluidly depending on the context. For example, Mario,

who spent most of his elementary years attending racially diverse schools, felt that he had to prove his Blackness to his Black peers once he started attending Metro Middle School (MMS). He explained,

> I felt like *I had* (italics added) to hang out with the Black people and that I had to make new friends. That was kind of difficult. I didn't know if my other friends that were white wanted me to leave [my Black friends]. I felt like I had to choose. I felt like *I had* (italics added) to be friends with the Black kids because I was Black. I felt like I had to dress differently to fit in.

Mario's understandings and characterization of Blackness was not only associated with *who* he befriended and who was in his social networks, but it was also connected to his appearance and style. Although he did not question his own Blackness, he subconsciously believed that both his white and Black friends did. Moreover, choosing and negotiating how his Blackness would be accepted and performed was difficult for him. To be accepted by his Black peers, Mario changed the way that he dressed. Thus, the perpetuation of "not being Black enough," via the way you speak, who you hang out with, or how you dress reflects racial stereotypes that many Black adolescents consciously and unconsciously subscribe to (B. Jackson, 2012; Nasir, 2012; R. Reynolds, 2010). Ferguson (2010) notes that many Black boys like Mario, wear "symbolic badges of their identification through clothing and style" as a way to identity their Blackness (p. 216).

Taken together, the multiple understandings of Blackness that these boys illustrate support scholarship that suggests there is no singular definition or explanation of how Blackness is performed or propagated (Ferguson, 2010; B. Jackson, 2012; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016; Nasir, 2012). As Black adolescents "learn and adopt an ideology about their own racial group and the racial group of others" (B. Jackson, 2012, p. 40), ideas of Blackness (and whiteness) also begin to manifest in terms of what is and is not right or acceptable. Consequently, these multiple

understandings and characterizations of Blackness shape and inform how Black individuals interact with others, contribute to how they see themselves, and shape how they understand their own racial identities. In doing so, the salience and centrality of race, racism, and anti-Blackness are revealed as is the implicit and explicit socialization of Black people. As Black youth are routinely exposed to philosophical, theological, and ideological messages and experiences about what it means to be Black, where Black is constructed as less than, some youth feel the need to craft alternative formations or versions of themselves to navigate the multiple worlds and contexts in which they exist (Ferguson, 2010; Nasir et al., 2009; Noguera, 2015; Rubin, 2007).

"How Strong Are You?": Dispositions and Displays of Maleness and Black Masculinity

Ferguson (2010) argues that there is an incitement for boys to be "boylike" where visions of maleness and notions of masculinity are framed around "mischievousness, getting into trouble, standing up for themselves, being naturally more physical and more active, being naughty by *nature*, [and] rule breakers" (p. 85). However, when these "boylike" behaviors, demeanors, and characteristics are embodied by Black boys, they are read as more sinister, threatening, disrespectful, disobedient, and insubordinate (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Howard, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011; R. Reynolds, 2010). Moreover, their dispositions and behaviors are reframed into a fixed category of Black masculinity and thus, they are not afforded the Eurocentric, hegemonic, and heteronormative images of maleness and masculinity as other boys.

For Black boys in this study, the enactment of maleness and masculinity was not displayed through disidentification with school or opposition towards learning (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1986, 2003), physical violence or threatening behaviors, suspensions or expulsions (Skiba et al., 2002), heterosexual power and hypermasculinity (Cunningham et al., 2013; Ferguson, 2010), characterizations of emotionless (Way et al, 2014), or other norms that are often

associated with Black boys. Rather notions of maleness and masculinity were illustrated through interactions at school where adults and peers tended to reinforce and project stereotypical gendered roles and norms on them. For example, several boys recalled incidents from gym class that illustrated the many ways they believed they were treated differently because they were male and in the same instance, were prescribed to "boylike" behaviors. Charles stated, "My gym teacher thinks I am good at any sport because I am a male. This year, he put me on the worse team, like with kids that he knows aren't that good." Charles also mentioned that Black boys were often seen as tougher and stronger than their counterparts. He recalled,

> In gym, one of my friends, a Black boy, fell and he was hurt. But instead of my gym teacher asking if he's okay, he was like, "he's good, he's not hurt", instead of going over to actually help him up.

In this instance it was not Charles' friend who perpetuated the image of a tough, Black boy, but the adult. This appeared to be common within the gym culture at MMS where adults or other students perpetuated a set of unspoken rules regarding male behavior and performance. There were clear "rules" that boys did not play with girls and what was/was not considered girl- or boy-appropriate. Isiah, for example, was steered into playing basketball even though his interests were elsewhere. He remembered, "The girls were playing jump rope and she (the teacher) said only girls can play this. You go play basketball." Brian noticed among his peers,

> People always are always trying to see how cool you are or how strong you are, but not the girls. I've seen people do something different for girls than boys. Like little things, like if we are in kickball, [a boy] might roll it a little softer [for her].

For Charles, Isiah, and Brian, what was considered male or masculine was already established by their teachers, other adults, and their peers. To go against these directives and implicit gendered expectations, however, would have positioned these boys as disrupters and rule breakers, adding to the myriad of negative depictions already associated with Black boys.

Similarly, reinforcing narrow gender roles were also visible in classroom settings. Like in gym, some students were aware of how teachers implicitly and explicitly sanctioned activities for Black boys. Charles recalled, "They put us in different stuff. We get put into different groups and activities based on gender. Like the girls would do the arts and drawing and the boys would do the building." Mario also believed that teachers would often focus more on what the boys were doing than the girls. He noted,

> I feel like if I have a female teacher, she will not really care what the girls do, but really focus on what the boys do more. Like if we are talking we are always going to get in trouble. But if they are talking, they only get in trouble every once in a while.

The significance of gender in these instances highlight the ways teachers can appear to curb boys' academic and creative interests, try to regulate their classroom behaviors, and stifle their overall presence in the classroom. Not only might these decisions have implications and consequences for classroom engagement, the formation of academic identities, and how they see themselves, but also how boys (and girls) begin to view teaching and schooling (Galley, 2015).

Contrary to research, literature, and media that perpetuate fighting and aggressive behaviors among Black boys as commonplace and as ways to enforce their heterosexuality, prove their masculinity, and establish their male power (Ferguson, 2010), fighting and aggressiveness among these boys were rare. This is not to suggest that these students have never been in fights or physical altercations. Rather, none of the boys identified fighting as a part of their current schooling experiences at MMS and the two students who did speak of fighting, noted that it occurred when they were in elementary school. James shared that he fought a peer for calling him the n-word, while John described an incident where he was blamed for something that he did not say,

> They went to the teacher and told her that I said that I would kill them and Donald Trump. All day I was crying and then the crying turned into anger and then the anger

> turned into wanting to fight. The next day, I came back and fought all three of them at the same time.

In both cases, these acts could have been read as gendered and as male self-expression under the "boylike" rhetoric that boys stand up for themselves and "boys will be boys" (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016). However, because these boys are Black, their acts are "seen as embodying violence and aggression [where] fighting is seen more visible as a problem, so it is viewed with extreme concern and responded to more swiftly and harsher" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 194). Unfortunately, this was the case with both James and John who were given swifter and harsher punishments. This illuminates how Black boys and notions of Black masculinity are reconstructed within our racist and anti-Black society. Thus, when "boylike" behaviors are examined through a lens of race, white "boyness" is seen as normative and Black "boyness" is not.

Together, these boys' experiences illustrate that the meanings and understandings given to gender dispositions and behaviors are varied and multiple. Moreover, there are similar and dissimilar experiences with gender and gender performance among Black boys. For some students, they were able to identify gendered interactions between themselves and others and the various ways that expectations for boys were taught and reinforced. For others, gendered socialization processes were evasive and hidden such that students were not aware of its pervasiveness in their daily interactions and experiences. When asked to describe a time when he believed he was treated differently because of his gender, for example, John explained, "I can't say that that has never happened to me. Maybe I've never paid it any attention, or it happened to me and I just don't remember." Even when boys were pushed to think of how their experiences are different than others of a different gender, they could not pinpoint any incidents or infer what could happen or what life would be like if they were a girl. Josh believed, "Everyone gets treated

the same," while John could not identify how his daily experiences would be different. These reflections from the boys underscore how our society is constructed along normative notions of boyhood and perhaps the ways in which many of these Black boys have unconsciously adopted normative notions of what it means to be a boy. However, in doing so, the experiences and understandings of Black boyhood, which are rooted in the matrix of race and gender and is situated within the context of our "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2013, p. 4), are not fully examined and explored.

"I Just Try to Play it Cool": Racialized and Gendered Stereotypes as Narratives

Noguera (2015) asserts that Black boys' identities and sense of self can be trapped by stereotypes, especially as they are "becoming more detached from their parents and [are] attempting to establish an independent identity" (p. 24). Moreover, as Black boys are increasingly exposed to popularized, racialized, and stereotypical depictions of Black identity discourse, they are likely to base their perceptions of self and self-worth on distorted Black boy images (A. Brown, 2011; Dancy, 2014b; Nasir, 2012; Nasir et al., 2009). Across student interviews, boys revealed a myriad of racialized and gendered stereotypes that are perpetuated and projected at school, in the media, and within society. They believed that many people in society view them as criminals, drug dealers, gang members, very athletic, but incapable of achieving academically, and overall "bad." While many of the boys recognized that these assumptions and generalizations were not true and did not apply to them specifically, they were deliberate in distancing themselves from them or shifting the narrative about them.

McGee and Pearman (2014) found that some Black boys make conscious decisions to "fabricate a 'calm' demeanor that appear obligatory as a result of teachers and school administration berating some of their peers" (p. 13). Several boys in this study quickly learned to

refashion their otherwise energetic, playful, and talkative selves to be docile, pensive, or passive in order to operate within the restrictions and confines of whiteness and what is deemed appropriate school behavior. Josh, for example, explained that he chose to keep a low profile so that he is not blamed for misbehaving or punished for something that he did not do. He said, "We (as in Black boys) have to keep it low because we might be targeted for things." Mario shared similar thoughts regarding the idea of going under the radar. When explaining his identity map, he talked about the various ways that people see him and why it's important for him to "play it cool,"

> I think some of the things that I have said (e.g. funny, hardworking, goofing around, talkative), people also see me as. But not all of the things people can really see what I do. It's kind of hard to put in words. Like, I really don't show myself. I just try to be like the funny person or the most understanding person that I can be, or just try to play it cool.

Mario eludes to how society writ large and how his teachers and peers specifically read and frame him. He acknowledges that he is judged from his appearance and how he performs in school, which can dictate how he is perceived and treated. To that end, Mario chooses not to reveal his authentic self with the understanding that Black boys specifically are often more than not depicted in negative ways. Brian shared similar thoughts. "They only see me as Black," he said. "They don't know me. They don't personally know me, so all they can do is just *see* (italics added) me." Love (2014) argues that "too often, teachers make judgments concerning Black [boys] having nothing to do with their intellectual ability and everything to do with stereotypes, assumptions, and fear" (p. 294). Despite not using the language of racially hostile or anti-Black environments, these boys expose the ways in which they are conditioned to see power and race and the ways in which race and gender operated alongside racism and stereotypes in school settings.

Contrary to the narrative that Black boys are expected to excel athletically, but not academically (Henfield, 2011; Howard, 2013; Nasir et al., 2009), all eight of the boys in this study positioned and viewed themselves as student-athletes. These students took pride in their athletic and scholarly abilities, sharing how they are both "good in sports" and "good in school." James, for example, believes that being a student-athlete is very important to his identity. He said,

> I have to get my grades before I play sports. That's what my mom says. I had bad grades and I had to sit out some games. A couple of weeks ago I had a bad grade in English, but I got it up to a B. I'm working on it. I'm working on it in Math too.

Both Mario and Charles indicate that they are hard workers and leaders on and off the field and that they always try their best. Mario stated,

> In sports, I don't really like to goof around, but also I want it to be fun. But if people are messing around when they shouldn't, then I take the lead. I am a leader in both school and sports. I think I am a leader in both spaces.

The idea of being a leader in multiple spaces also resonated with Isiah who indicated that being smart and hard working in "more than one space" was important. He said, "I know I'm smart. I work hard in all of my subjects, I make good grades, and I like helping other people with their homework…other people, my friends, my team, are able to see that too." Despite the negative connotations that are often associated with Black boy athletes, these boys implicitly challenge this notion. With sports, boys did not feel the need to eradicate their Blackness or relinquish their academic abilities and talents (Ferguson, 2010). In many respects, sports and athletics was a part of their Blackness and Black culture in general. Moreover, students did not feel the need to detach themselves from school spaces and networks of learning or choose athletics over academics as society suggests they would. As Howard (2013) points out,

> Though there is a disproportionate number of Black [boys] involved in sports, what is often lost from this dialogue is the hard work, determination, sacrifice, countless hours,

> discipline, and mental focus that many of them display to excel in the athletic domain and in the classroom (p. 79).

Relatedly, notions surrounding anti-intellectualism, where academic failure is the result of Black culture (Cokley, 2003) and that academic achievement poses a threat to Black identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1986, 2003), were also evidenced during students' conversations. Charles observed that teachers often think that Black boys "don't know nothing." He said, "I see it happening all the time in class because we might be goofing around, and they think we aren't paying attention. They think we don't know anything. They think we need their help. They just assume." Other boys shared similar thoughts regarding the negative perceptions that they believe some of their teachers have about Black boys' academic abilities and school performance. Some of these thoughts included:

- "We don't participate enough in class" (James);
- "We could get our work done, but we don't try hard enough" (Mario);
- "We don't listen in class" (Charles).

Framing Black boys' academic identities according to misleading stereotypes and deficit narratives like they are unintelligent, unteachable, and incapable of learning, can have a profound impact on the schooling experiences of these Black boys' boyhood, where schools become continuous sites of Black suffering and spirit murdering (Dumas, 2014, 2016; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Love, 2013, 2016). Moreover, the perpetuation of racialized and gendered stereotypes regarding academic achievement and performance can also inform how Black boys come to see and understand their academic abilities as well as their intellectual value in the classroom. For these boys, however, these stereotypes did not shift how they perceived themselves or valued school as a whole. In fact, all of these boys overwhelmingly saw themselves as smart, capable, intelligent, and able to make good grades. For many of them, they saw themselves as achievers

who did well in school. Thus, the common myth of Black anti-intellectualism among these boys was debunked. Yet and still, these experiences highlighted the ways race, power, racism, and anti-Blackness operate in school settings. It showed how racial biases and racist attitudes, pedagogies and practices are enacted across multiple levels from individuals and within systems. Thus, when teachers assume that Black boys are disengaged in class, don't try hard enough, or "don't know nothing," they've already positioned them as unworthy of learning, "reflecting a conception of them as incapable of being intellectual" (Carter Andrews et al., 2019, p. 20).

In general, the pressures and dilemmas that Black boys face in navigating racialized and gendered stereotypes that are present in society, media, and public discourse, and that are perpetuated in schools and spaces of education is challenging and complex. As these boys shared, they are routinely exposed to and experience, overtly and covertly, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, practices, etc. rooted in whiteness, white supremacy, racism, and anti-Blackness, where race, gender, and power are at its crux. Unfortunately, for Black boys, the multiple manifestations and complexities of racism and anti-Blackness, individually and institutionally, are intricately woven into the fabric of their boyhoods. They exist under the guise of low academic expectations, behavior modification and compliance, self-policing, and athletic achievement. It is for these reasons and others that Dumas and Nelson (2016) contend that public discourse "makes it difficult to authentically see Black boys as human beings in and of themselves" (p. 27). That is, it is difficult for Black boys to imagine themselves beyond the racialized and gendered stereotypes that society has married them to if they are not provided opportunities or afforded the right to do so.

"Race Does Matter, But It Doesn't": The Normalized and Elusive Nature of Race, Racism, and Anti-Blackness

As illustrated in the various discussions and conversations, students' understandings of race, racism, and racialized experiences teeter between race mattering and not mattering. On the one hand, the boys are keenly aware of the stereotypes about them and their peers that are perpetuated in society and within schooling contexts. They understand teachers' biases, attitudes, and differentiated treatment towards them because they are Black. The boys also recognize the different social and academic expectations and standards imposed on them because of their race and/or race and gender (Ferguson, 2010; Henfield, 2011; Howard, 2013; Nasir, 2012; Nasir et al., 2009). Even though students are aware of these social and academic inequities and to some degree are able to think through why racialized and gendered stereotypes exist, the boys also struggled with identifying *where* the stereotypes came from and *how* and *why* they continue to persist. For example, Josh believed that Black boys are perceived and treated differently because "that's just how [society] thinks about us." Both Sean and Isiah said that they did not know where stereotypes about Black boys came from. Mario and John, however, allude to the systemic and structural underpinnings of our society as the reason for racialized and gendered stereotypes about Black boys. When asked "Where do you think these stereotypes come from?" Mario responded, "Maybe because people really thought that. We've been depicted like that for so long that I guess it becomes a part of history." Similarly, John answered, "From racism and white people. They will just look at us and say something about us that's not even true. They don't even talk to us." Although not explicitly stated, Mario and John reference the historical and systemic nature of racism and anti-Blackness. Even Josh's answer reflects the normalized and elusive nature of the systems of oppression that undergird our society.

On the other hand, at the same time that the boys are aware of the centrality of race and racism and the consequences and outcomes related to them, they also dismiss and downplay race and racism in relation to their own personal experiences (Henfield, 2011; Nasir, 2012). For most of the boys, it was easier for them to identify and recall racial incidents and racial socialization processes that they witnessed than locate themselves in them. For example, Brian believed that his dad was pulled over because he was Black, and he drove a certain type of car. He explained, "In Georgia, my dad had tinted windows and they arrested him because he had tinted windows." But when asked to describe a time where he was treated differently because of his race, Brian responded, "I don't really have one. I don't think I've been treated differently because of my race. Like other people [are] treated differently than me because of *their* (italics added) skin." Yet later in our conversations, Brian admitted, "I want to be treated like everybody else." In Brian's case, he concurrently holds perspectives about race mattering and not mattering in his life, whether in school or society (Nasir, 2012). Through his comments he understands that people are treated differently because of their race yet he finds it difficult to place himself within these racial narratives.

Isiah, the sixth grader who was born and raised in Japan, expressed a similar sentiment that he isn't treated differently because of his race,

> There is really no negativity about my skin color because we, my friends, accept our skin color. We don't make fun of each other because of our skin color because we are equal and different. But I really don't have a problem with discrimination and stuff like that.

In this instance, Isiah minimizes the role of race in his life at MMS. Although he speaks of incidents with a school bully who picks on everyone, makes racist comments, makes fun of him, and that there are "a lot of fights that go around here [at MMS] …it might be about skin color," Isiah disassociates himself from these racial incidents. However, Isiah shared,

> Some people can be racist. There is a lot of hate towards *them* (Black boys). Probably because of things that have happened in the past, like protests, segregation, slavery. Maybe their ancestors are passing on the message that Black people are bad. Maybe they are teaching their kids that Black people are dangerous.

Again, Isiah acknowledges the presence and permanence of race and racism and how other Black boys are treated but he doesn't necessarily include himself within that "them." However, this perspective contradicts earlier discussions about his experiences with race and racism in Japan. Throughout our interviews, Isiah often mentioned how he was not treated fairly or equitably by some of the students in his Japanese elementary school. He also talked about how race was "different" in Japan than in the states, noting that they "don't have the same types of problems with race." Isiah shared,

> There was a kid that despised me because I was from America and [because I was] Black. He would cut me in line and say you can't be in this line or you can't play with us. My Japanese friends would treat me in a good way, but the other dude would treat me badly.

Taking both perspectives into consideration, Isiah recognizes that race, racism, and racial inequities exist and impact his schooling experiences. However, he goes back and forth about the relevance of race and racism in his life. Moreover, Isiah implies that racism is individually acted out which encapsulates a notion about racism common in our society.

John articulated a belief that race doesn't matter and spoke to the notion of color-evasiveness, where race is not acknowledged or recognized and for some is seen as a non-factor in the outcomes and experiences of individuals (Annamma et al., 2017). He explained,

> I think of [race] as we might be different in some ways, but in some areas we are the same. We might have different opinions about stuff, but color, that doesn't matter because we are all the same being.

Although John is not endorsing a color-evasive perspective, he sees race as an indicator of difference, yet still shouldn't be a compounding factor in our lives. At the same time, John acknowledges that racism is still prevalent. When reflecting on our conversations about race,

racism, and factors that are important to identity, he shared, "I just think of what would be different if [racism] was still happening. I mean it's still happening, but very little." Again, the wavering between racism existing and not existing illuminates the complexity and evasiveness of racism in our society such that racism is a normal part of life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gillborn, 2006; Taylor, 2016). Nasir (2012) argues that the conflicting notions that Black youth often express regarding race and racism should not come as a surprise "given the conflicting views of race held in schools (Pollock, 2005), and in society more broadly (Bonilla-Silva, 2006)" (p. 81).

These conflicting perspectives were further explained by Mario, the eighth-grade student-athlete who often engaged in conversations with friends about issues of race and racism, who spoke candidly about how society and schools often frame and construct Black boys' overall existence and academic identities along deficit narratives and negative stereotypes, but simultaneously expresses that race doesn't *really* matter. Mario explained,

> I don't think it really matters. Well, I feel like it does matter but it doesn't really matter at the same time. I understand that you can't always be so quick to judge what people do, [what they] practice, [or] the things they believe because of someone's race.

Although Mario acknowledges that people are treated differently because of race, including his Black peers and as you will learn later, himself and his siblings, he believes that race *shouldn't* matter, although he knows it does. This perspective is not due to Mario's lack of understanding or awareness of race and racism. Rather, it appears that this perspective is built on hope that in an ideal world, one's racial identity would not determine their life outcomes and consequences.

Over the course of several discussions, boys offered insight into the ways in which race and racism both broadly and in their schooling contexts are salient, yet at the individual level appear to be insignificant or at most does not impact them directly. This is contrary to the racial

socialization processes and experiences in their Black boyhoods that they spoke of throughout the study. While James, for example, was able to identify overt and "socially unacceptable" acts of racism (i.e. hearing the n-word), he was unable to describe a time when he believed he was treated differently because of his race. Thus, the covert ways in which racism and anti-Blackness has been structurally woven into society and into the functioning of schools, underscores the myths that race does not matter, that America does not have a race problem, and that we are currently living in a postracial society (Carter Andrews & Tuitt, 2013; Donnor & Brown, 2011; Leonardo, 2013;; Chris Warren, 2012). Moreover, if students are only able to recognize and acknowledge the overt ways that racism and anti-Blackness manifest in school settings (e.g. teacher biases, racial discrimination), but not covertly (e.g. coded language, zero-tolerance discipline policies, "race neutral" practices), Black youth in general, and Black boys especially, will continue to endure to a greater degree of Black suffering and anti-Black experiences. Further, if race remains invisible in schools and spaces of education at the hands of administrators, teachers, staff, and peers who uphold and maintain whiteness and white supremacist thought and ideologies, race and racism will continue to operate without "students having any understanding about where they stand in relation to systems of privilege and oppression and how these systems function in their everyday lives" (Love, 2019, p. 130). This is why it is critical to engage Black boys in candid and honest conversations about race, racism, and racialization, such that we not only learn from their experiences, but so that we can collectively find understanding, value, joy, love, and appreciation in their realities.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explores Black boys' racial and gender identity beliefs and the various experiences and interactions that contribute to those understandings. Through their stories and

reflections, the boys illustrate the nuances and complexities in how they make sense of and experience race and racialized experiences in the larger structures of racism and anti-Blackness. Their early understandings and recollections of race, for example, are mostly centered around name calling, group separation, and race naming, where identifying as Black often reflect a perspective of difference but was not necessarily associated with negativity. Arguably, these experiences and other racial socialization processes throughout their Black boyhoods influence how the boys come to see race constructed around phenotypic differences and its relationship to place of origin, heritage, ancestry, culture, and ethnicity. Moreover, these individual and collective perspectives not only demonstrate the boys' understandings of the various components of the social construction of race, but it contributes to how they construct Blackness and why at times they negotiate their Black identity. Further, the boys' racial awareness also shapes their perspectives on gender/maleness, Black masculinity, and how they process racialized and gendered stereotypes about Black boys. As their stories suggest, the boys are keenly aware the role race plays in their daily lives and the ways in which race, alongside racism and anti-Blackness, manifest in society. Even still, for some of the boys, race (and/or gender) was not specifically identified as integral to their identity or self-concept and for many of them, they struggle with locating themselves within racialized narratives and anti-Black experiences. In doing so, the boys expose the normalized and elusive nature of race, racism, and anti-Blackness in their daily experiences and interactions at school and in society.

CHAPTER FIVE: RACIALIZATION OF INNOCENCE, INTELLECT, AND TRUTH

Black boys have collectively been constructed based on the historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts of who society *want*s them to be and who they *fear* they will become (A. Brown, 2011; T. Brown 2013; Howard, 2013; Jones, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2011). For Black boys living and learning in a racially stratified society, not only are their identities racialized, but their social interactions, positioning, discourse, and ways of knowing and being are also made racial (Nasir et al., 2009; Nasir, 2012). This holds true in society and in school settings which systemically seek to exclude, marginalize, and dehumanize Black boys through coded language usage, teacher bias, racialized and gendered stereotypes, "racially-neutral" policies, pedagogies, and practices, etc. (Goff et al., 2008; Goff et al., 2014). In this chapter, I examine how Black boys are socialized to believe that they are "problems," revealing the various ways racism and anti-Blackness are socially and culturally embedded in their daily experiences and interactions. I focus on three themes, each connecting to Black boyhood, Critical Race Theory (CRT), anti-Blackness, and how they function and operate at the intersection of race and gender: (1) "Be Good So You Don't Get Your Third Strike": Black Boys, Conformity, and Expectations of Goodness; (2) "They Are Always Watching the Black Kids": The Surveillance and Policing of Black Boys; and (3) "I Am a Boy, But I Get Treated Like a Man": The Adultification and Assumption of Deviance of Black Boys.

"Be Good So You Don't Get Your Third Strike": Black Boys, Conformity, and Expectations of Goodness

Across student interviews, boys spoke compellingly about notions surrounding "goodness" and the admonition of not "being a good child." Students believed that their parents, teachers, and other adults saw them as or expected them to be "good" in some form or fashion.

Mario, for example, explained that his parents expected him to be, “The good kid pretty much. Someone who is a good role model.” John believed his parents saw him as, “A good child that has a bright future ahead of him.” Brian had the opinion that his parents generally saw him as, “A good kid.” He also referenced a conversation with his mother and grandmother that reinforced the importance of “being good,”

> I was probably like 9 or 10 and my parents and my grandmother were like, you are African American. You already have one strike against you because you are Black, and you’re male so that's two. So, be good so you don't get your third strike.

Despite the constant reiterations and expectations for boys to be good by family members, there was no clear explanation of what “good” entailed. Instead, the boys spoke of behaviors and dispositions connected to normative images of what “goodness” or “being a good child” would constitute, like performing well academically, staying out of trouble, being nice to others, being respectful to adults, being responsible at home and school, and being mannerly and honest. These thoughts and ideas surrounding goodness were expressed by the boys throughout the study, but specifically when asked about how they viewed themselves as Black boys and what aspects of themselves were important to their identity. Even with these understandings, none of the boys, through conversation or their identity maps, identified explicitly or associated themselves with goodness or being a good child. However, they were fully aware that those were standards expected of them.

As conversations evolved, references to goodness, being good, or expectations towards these standards shifted to notions of badness. It became clear to students that public discourse, society, and schools perceive and frame Black boys as “bad.” When boys were asked how they think their teachers perceive them or expect them to be, most students referenced variations of bad or badness. For instance, Charles shared, “I feel like the teachers look at them (white

students) and say they're good kids and they look at us and are like oh they're trouble." John believed, "They see me as a loving boy but will say I have some challenges with other people." When asked to explain further what "challenges with other people" meant, John referenced building and maintaining friendships and good relationships with his peers. For James, he noted, "I think they see me as bad, because I sometimes make bad choices." Mario shared similar thoughts, "Well I just feel like we are depicted to be not the smartest or like we are all bad kids and that we get sent to the office all the time, but that's really not the case." In these instances, students believe some of their teachers perceive them as bad because they are Black boys, reinforcing society's perceptions that Black boys are bad while "(re)producing social identities of "at-risk", troublemakers, and "unsalvageables" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 97). Unfortunately, Black boys are accustomed to observing, interpreting, and analyzing teachers' classroom behaviors, interactions, and inactions towards them. Scholars argue that throughout Black boyhood and over the course of their schooling experiences, Black boys are cognizant of the various signals, verbal and non-verbal, that indicate teachers' expectations and perceptions of them (Dancy, 2014b; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Howard, 2013; Howard & Reynolds, 2013). As Ladson-Billings (2011) asserts, "From the moment Black boys enter school who and how they can be is predetermined" (p. 12), especially regarding what is a "good" or "bad" boy.

Consequently, the meanings and values that parents, teachers, and other adults put on goodness or being a good child, have communicated, implicitly and explicitly, to Black boys that their current performativity, behaviors, dispositions, and overall existence in society and school is perceived or labeled as "bad." James recalled a conversation with his mother, who told him, "If I make bad choices, then I get labeled as a bad child." John had a similar discussion with his grandmother,

> My grandma tells me all the time about labels. She says every time I get in trouble and get written up for something, you're getting labeled. She says you are a Black boy that is trying to make it to college and succeed in life and all they are going to do is just label you. I didn't get it until now.

Unlike his peers, Josh was able to provide examples of why he thinks some of his family members perceive or label him as bad,

> My mom sees me sometimes as a bad kid and sometimes as a good kid. I get in trouble a lot at home and my sisters and family see me as angry because I don't talk much, and I don't communicate with them.

Like notions of goodness, when asked about how they viewed themselves as Black boys, none of the students identified or associated themselves specifically with badness or being bad. There were nods to making bad decisions and choices, getting in trouble, or being angry, but overall, no one perceived themselves as a "bad child." Even still, boys still receive mixed messages and communications across various contexts and spaces about who they are and/or who they can become, placing them in conflicting positions regarding their identities and perceptions of self. This reflects how Black boys are framed around paradoxical lines of good/bad and love/hate where they are positioned as both intact and in need of fixing (Dancy, 2014a; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Love, 2014). Thus, it becomes very clear that at the center of notions of goodness and badness are these boys' race/Blackness and gender/maleness and how it does/does not align with whiteness.

In a society built on whiteness, racism, and anti-Blackness, how are these Black boys making sense of and constructing "good" and "bad"? Moreover, how are these notions being determined and who is determining it? CRT scholarship and anti-Black research provide insight into how race and systemic racism shape Black boys' experiences and boyhoods, as well as how racist ideologies and the functionality and permanence of racism and anti-Blackness infiltrate Black boys' thinking (Carter Andrews, 2016; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Howard, 2013; Howard &

Reynolds, 2013; Love, 2013) . Through racial socialization processes at home, school, and in public places, for example, Black boys are sent various messages about what is good and bad. As revealed in their conversations, the boys in this study neither saw themselves as bad, nor good. Instead, they allude to what they believe reflect variations of goodness, which could sometimes contradict their academic and/or social identities. For example, can Black boys have strong racial, academic, and athletic identities without being associated with racialized and gendered stereotypes, "oppositional identities," or labeled along lines of goodness/badness? From this perspective, the parallels that emerge regarding Black boys and the construction of goodness/badness and whiteness and property as whiteness cannot be overlooked.

Property as whiteness constructs whites as possessing aspects to citizenship and humanity that no one else does (Gillborn, 2016; Harris, 1993; Leonardo, 2002). These intangible benefits of being white, as Ladson-Billings (1998) explains, are displayed as "rights of dispositions, right to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property, the absolute right to exclude" (p. 15), and in my opinion, the right to be perceived as good. From society's standpoint, whiteness is positioned as normative, right, and good. It is a socially constructed concept that reinforces white identifications and interests, and thus, anyone can embody, signify, and perform whiteness (Gillborn, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2002). This is illustrated through the boys' conversations where both their home and school contexts reveal the deep-rooted, disguised status of whiteness through the reinforcement of expectations and standards to be good or the implicit actions that suggest they are bad. It is not surprising then that Black boys believe that some of their teachers and other adults perceive them as bad, "trouble," or perpetual problems in need of fixing, and that some of their parents and family members often reinforce conformity and expectations of goodness. We know from research that Black boyhoods are not socially and

culturally imagined through their lived experiences or actualities, but from the Eurocentric constructions of childhood where systemic structures of racism, anti-Blackness, and other forms of oppression are ignored (Dancy, 2014a; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2011). We also know that the messages Black boys receive about who they are or who they can become is centered around deficit narratives and racialized and gendered stereotypes, where many of their social and academic experiences are adversely impacted due to the ways in which society, systems, social institutions, and individuals treat and view them. Thus, for Black boys, who are not given "the freedom to imagine themselves as they please" (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 29), conformity to and perceptions of goodness often determine their academic experiences and outcomes in school and their social interactions in society.

"They Are Always Watching the Black Kids": The Surveillance and Policing of Black Boys

In public spaces and schools, Black boys are subjected to surveillance and policing where the mere presence of their racialized bodies, regardless of size, signals to others suspicion, dishonesty, and mistrust. Ferguson (2010) asserts, when Black boys are in public "they become objects of suspicion. Their presence in groups on the street, in shopping malls, commuter trains, and buses makes adults uneasy" (p. 124). This was also evidenced among students in this study who reported how common it was for them to be viewed as guilty, suspicious, and untrustworthy in public spaces and schooling contexts. Mario, for example, described several incidents of being followed around the mall by security guards and store employees.

> It's usually when I go out in public, like the mall. I usually get followed by security. I feel like the people who work there (sporting goods store) are always following me and my friends around. We, me and my Black friends, always get told to leave or they just keep following us wherever we go. I feel like we shouldn't go into there (sporting goods store) anymore if we are going to get followed around.

When Mario describes the second incident in the mall, he points out how his and his friends' presence is seen as distrustful, "as if we are in a gang or going to steal something." He recalled,

> So, me and my friends were in the mall and there was a group of white boys. They were conversating and walking around and me and my friends were doing the same. But we were getting followed around and they weren't.

Mario's personal stories illuminate how society racializes Black boys as less innocent and trustworthy than their white peers. Even when Mario and his friends are "doing nothing," they are seen as guilty of "doing something." As Ladson-Billings (2011) argues, Black boys "are determined to be the root cause of most problems in schools and society" (p. 9). Thus, the culpable reputation that Black boys are always "getting into trouble" or that they are "problems in need of fixing" has been attached to their racialized and gendered bodies, whether they realize it or not, and incites how they are seen collectively and individually as Black boys (Ferguson, 2010; Howard, 2013; Howard & Flennaugh, 2011). As we have seen across multiple interviews and conversations, the expectations to mistrust Black boys and the perceptions that Black boys are less innocent and trustworthy spill over into schools and spaces of education where they are tagged as anti-intellectual disruptors, troublemakers, and problems.

Across student interviews, boys note how they often felt watched, surveilled, and policed in hallways, classrooms, and school spaces in general. Students believe that school personnel pay more attention to Black students writ large and Black boys in particular because of their race. In Mario's opinion, Black students, more often than not, are constantly monitored and routinely sent to the office. He shared,

> So, if I am coming down to the office for something like ice or anything, I mostly see Black kids down there, down there sitting in the office. Or Mr. X would be watching every Black kid's move. That's just how I feel.

Mario's observation was something that I too noticed throughout the research process. As previously noted, this research was conducted over several months in the administrative wing of Metro Middle School (MMS). During this time, I observed a large number of Black students in and out of the administrative wing regardless of what time I was present (e.g. early morning, mid-afternoon, late afternoon). I noticed that some Black students were isolated in small offices completing work, eating lunch, wandering around the wing, or just sitting in the main office, while on other visits I saw Black students meeting privately with administrators. Like Mario, these patterns signaled to me that there was a constant surveillance and monitoring of Black bodies. In our discussion, Mario stated, "I'm not sure what they are doing, but that's just how I feel," revealing that he is aware of administrators' desire to monitor the moves of Black bodies and the spaces they occupy. These behavioral patterns were also evidence among some of the boys' teachers.

Some of the boys believe that their teachers, the majority of whom are white, pay more attention to them because they are Black. Students describe incidents where teachers would watch them and/or their Black friends during class for what they determined to be "no reason at all." Charles, for example, noticed that his teachers paid Black boys in particular more attention than other students. He describes several incidents where he and his friends were "helped" more often than others, removed from class, or grouped together when other students in the class were not. Charles reflected,

> Teachers seem to pay a lot more attention to us than other people, but that can be a good thing and a bad thing. When we are in class, though, the teachers seem to drift over to us to see if we need help.

In this instance, Charles acknowledges that there is benefit in his teachers addressing their academic needs and providing students with help, but as he points out, it is based on the

assumption that Black students *need* help. He expounds on this more when he describes an incident where his teacher groups all the Black students together during class. According to Charles,

> Like all of the time, I will come into a class and the teachers will just put us in a group. They would put all the Black kids together and then just stay at our group and help us. It felt good that she could help us even more, but at the same time, why are you helping just us when other people need help too?

Charles illustrates how he and his Black peers' academic abilities and intellects are crafted along racialized expectations. This racialization of intellect has been illustrated throughout the boys' conversations and across schooling experiences, reiterating teachers' racial biases and attitudes towards Black boys and learning. This is supported by scholarship regarding Black boys attending predominantly white middle schools which have found that students often reference experiences where they believe their teachers perceive and assume that they are unintelligent, unteachable, and incapable of learning (J. Brown, 2010; Harden, 2016; Kauffman, 2018; Rowley et al., 2014; Wingard, 2000). The racialization of intellect is further demonstrated when Charles reports another incident where Black students were separated from their peers based off a teacher's undisclosed assumption,

> Me and some of my friends were in math class and there was a sub. One of the assistants (from another classroom) came and took all of us Black students and told us, "You can do your work with me," when there were white kids within our friend group [too]. But they just took us.

Charles' three excerpts bring attention to the various ways racism, anti-Blackness, and the racialization of Black boys permeate teachers' practices, attitudes, and discourse. It is important to note that in each of these incidents, Charles did not report any discussion on *why* these "teacher moves" were specifically enacted on him and his Black peers. When another adult comes to remove Charles and the other Black students from class, it is clear the permanence and

elusive nature of institutional racism in schools where Black boys' bodies are rendered as less innocent and truthful, where their goodness is constantly questioned, and where there is a strong desire to manage and control Black bodies.

These collective experiences shared by students illustrate the multiple ways racialization of innocence and intellect perpetuates the surveillance and policing of Black boys. Research on Black boyhood suggests that Black boys are routinely exposed to racial socialization processes where they are read and treated as racialized and gendered stereotypes both socially and academically (Dancy, 2014a; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2011). Their presence, interactions, practices, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, etc. are racialized in a way that position Black boys as less innocent and trustworthy in public spaces and less innocent and intellectually capable in classroom spaces. As a result, these boys become trapped in a cycle where society (re)produces racialized and gendered stereotypes about them, Black boys are propagated as less innocent, trustworthy, and intellectually capable than others, and the response to these assumptions are through racial profiling, public surveillance, and the monitoring and policing of them at school.

"I Am a Boy, But I Get Treated Like a Man": The Adultification and Assumption of Deviance of Black Boys

Ferguson (2010) asserts that public discourse "reframes African American boys around racialized representations of gendered subjects, [where] they come to stand as if already adult, bearers of adult fates inscribed within a racial order" (p. 96). The adultification of Black boys, where Ferguson says, "these are children who are not children" (p. 96), has been central in the double displacement of them in both society and schools. First, Black boys are displaced when they are denied their Black boyhoods, their existence as children, and where their behaviors and

interactions are not seen as "childlike" (Dancy, 2014a, 2014b; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2011). Black boys' second displacement occurs when they are denied accordance to white constructions of masculinity and hegemonic images of maleness. Across interviews and discussions, this adultification is revealed by the way Black boys are treated by adults in public places and in schools, and how their behaviors are stratified and interpreted through a racial lens of assumed deviance and wrongdoing (Henfield, 2011).

Mario described two events where he and his brothers were the victims of racial profiling at the hands of police, where the intersection of their race, gender, and physical stature (e.g. weight and height) presented them as men and not boys in the eyes of the police.

> A couple of years ago, my oldest brother, he has autism, he was walking over from his apartment to my apartment. The police followed him. He's pretty tall and he's Black and they thought they had a suspect that stole a bike. They followed him into our driveway, and they told him to stop, but he didn't know what to do. He has Asperger syndrome. He asked them, "Can we go speak to my mom?" They didn't listen. They threw him over the car and then pinned him down. Luckily my mom came out in time, but I felt like if it was a white male and he was shorter, I feel like they would have probably just left him alone or just not suspect that he was doing anything.

Mario then describes a second incident, very similar in nature, where their physical appearance becomes the "excuse" for him and his brothers to be pulled over.

> We got pulled over, me and my brothers, and I got kind of nervous. We are both taller and bigger, so I feel like they think we have guns in the car or something or that we are going to do something bad.

Mario's experiences eerily parallel the incidents prior to the deaths of 12-year old Tamir Rice, 17-year old Trayvon Martin, 17-year old Antwon Rose, and countless other Black boys who were presumed to be Black men. Like Mario, Black boys come to recognize that they are not protected by the status and innocence of childhood because of what they look like (Dancy, 2014a, 2014b; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2011). With this understanding, Black boys realize and begin to embody that their existence poses physical and social threats, dangers,

fear, and terror to everything and everyone that they encounter. As Ferguson (2010) asserts, “the constant reiteration of this danger and the need to be on guard or to handle dreadful encounters themselves saturates Black boys’ daily journeys through school and neighborhood” (p. 116).

Similar to adultification, the assumption of deviance of Black boys is also a recursive experience that many of the students spoke of. Students were able to recognize the multiple ways “they were perceived as exhibiting deviant behavior that served to separate them from school norms” (Henfield, 2011, p. 151). For many of the boys, this manifested through students and teachers blaming them for misbehaviors, breaking rules, or disruptions that they did not commit. John shared two experiences where he was incriminated for acts that he did not do. John recalled in third grade,

> One day we were in the library and we were talking about Donald Trump, around the time that he was first being elected, and everybody is white besides me. They were saying that Donald Trump would be a horrible President and then I gave my opinion and said, yeah, he would be. Then they said he'd probably try to start slavery again and I said, “No they won't let that happen again”. And then two hours later, they went to the teacher and told her that I said that I would kill them and Donald Trump. I didn't have any type of intentions of doing that in third grade.

In relaying this story to me, John was still in disbelief, three years later, that his peers would accuse him for such an egregious act. In our discussion, he disclosed that the teacher did not believe him, and consequently, he was sent to the office. Not only did this fracture the trust that John had with his peers and teachers, but it was one of the earliest times that he believed he was treated differently because of his race; however, it would not be his last. John also referenced an incident during his sixth-grade year where differential treatment by a teacher was based on race. He stated, “The first two months into sixth-grade was hard because I had one teacher that would always blame me for something that I didn't do. She’ll accuse me of something, then call home.” Similar to other boys’ experiences with teacher surveillance and policing, there was also no

discussion or conversation about how events unfolded or why the Black boys received unfair treatment. While it is understood that teachers in general subjectively enforce rules, Ferguson (2010) explains,

> Teacher perceptions of students are grounded in their own location in social categories of race, class, gender. They make sense of their interactions with students from these social locations, [which] provide a framework from which to interpret, to organize information, to act. These factor into the creation of hierarchies of culpability of rule-breakers (p. 89).

For Black boys however, misbehavior or being blamed for misbehavior is a reflection of teachers' biases, the adoption of racialized and gendered stereotypes, and the racist, anti-Black institution in which they teach.

Several other students also described incidents where teachers commonly passed judgement on their behavior and character, blaming them for the misbehavior of their peers. As previously referenced, James recounted multiple incidents of mistreatment at the hands of his teachers. While in the gym, he recalled,

> We were in the upper gym and we were playing a game. Someone pulled this dude's pants down. I was behind the person behind him and the dude that was in front of me ran so he thought it was me. I got accused of it and had to go to the office and had to call home. I told him (the teacher) that I didn't do it, but they didn't believe me.

The recurrence of teachers not believing Black boys perpetuates the racialization of innocence and truth previously discussed. It also highlights how the lack of innocence afforded to Black boys begins during their boyhoods where they are judged and perceived to be less innocent than their white peers (Dancy, 2014a; Goff et al., 2008; Goff et al., 2014). As James summed up in one of our other discussions, "I feel like they will blame us for things because of our skin tone." This sentiment was also shared by Charles, who stated, "When something happens, teachers just come to us first." These types of incidents also parallel how Black boys writ large are framed and positioned in society as "guilty until proven innocent." This is evidenced in the mass amounts of

Black boys and men who are put in the criminal justice system for minor infractions or for crimes they did not commit (Dancy, 2014b; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Love, 2013, 2019).

Consequently, the adultification of Black boys, the racialization of innocence, goodness, and truth, and the assumption of deviance of Black boys often leads to the unfair and unjust punishing of these students. Because these boys perceive that they have been positioned as problems, from the perspectives of administrators, teachers, or school personnel, this carries the need for them to be disciplined. Mario describes a time where he was reprimanded by his Math teacher for displaying the same type of behaviors as some girls in his class. He noted,

> Sometimes in Math class, I feel like Ms. B treats all the girls better. They be in their own space talking and what not, and then I say a couple of words to my friends and then I will get in trouble, while they are still talking over her, while she's still teaching.

Mario's incident highlights how Black boys are not held to the same standards as their counterparts. Further, when race is factored, behaviors that are deemed "normal" among other adolescents is perceived as more sinister and disruptive among Black boys. James illustrated this in his account with a white peer,

> This white person called me the n-word. I don't know why he did. We were going back and forth playing basketball. I was winning and I fought him because I don't like people calling me that. I got in trouble for fighting. He got in trouble for saying the n-word, but not as much as me. He just got sent home. I got suspended.

In James' incident, perceptions of Black boys being more threatening and uncontrollable is clear in the different consequences and outcomes administered to both boys. This was also evidenced by Charles when he described two incidents where both he and his friend received harsher punishments for the same behaviors as their white peers.

> Last year, one of my friends got into a fight with a white kid and he got into really big trouble. They both did bad, but the other kid didn't get into any type of trouble. The Black kid got suspended and the white kid got to stay in school.

Charles also recalled, “When white kid blurts out something, they (the teachers) will be like please stop talking. If I blurt out and say something exactly the same, I get a worse consequence.” With this understanding, Charles shared in another conversation that he knows that “he has to act in certain ways, or he will get in more trouble.” Further, he spoke of the need to police his own behavior because of how others perceive him, fully expecting that his outcomes and consequences will be worse than his peers. He added, “We can say the exact same thing as someone else, but we will get the punishment, or we will get in trouble. So, we have to be careful.” As Charles eludes to, Black boys are more susceptible to harsher and more punitive responses and consequences than their counterparts, even if they displayed the same rule-breaking behavior.

According to Charles, “We get treated like adults because we are Black even though we are boys.” His comment reflects how Black boys’ and their “behaviors are understood not as something to be modeled and shaped over time, but as the intentional, fully cognizant action of an adult” (Ferguson, 2010, p. 90). This means that Black boys are framed in ways that ignore and dismiss their childhood and innocence, yet emphasize their race and gender. The incomprehensible ability to disregard one’s humanity so that Black boys are only seen as racialized and gendered subjects is an indication of the permanence and perpetuation of racism, whiteness, and white supremacy. The normalcy of race and racism and its power to systemically exclude and pushout Black boys from both society and in schools, underscores CRT scholarship that asserts racism is deeply embedded in society and its structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Similarly, how schools, administrators, teachers and other school personnel, overtly and covertly, assault and dehumanize Black boys through coded language, teacher bias, racialized and gendered stereotypes, “racially-neutral” policies, pedagogies, and

practices, etc. is an indication of the epistemic, ideological, social, cultural, material, and spiritual disregard for Black humanity (Dumas 2014, 2016; Love, 2013). In doing so, Black boys have become a cultural representation of "otherness," where their boyhood experiences, identities, and perceptions of self are centered around society's imagined threat, fear, and terror.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reveals the multiple ways Black boys' innocence, intellect, and truth are racialized in public spaces and schools by adults, teachers, and peers. Through conversations and discussions, the boys report various incidents that illustrate the constant judgement and questioning of their goodness and trustworthiness. The looming assumptions that Black boys are always "doing something," when they are in fact "doing nothing," is reflective of the "othered," errant childhood that is constructed for Black boys and is indicative of systemic racism, anti-Blackness, cultural prejudice, and dehumanization that Black boys are subjugated to. Thus, when these boys' parents and grandparents engage in conversations about expectations of goodness and the importance of "being good," it serves as a cautionary tale about society's perceptions and treatment of Black boys in America. Through their own personal experiences, especially in school settings, the boys come to acknowledge these cautionary tales through the excessive surveillance, policing, adultification, and assumptions of deviance of their Black existence. Although the surveillance and policing of Black youth in general is often framed around racialization of threat, fear, and social terror where society and schools seek to push out and purge themselves of Black boys (T. Brown, 2013), in this study surveillance and policing was less about exhibiting bad behaviors and disciplinary actions, and more about Black boys' bodies being rendered less innocent and truthful. The same can be said about the adultification of Black boys, which is often meshed with assumptions of criminality which tend to focus on discipline

issues, misbehavior among Black boys, and how transgressions are made more sinister when enacted by Black boys (Ferguson, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2011). However, as the boys reveal, they can be adultified and not be perceived as criminals. Across their individual and collective experiences, the boys emphasize how they are not seen as children, the many ways they are assumed to be deviant, and the overwhelming feeling of not being believed and trusted. Despite these highly racialized experiences, how these boys think about race, racial identity, racism, anti-Blackness, etc. was not associated with negative feelings or thoughts about themselves. Rather, their experiences heightened their awareness of how race, racialization, racism, and anti-Blackness operate as normal parts of society and function in schools on a daily basis.

CHAPTER SIX: PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND POSITIVE RACIAL SOCIALIZATION

The various racial socialization processes and interactions that these eight Black boys have experienced, both in and outside of attending their predominantly white middle school, illustrate the enduring reality and continuing significance that race, racism, and anti-Blackness has on their lives. Further, much of what these boys have experienced over the course of their Black boyhoods lends insight into the social and academic inequities that they endure at individual and structural levels. Moreover, the constant exposure to racism and anti-Blackness not only contribute to their marginalization and exclusion in and out of school, but they also impact how these boys made sense of themselves and the world. Despite living, learning, and playing in racially hostile environments, these boys still found ways "to do more than survive" (Love, 2019). Through interviews, discussions, and identity maps, students expose the institutional and systemic factors that undergird society (i.e. racism, anti-Blackness) and, consequently, their boyhoods. At the same time, their stories and narratives reveal individual factors and structural processes that helped them develop and maintain positive racial and gender identities, scholarly identities, and promising outlooks on their lives. In this chapter, I focus on four themes that have contributed to the strong, positive identities that these boys have chosen to develop and embody: (1) "Know Who You are Meant to Be": Self-Love, Resilience, and Black Joy; (2) "The People Around Me": Relational Support and Positive Identities; (3) "We Get to Be in Groups Like This": Black Boys' Mentoring Programs as Identity-Affirming Spaces; and (4) "I've Been Looking Forward to This": The Power of *Real Talk*.

"Know Who You are Meant to Be": Self-Love, Resilience, and Black Joy

For Black boys, experiences with racism and anti-Blackness and the routine exposure to negative racial socialization processes (e.g. racial bias, racial discrimination, racial microaggressions, racial stereotype) can have undesirable implications and consequences on their academic and social experiences, as well as on their identity formation and the fashioning of their self-concepts. Milner (2007a) argues,

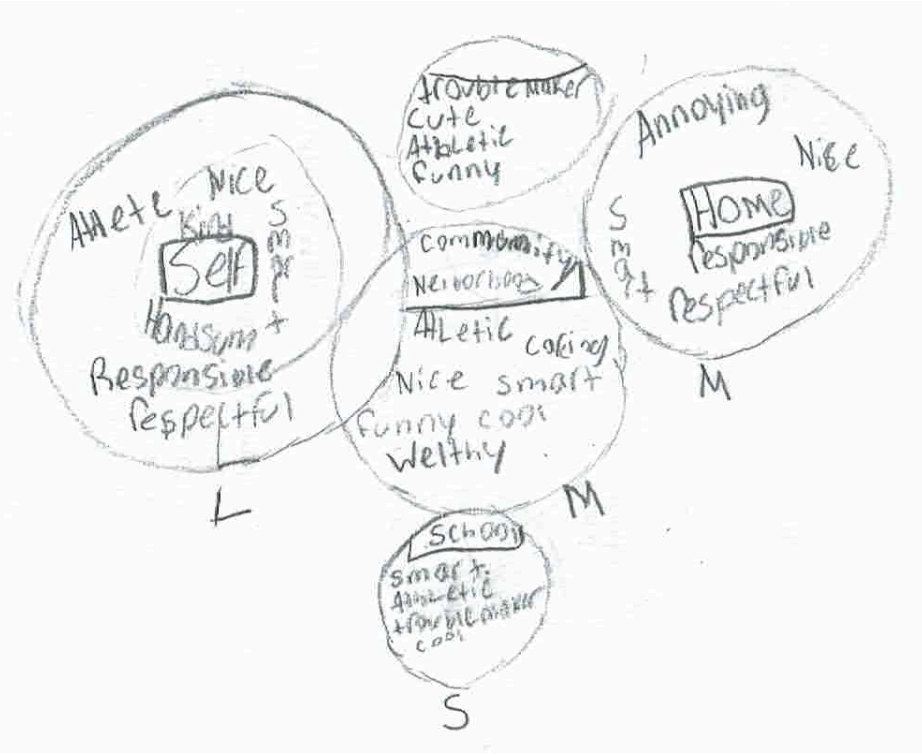
> Many Black boys have been kidnapped into believing that they are inferior and unable to succeed in school. They have been deceived about the possibilities of their lives, especially educationally. They need to develop positive images of themselves before they will be able to realize how valuable they are and how bright their future can be (p. 245).

Through interviews and discussions, the boys spoke often and proudly about themselves, their identities, and their futures. They offered insight into why they held themselves in high regard and why they viewed themselves in the positive manner in which they did. For example, when asked, "How do you see yourself as a Black boy?," most students responded that they viewed themselves as "smart" or referenced some variation of being intelligent, and that they were athletic, kind, and caring. Constructing oneself as an achiever or a high academic performer, characterizing oneself with emotions, and centering their athletic identity can be a complicated process for many Black boys as the combination of these identities seem to counter or contradict many of the racialized and gendered stereotypes that frame Black boys as oppositional, misbehaving, and reluctant to learn. However, when facing such stereotypes and other social challenges, the boys in this study still perceived and imagined themselves and other Black boys their age in ways that are not often seen, heard, or emphasized in society or schooling contexts.

James, one of several student-athletes in the study, explained, "[I see myself as] smart, athletic, nice, [and] intelligent. I have a dream to play pro basketball or football, and I want to get rich and so I see myself this way to reach these goals." When asked *why* he sees himself in this

way, James was quick to respond, "Because I am my own person and I *know* who I am." James' strong sense of self was not only conveyed verbally through our discussions, but it was also illustrated in his identity map. As shown in Figure 3, James drew his *Self* circle larger than any other context or space (i.e. home, school, community/neighborhood, or society). When giving the

Figure 3: James' Identity Map



"grand tour" of his identity map, he shared that he values his perspectives and perception of self, more than others. He believed that how he sees himself and the world has a larger and greater influence on his identity and self-concept, although he acknowledged that both *Society* and *School* tend to have negative perspectives and views of him and Black boys in general. With this understanding, James drew these two circles smaller than the others and with an "S" in it to indicate the lesser influence that these perspectives have on his identity and self-concept. At the same time, James recognized that some perceptions of himself are shared in other contexts, as shown by the overlapping circles of *Self* and *Community/neighborhood* circles. He believed this

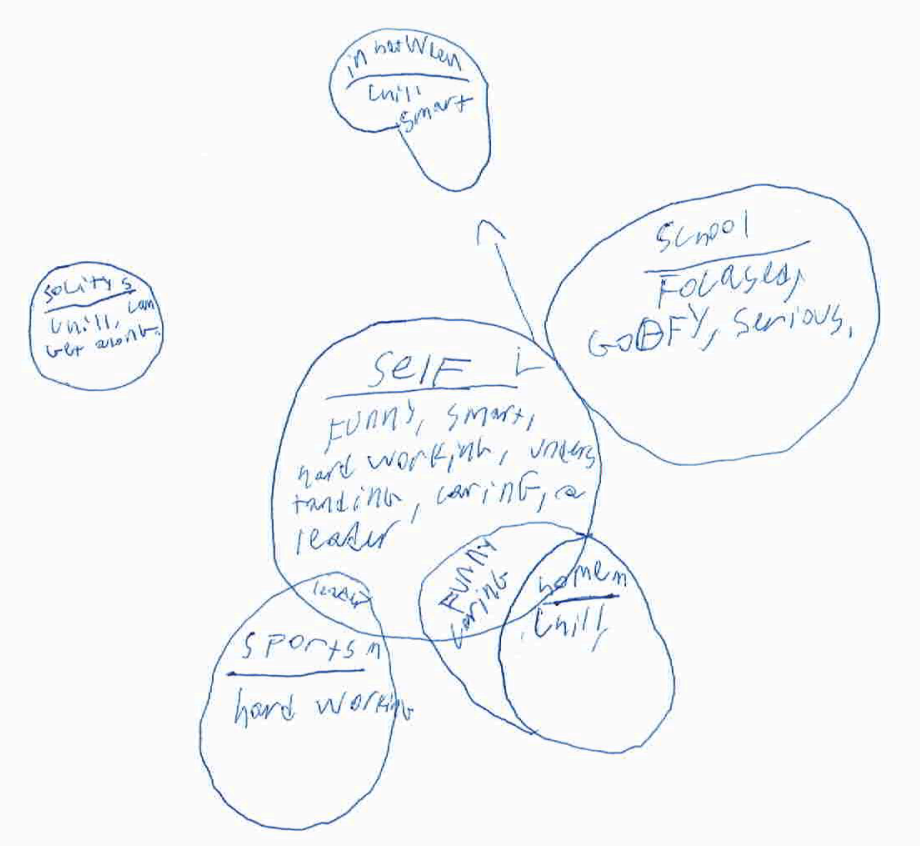
was because people within his community and neighborhood "know him and are close to him" and thus, "really see and understand him." Thus, for James, his protective factors in fashioning a positive identity and self-concept were self-confidence, self-efficacy, and his resilience and determination to achieve his dreams and goals. Even within the compounding systems of institutionalized racism and anti-Blackness and against society's negative perceptions of him being/becoming a "troublemaker," James was able to reimagine his Black boyhood as he desired and hoped it to be versus what he believed society expected him to be (Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

Like James, other students also demonstrated a strong sense of self-awareness, confidence, and self-love, which played a significant role in the positive constructions of their identities and self-concepts. If you recall, Mario shared several personal experiences with racial profiling, surveillance, policing, adultification, and assumptions of deviance in public places and school. He discussed the various ways that these incidents made him feel, including fearful. Despite these negative racial socialization processes, when asked "How do you see yourself as a Black boy?," Mario replied "[I am] funny, smart, hard-working, caring, mature for my age, and all around just a cool guy." Mario also believed himself to be a leader in both the classroom and in sports. When asked why he viewed himself in this way Mario discussed how he "works hard to get the grades that he gets" and that he has a "hard work ethic" academically and athletically. Like James, Mario's personal feelings and reflections about himself counter the "master narrative" often perpetuated in society. The disconnect and disassociation from racialized and gendered stereotypes about Black boys was not only shared throughout our conversations, but it was evidenced in the construction of his identity map as well (see Figure 4). According to Mario's identity map, *Self* is a large part of his identity construction and perception of self. At the same time, Mario highlights how *School*, *Home*, and *Community/neighborhood* also play a

role in how he views himself and is connected to his self-concept, but they don't have as large an influence on his identity. He explained,

> The *Self* one I wrote funny and smart because I get good grades. I put hard working because I always try my best and then understanding because most of the time I can relate to what other people are saying. I also put funny and caring in *Self* and *Home* because I care for other people at home and I think a lot of people just think I'm funny.

Figure 4: Mario's Identity Map



On the other hand, *Society* is not only small, but it is disconnected from the other circles and how he perceives himself. Mario notes this is because society often views Black boys as "members of gangs, that we are selling drugs or that we are criminals. Or that most of us didn't have a dad growing up." Understanding the perspectives and racialized and gendered stereotypes society imposes on Black boys, Mario detaches himself from society. Instead, he relied on the aspects of himself that established and crafted a sense of pride, self-worth, and confidence. As Mario

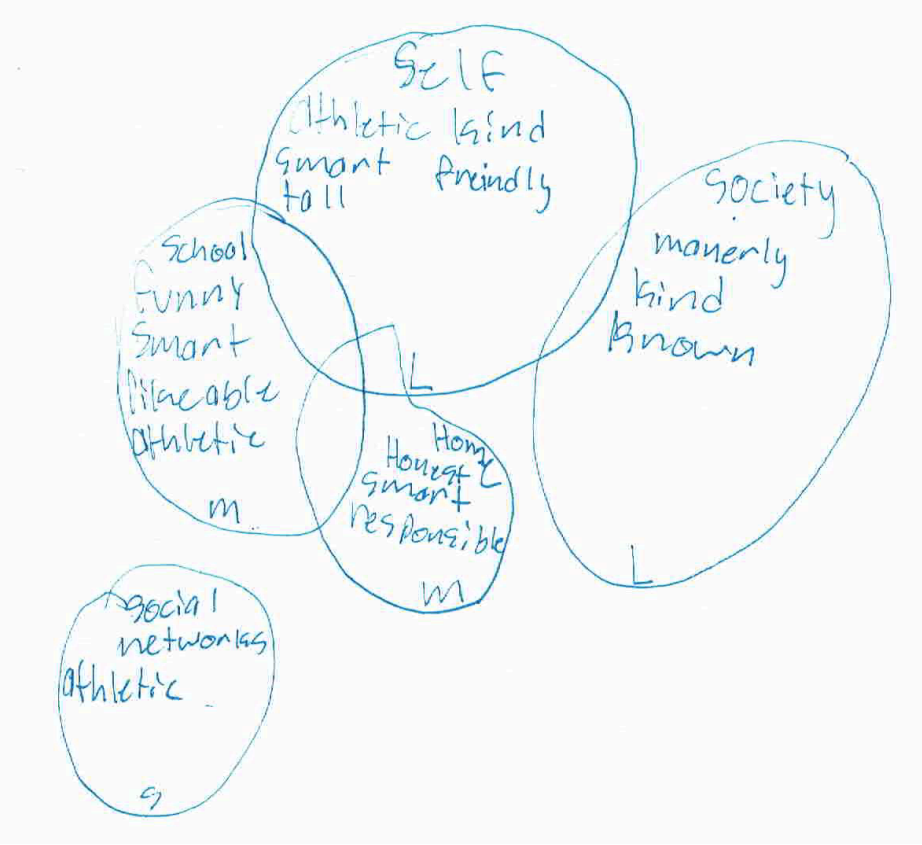
candidly stated, “I feel like being Black is awesome. You can do so many things. You can do anything you want.”

When Charles was asked to describe how he viewed himself, his response mirrored many of his peers’ positive outlooks and perspectives about themselves. He replied,

> [I am] a leader even when I am not trying to be. I know people are following me and looking to me to do the right thing. I know I am powerful, and I have to be smart and I can be smart, and my grades, they show me that I am smart.

As discussed early, most of the boys highlighted that their grades, academic abilities, or “being smart” was central to their identity and perception of self. For Charles, being smart appeared to take precedence over other elements of himself as indicated in his identity map (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Charles’ Identity Map



Moreover, our discussions throughout the study supported this perception as Charles spoke about how he believed that his parents, some of his peers, some of his teachers, and other adults viewed

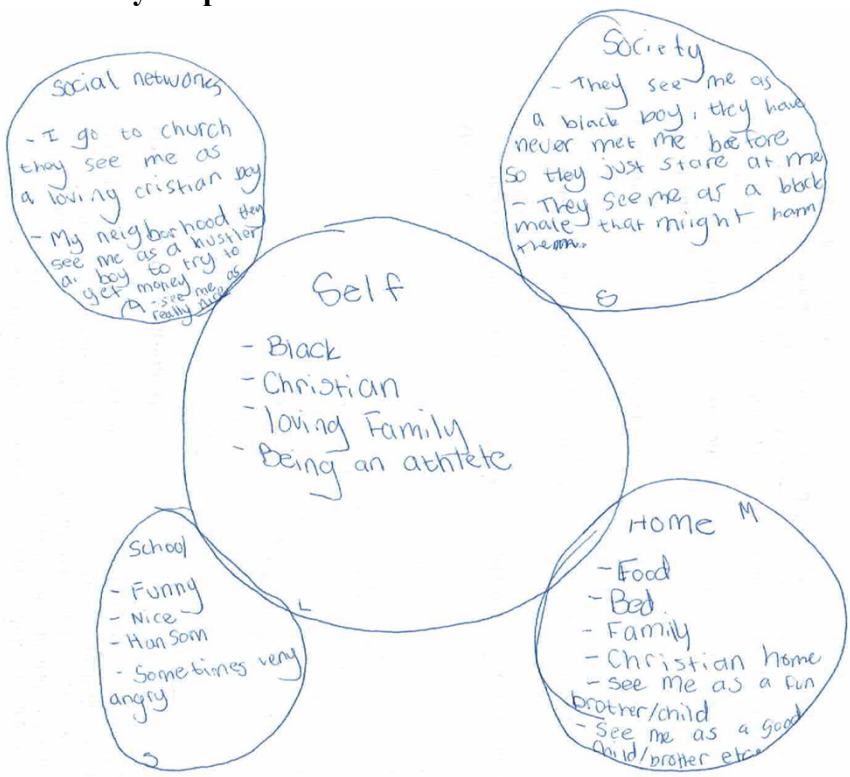
him as smart as well. At the same time, Charles acknowledged that society in general and that some teachers and classmates assume that Black boys are "bad kids," are only "athletic," or that they are "poor." He also talked about how Black boys are often perceived by their teachers as always needing help. However, these notions were not visible in Charles' identity map. Instead, Charles believed that *Society* sees him as mannerly and kind and as having a large influence on his identity and perception of self. Unlike James and Mario who disconnected *Society* from *Self*, Charles does not detach himself from *Society* because he believes society sees him differently from the racialized and gendered stereotypes that he spoke of. Perhaps Charles is resisting the stereotypes that are often imposed upon Black boys and thus, consciously chose to include how he hopes that society will perceive him as he sees himself. In this case, Charles is attempting to shift the understanding and perspective of him as a child in the world (Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

Perhaps one of the most complex understandings of self was from that of John. Like the other boys, John is also a student-athlete. He lives with his mother and grandmother in what he describes as a "Christian home." John believes himself to be "a good child" and thinks that it is important to "make a name for yourself [that is not based on] who or what people think you are." Thus, when asked what aspects were most important to his identity and perception of self, he replied, "Being Black, Christian, [having a] loving family, and [being] an athlete. [I am also] powerful. I can overcome obstacles with God. I can walk away from situations that don't benefit me." Through his responses, it becomes clear that John has a strong sense of self rooted in faith and family. According to his identity map, *Self* (which has an "L" in the circle to indicate the large influence that this context has on his identity and self-concept) and the social networks within his *Community/neighborhood* (which has an "M" in the circle to indicate the medium influence that this context has on his identity and self-concept) play a significant role in how

John understands and views himself (see Figure 6). In his opinion those two contexts *see* and understand him best. John explained,

> How I see myself kind of connects to *Home* and social networks. I have a loving family and I have a loving home which has my family in it. My social networks, they see me as a good Black boy who can succeed and go high in life. My *School*, the people here, some of them understand me, but they don't at the same time. They know different parts of me, but not all of me. *Society*, they discriminate against me because of what I look like even though that's not who I am, so I put that as "small". A lot of them are "small" or "medium" and some of the spaces are similar with the exception of *Society*.

Figure 6: John's Identity Map



From John's perspective and the positioning of his circles, *Self* is the nucleus of how he perceives himself. It is central in knowing and making sense of who he is. At the same time, John acknowledges that there are other influences outside of himself that can impact his self-concept, but consciously mitigates or limits their impact. For example, when discussing *Society*, John is aware of the negative perceptions and treatment of Black boys. He knows that he is

discriminated against based on his race and that *Society* doesn't fully *see* him beyond being a Black boy. Thus, John labels *Society's* perspective of him as "small (indicated by the "S" in the circle)" as is *School*. Like many of the boys, the conceptualization of identity is connected and impacted by a myriad of factors and experiences, both negative and positive. But what helps John maintain a sense of pride, confidence, strength, and power is his faith, his family, and the overwhelming sense of "Just knowing who you are meant to be. Knowing who you are."

In spite of the many negative racial socialization experiences and Black suffering that James, Mario, Charles, John, and many of the other boys are exposed to and endure on a daily basis, they were able to uncover a type of self-love and mattering that author, social justice activist, and Professor of Educational Theory and Practice Bettina Love describes as "Black joy." Love (2019) asserts,

> Black joy is to embrace your full humanity, as the world tells you that you are disposable and that you do not matter. Black joy is a celebration of taking back your identity and signaling to the world that your darkness is what makes you strong and beautiful. (p. 120)

For these boys, Black joy was necessary for them to be fully alive and thrive broadly in society, but also within their predominantly white middle school. For them, finding joy within themselves and being a source of joy for others reflect the love and self-care that they have for themselves, other Black boys, and Black humanity in general (Love, 2019). As Josh explained, "Not every Black boy will grow up to be a gangster or do drugs. They *can* become successful." Thus, the positive and affirming ways these boys construct their identities and self-concepts allow them to cope with and face the many challenges of living, learning, and playing in anti-Black spaces. Carter Andrews (2016) argues, when Black boys "develop resilient, adaptive behaviors for succeeding in school, [and] can encourage self-efficacious beliefs, they can reach their full potential in their lives beyond middle and high school" (p. 54).

Using interviews and their identity maps as tools to capture their sense-making processes and understanding of self, boys conceptualize their identities and sense of self as socially situated across various contexts and spaces (Flennaugh, 2016b). They consciously challenge and resist racialized and gendered stereotypes and narratives and (re)define their racial, academic, and athletic identities according to their experiences and understandings (Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Way & Chu, 2004). They show that it is possible to be joyous, happy, perform well academically, perform well athletically, have racial and culture pride, and love their Blackness in the midst of a society that devalues their Black bodies and overall existence.

"The People Around Me": Relational Support and Positive Identities

For many adolescents, friendships, relationships with peers, seeking acceptance, and affirmation from others are critical in forming and shaping racial identities, academic identities, and an individual's overall self (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016; Noguera, 2003). Noguera (2015) explains that "for some adolescents, identification and attachment to peer groups takes on so much importance that it can override other attachments to family, parents, and teachers" (p. 27). Although there are other socialization processes and forces that contribute to the social construction of identity within schooling contexts, for some of these boys, peer friendships as a form of relational support played a powerful role in shaping and maintaining their positive identities and self-concepts.

According to Charles, his social networks have a strong influence in how and why he sees himself as "smart, kind, athletic, and a leader." He explained,

> I feel like people in my social networks know me and they've been close to me for a while and so they think of me differently than in society and in school where there is a lot of people who don't really know me.

The close relationship that Charles has with his social network (i.e. a select group of friends at school, friends in his neighborhood, and his teammates) allows him to fully be himself. At this stage in adolescence when youth are constantly trying to "fit in," Charles surrounds himself with people who accept him versus him trying to shift and refashion himself to fit into their narratives or perceptions of who they think he should be. As he suggests, his social circle *knows* who he is and is privy to the most private and vulnerable aspects of himself that others are not (Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Way, 2013). In forging these close bonds within his social network, Charles establishes group trust and camaraderie where his sense of self and ways of knowing are honored affirmed. He explained, "When people congratulate you on how good you are or something. If they compliment you on being well-mannered…when people aren't negative about you…when they want to follow you," that's what influences how and why Charles views himself through a lens of optimism and hope.

Brian expresses a similar sentiment about friends affirming his identity and perception of self. In our interviews, Brian describes himself as "smart, happy, good at math, and funny." When asked what influences how he sees himself, Brian responded, "Me…and the people around me say I'm smart, athletic, good at math." From this statement, one can assume that Brian intentionally surrounds himself with people who see him in the same positive light that he sees himself. As he pointed out, "Other people, they don't know me personally." Similar to Charles, Brian highlights the trust and kinship that comes along with allowing others to completely *see* you for who you are. His friendships illustrate how positive relational support allows him and perhaps encourages him to continue to be himself in ways that he may not be comfortable to do (Ferguson, 2010). For Brian, his friends provide him with a sense of security

and comfort in his identity where he does not hold conflicting views about who he is or who he is becoming.

John also attributes his social network as having a positive influence on his identification and the formation of self. He explained, “My social networks, they see me as a good Black boy who can succeed and go high in life. [They see me as a] loving boy and a good child.” His social network, which is comprised of members of his church, people in his neighborhood, and some friends from school, hold viewpoints that reflect and support John’s own values and self-worth. As you recall, John described himself as a “Black, Christian, [from a] loving family, and an athlete.” He sees himself as “Powerful [and] can overcome obstacles with God.” Thus, how he is seen and how he sees himself reflects the notion of how identity is co-constructed by the people and contexts around you (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016). In John’s case as in some of his peers, it appears that consciously surrounding oneself with others whose perspectives mirror their own can result in positive relational support and guidance in the formation of one’s identity.

Noguera (2003) asserts, “Peer groups play a powerful role in shaping identity because the desire to be accepted by one’s peers and “fit in” with one’s peers often becomes a paramount concern for most adolescents (p. 444). Through conversations and discussions, these boys suggest that their close friendships and peer groups, whether from their school, neighborhood, church, or a combination of these spaces, provide them with an emotionally expressive relationship that contributes to the construction and preservation of their positive identities (Way, 2013). Focusing on the desire and need for Black boys to establish healthy friendships and support among their peers, reframes how literature typically views and understands friendships among Black boys. More often than not, Black boys’ peer groups and friends are not explored in ways that position emotional and social support as key in forming healthy friendships and/or in

shaping identities. Rather, there is a greater emphasis on the hypermasculine, competition-based, combative representations of boy's friendships that lead to poor decision making, getting into trouble, and other identifications that uphold racialized and gendered stereotypes, notions of Black masculinity, and fearsome reputations (Ferguson, 2010; Way et al., 2014). However, not only do these boys disrupt these notions, but they provide insight into the importance of positive peer relationships, friendships, and relational support and their link to positive identity formation and perceptions of self.

"We Get to Be in Groups Like *This*": Black Boys' Mentoring Programs as Identity-Affirming Spaces

Formal and informal mentoring and mentoring programs through churches, schools, and community organization, have been long-standing, integral structures within Black communities. For years, they have provided Black youth and their families with various means of support and resources to address many of the academic and social challenges they face (I. Jackson et al., 2014; Noguera, 2003; Sánchez, 2016). For Black boys, specifically, there has been a large emphasis on developing mentoring programs and initiatives that support their academic, social, emotional, and cultural development and that "show Black [boys] that their schools [and communities] care about their individual and collective potential, value their personhood, and are authentically invested in their success" (Harper & Wood, 2016, p. xi). The call to prioritize Black boys' success in schools and society is evidenced through the development of hundreds of local, state, and national Black mentoring programs and initiatives for boys like Mentoring Brothers in Action (Big Brothers, Big Sisters of America, 2012), Project 2000 (S. Holland, 1996), Umoja Network for Young Men (I. Jackson et al., 2014), Project Avalanche (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011), My Brother's Keeper (The White House, 2016), and the Expanded Success

Initiative (Villavicencio et al., 2018). These programs, where Black boys establish positive and healthy relationships with non-parental men within their school and/or community, has shown to have some positive effects on healthy social and emotional development (Dumas et al., 2002), academic achievement and success (Biggs et al., 2014; Gordon et al., 2009; Wyatt, 2009), and establishing positive academic and social identities (Hall, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011; Wyatt, 2009). However, Dumas and Nelson (2016) argue that most literature and research on mentoring programs for Black boys "already predetermines [them] as lacking guidance, role models, and values, [where] the adult is there to provide these supports for the child" (p. 42). In part, this is due to how society, schools, school practitioners, and other adults view and treat Black boys and perhaps how some Black boys have come to view themselves (Rowley et al., 2014). Instead, scholars like Jackson and colleagues (2014) believe that we need more adults "who imagine themselves as seed people whose purpose is to cultivate the academic, social, and emotional success of these young men" (p. 396-7). The emphasis to build from and maximize the cultural and social capital that Black boys already possess is reflective of the mentoring program that many of the boys in this study spoke of as not only having a positive impact on their lives, but also serving as a space where their identities are welcomed, accepted, and affirmed.

Over half of the boys in this study (62.5%) indicated that they participated in the all-Black mentoring program for boys, Boys to Men Mentoring Program (BMMP; a pseudonym). BMMP is a local non-profit organization designed for Black boys in grades 7-12 who attend middle and high schools in the tri-county area. Through seminars and workshops, the non-profit "addresses issues in education, relationships, health, communication skills, professionalism, financial responsibility, and sexual responsibility" (BMMP, 2019). According to its website, BMMP is dedicated to addressing and challenging inequities and injustices facing Black boys in

society and school. Moreover, the program seeks to meet the "cultural and social needs of young, African American [boys] by providing them with an effective support network of role models who are determined to help them realize their fullest potential in society, while developing strategies for success in their lives, school, and communities" (BMMP, 2019). Notably, BMMP is composed of Black professional men within and around the greater metro area committed to establishing cultural and racial pride in Black boys and foster healthy, positive relationships with and among them (BMMP, 2019).

Over the past several years, BMMP has established a strong presence in the greater-city area with community organizations, local businesses, colleges, and K-12 schools, including Metro Middle School (MMS). Recognizing the need to have adult Black men present at MMS as a way to positively impact the schooling experiences of the Black boys attending its predominantly white middle school, MMS' administrative team partnered with BMMP. BMMP meets bi-weekly with seventh grade boys to address issues relative and pertinent to them as Black boys. Throughout this study, some of the boys shared how much they've enjoyed being a part of the program and the many lessons they've learned about what it means to be a Black boy in America. Brian recalled, "We talk about stocks and the stock market and how to manage your money. And [then a session] before that we were talking about setting goals, making good decisions, discussing right from wrong." For Brian, being in a place where other boys "look like him" and "act like him" provide him comfort and a sense of brotherhood. BMMP served as a space of unity, safety, love, and care, where Brian could fully be himself, expressing how "unfair" things can be as a Black boy. He also shared that within the program, the boys "could talk about anything" including race, issues of racism, and their personal racialized and gendered

experiences. This is contrary to his classroom settings, where conversations related to their Black boyhoods and Black existence rarely occurred.

Charles shared a similar perspective regarding BMMP. When asked to share a highlight or a good experience about being a Black boy in middle school, he replied,

> We get to be in groups like this [*Real Talk* project]. We also have another group called BMMP and we meet every two weeks on Tuesdays and we just get to learn some more stuff and that's a good thing. The white kids don't get to be in those groups and stuff.

For Charles, being in this dissertation study and BMMP provided him with opportunities to learn more about Black culture, Black history, and himself as a Black boy. Like Brian, he noted that BMMP reminds him of how society perceives and treats Black people, Black boys specifically. He recalled a discussion with his mentors cautioning the boys about "acting certain ways,"

> We talk about how we have to act in certain ways or we will get in more trouble if we do something. We can say the exact same thing as someone else, but we will get the punishment or we will get in trouble. So, we have to be careful.

These "lessons" offered by BMMP mentors are very similar to the conversations that some of these boys had with their parents and grandparents surrounding the notion of goodness and being good. These types of socializing messages delivered by Black adults to Black boys, while well-meaning, remind them of the racialized and gendered stereotypes and the racist, anti-Black expectations that they must contend with (R. Reynolds, 2010). At the same time, however, the students that engage in these conversations appear to receive these messages as "cautionary tales" or "words of wisdom" about what to expect in terms of being a Black boy in America. From the perspectives of these Black boys, it seems that these messages are meant to guide them to be more aware of how and why they are negatively perceived and treated, not to discourage or disaffirm them or their identities.

Organizations like BMMP focus on affirming the identities of Black boys by providing them with a space to learn about and discuss their Blackness and Black humanity, their gender identity, and other identities and experiences related to their existence as Black boys, including their academic, social, and athletic identities. Like Umoja Network for Young Men, Project Avalanche, and others, there are positive elements and strengths within BMMP that "provide peer support, encourage academic excellence, and serve as a social networking system that connects them to other young men of similar interests" (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011, p. 346). Moreover, research suggests that Black boys who participate in mentoring programs that they believe are caring, safe, nurturing, and that support positive racial identities and self-images, they are more likely to seek advice and guidance on how to navigate challenges at home, school, and in society writ large (I. Jackson et al., 2014, S. Holland, 1996). This appears to be true with BMMP as well. Even though BMMP emphasizes the individual growth and development of its Black boys, it also highlights the collective injustices and challenges that Black boys face and attempt to equip them with strategies to cope with living in a racist and anti-Black society. They do this by engaging in critical conversations about the realities of how Black boys in America are dehumanized and discriminated against, both overtly and covertly; by discussing the *Black Lives Matter* movement and ways to be socially active in their schools and communities; by building and nurturing positive peer friendships and relationships with others that support their goals and dreams. Thus, by focusing heavily on building these boys' sense of agency, ownership, empowerment, self-knowledge, self-esteem, and healthy identities, BMMP serves as an identity affirming space that allows Black boys "to escape psychological, emotional, and physical stress stemming from experiences with racism [and anti-Blackness at school and in society]" (Carter, 2007, p. 542).

"I've Been Looking Forward to This": The Power of *Real Talk*

The silencing of Black humanity, both literally and figuratively, has been and continues to be part of the disparaging legacies of the United States and is reflective of a larger history of racism, anti-Blackness, racial aggression, racial terror, and Black suffering within our country (Evans-Winters, 2014; Knaus, 2014; Leonard, 2014; Love, 2016). For Black youth, the silencing of their voices and experiences through racial tracking, Eurocentric school curricula, zero-tolerance discipline policies, and hair policies, for example, illuminates the pervasive structures of institutional racism and anti-Black discourse in schools and spaces of education (Goff et al., 2008; Goff e al., 2014; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Love, 2013, 2016, 2019). For Black boys specifically, their erasure has manifested in society through the recursive policing, surveillance, adultification, and criminalization of their Black bodies and in schools through academic and social exclusionary practices, experiences, and learning processes. In doing so, not only are Black boys' realities removed from public discourse, but their voices and stories are too. A. Brown and Donnor (2011) assert that "stories are not only useful for conveying particular viewpoints, they are particularly powerful in explaining the human condition." (p. 17). With this understanding, *Real Talk* emerged as a cultural space where students could engage in candid conversations about race, racism, racialization, gendering, and notions of self-concept, revealing stories and parts of their lives known to few.

The premise of this dissertation was grounded in the observation and critical need for Black boys to share and problematize their racialized and gendered experiences according to their perspectives and understandings. Like Black girls, Black boys are also silenced when expectations, standards, and behaviors are imposed on them without their knowledge or consent, especially in schools and spaces of education (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Thus, providing

boys with opportunities to engage in discussions about their experiences with the intention of learning from and with them was imperative. In general, when boys were asked how often, in what ways, and with who did conversations about race and racism occur, most boys responded that they rarely happened. At school and in school spaces in particular, Josh, Charles and Brian pointed out that discussions about race or issues of race "never" happen. For others, like James and Sean, they argued that racial dialogue doesn't occur "that much" within school unless it was Black History Month and/or during Social Studies class. For Mario, John, and Isiah, they chose to engage in discussions about race and racism amongst their peers.

Mario explained that issues about race and racism tend to "just happen" during conversations with his friends. He shared,

> Sometimes me and my friends will be having a conversation and eventually it leads to sparking a conversation about race or racism or what certain people have done to Black people over the history. [We talk about this] a few times a week.

Mario seems to understand that race and racism is woven into our everyday functioning and for him, his everyday conversation. In doing so, he illustrates his awareness of how race and racism are connected to every aspect of our lives and is not "something" that can be separated from our existence, especially as a Black individual. This perspective became clear later in our second interview when Mario expressed how often he reflects and thinks about race, racism, gender, identity, and his overall life as a Black boy. He shared, "I'm always thinking a lot. These conversations are kind of ongoing for me."

John expressed a similar sentiment where racial dialogue often occurs through personal reflections or with his classmates, rather than with his teachers or school administrators. He said,

> I talk about it all the time either to myself or with my closest friends. I have four close friends, but one I can really talk to, he's Black and Asian, and he understands what I am talking about and he would try to help me think [through things].

In this example, John chooses to engage in race talk with peers who can relate to some of his racialized and gendered experiences. He understands that not all of his friends can show empathy towards him or his experiences, and thus, is selective in what he shares and with whom. Like Mario, the notion of talking about race and racism "all the time" indicates that John too is aware of the multiple manifestations and presence of these social constructions.

Isiah shared similar thoughts regarding who he discusses his racialized experiences with, revealing that he only speaks to MMS administrators when he isn't able to handle situations on his own. He noted,

> [I talk to] my friends that are there for me. This kid named Robert, he doesn't try to [physically] hurt anyone in a way, but he's racist and can go really far. So, I would tell the Principal.

For Isiah, speaking with the Principal is a last resort when it comes to discussing racial incidents at school. Instead, he'd rather talk to his friends who he feels as though can support and understand him better. Like Mario and John, Isiah hints that there may not be a strong sense of trust, empathy, or concern to engage in open dialogue with adults at school and thus, these boys opt to rely on their friendships and peer relationships for relational support in coping with issues of race and racism.

Contrarily, at home, there seemed to be more opportunities for some of the boys to engage in *real talk* about race, racism, and their consequences with their parents and/or grandparents. As Carter Andrews (2016) suggests, "Parents of Black boys *have* to engage their sons in explicit conversations about racism as a potential barrier to their school and life success while conveying messages about racial group pride and personal self-worth" (p. 54). For Mario, whose mother is a community activist, these explicit conversations occurred frequently. He shared,

> Yeah, my mom, she is really into being an activist. Like we went to Black Lives Matter (BLM) marches and I've always been around when my mom talks about it. Like how racism started and how racism effects people's lives daily. And so, I think we talk about it pretty often.

In Mario's case, racial dialogue was commonplace. For him, conversations and messaging about race, navigating racism, racial discrimination, preparing for racial bias, etc. was a positive family-based racial socialization process (Hughes et al., 2006; Nasir, 2012; Neblett et al., 2009). It contributed to his learning, understanding, and processing of perspectives and views about Black people, Black history, Blackness, etc. that may have been different than his own or what he's been exposed to at school and in society.

Like Mario, Isiah also revealed that he enjoyed and looked forward to having discussions about issues of race and racism with his mother. He shared,

> My mom she is really caring. We have a lot of conversations about stuff like that. I remember when I was like three she explained to me that I was African American, and I really enjoyed that conversation. She brought it up because I think we were watching the news or something and it was probably an incident where someone got shot because of their race and she looked at me and was like, yeah you really need to know this. She's not afraid to talk to me about anything.

Isiah's perspective about the importance of having discussions about race highlights two important characteristics that may be vital in effectively having these types of conversations. One, Isiah's mother emits a spirit of care and concern to engage in critical conversations with her son about race, racism, and its life consequences. It can be argued that it is a parent's "responsibility" to have these conversations with their Black children, but it is also important to consider the weight and toll that Black parents shoulder as Black adults and as Black parents raising Black children in a racist and anti-Black society. Second, Isiah's mother did not fear having this difficult conversation with him, because in her eyes this was something that he "really needed to know." Perhaps it is these types of intangible understandings that allow Black

boys to open up with adults, including their parents, to have critical conversations about race and racism.

Despite the rich and full conversations that Mario and Isiah had with their mothers, for most of the boys, real talk about race and racism was uncommon at home. This was not because the boys' parents or grandparents did not acknowledge the centrality and pervasiveness of race and racism. Rather, at times parents chose not to engage in racial dialogue as it was mentally and emotionally exhausting. Thus, when students where asked how often and in what ways do they discuss race or issues of race at home, many, replied that they didn't. Josh responded, "Not at all or not that I hear about. My mom probably does, but not that I hear about." Charles shared a similar narrative stating, "Not really. Not unless something major happens in the country or something that my mom *wants* to talk about." Both John and Brian stated that they don't talk about race and racism at home either. John said, "We don't really talk about it that much because it kind of gets on our nerves and makes us *feel* a certain type of way. So, we keep our mouths shut about it sometimes." Brian shared, "Not really. We don't really talk about it that much because it kind of gets on our nerves." For these boys, it wasn't that *they* did not want to engage in dialogue about race or racism. Instead, for the adults in their lives, I argue that constantly engaging in racial dialogue produces racial battle fatigue (RBF). Racial battle fatigue is a concept that explains the racial weight that namely Black people carry from existing in a structurally oppressive, racist, and anti-Black society, where psychosocial stressors and racial microaggressions lead to physiological, psychological, and/or behavioral responses that require additional energy to cope with racism, to engage in racial dialogue, to combat racial discrimination, etc. (Smith, 2004, 2008a, 2008b; Smith et al., 2011).

Even in the midst of these various challenges and barriers to engage in *real talk*, these boys found ways to gain insight and understanding about race, racism, racial discourse, etc. and its influence on them as Black boys. In general, the boys discuss how these conversations, regardless if it was through friends, peers, parents, grandparents, mentors, or in the context of this dissertation, reveal "something" to them. Mario discussed how it's important to "not be so quick to judge people based on race." John talked about how these multiple conversations revealed to him the various ways racism operates in society. For Charles, these discussions served as a guide in "knowing what to do and what not to do in certain situations." Similarly, Brian explained how important it is for people to be careful about what they say and how that makes other people feel. Isiah shared that it was important for him to have "deep" conversations about these topics. He said, "When we talk about it, we go deep. My mom really wants me to understand so that as I get older I am really aware of other people so that I can also help them understand too."

In the end, the boys' conversations and discussions make it clear how school as a social institution and their personal schooling experiences perpetuate, consciously and unconsciously, anti-Black ideologies, practices, and rhetoric. Within those spaces and experiences, students are not provided space to be as they are or develop into who they desired to be. Further, the reluctance to or lack of significance placed on engaging in talk or discourse regarding race and racism within their school setting, illustrate the unsafe and racially hostile environment that these boys are expected to learn and grow in, regardless of how "subtle" the conditions of the environmental racism (Bullard, 1993, 1994; Carter Andrews & Tuitt, 2013). Moreover, the lack of conversations in school contexts highlight the low levels of trust and openness to engage in

this type of dialogue beyond people whom they felt comfortable with, e.g. their peer group, mentoring group, family, or myself (I. Jackson et al., 2014).

As previously discussed, *Real Talk* is conceptualized as both a social phenomenon and as social discourse. As a social phenomenon, the boys in this study were excited to engage in candid conversations about themselves and their lives, including discussing difficult topics regarding race, racism, gender, and how they impact their life experiences in society and in attending a predominantly white middle school. Across interviews and conversations, the boys spoke openly and honestly about the various racialized and gendered experiences that they encountered on a daily basis at the hands of adults, teachers, and peers, and how they influenced their conceptions and understandings of self. This type of honest communication and open dialogue was possible as a result of the high levels of trust, care, empathy, mutual respect, and authentic relationships established between the boys and me. These conditions laid the foundation for *Real Talk*, leading the boys to share stories and narratives and engage in deep, personal conversations. As social discourse, "real talk," "that's real," and "on the real," were often uttered throughout our interviews and conversations. They signaled affirmation of opinions, support of experiences, validation of thoughts, and demonstrated a sense of learning about who they are, what they've experienced, what they think, and how they understand the world.

As a result, *Real Talk* emerged as a space to the anti-Black experiences and learning that these boys endure in society and at school. It became a social and cultural space where the boys could engage in critical discourse and reflection about themselves and where they could experience and process *being* and *becoming* according to their own conceptions and perceptions. They were comfortable *being* as they imagined themselves to be, where they did not fear that

they were being watched or surveilled, where their existence and realities was not judged according to a set of imposed standards and expectations, and where they felt supported in developing strong and positive identities. Moreover, this space and experience provided an opportunity for the boys to build self-knowledge, nurture a deeper sense of identity, and (re)frame and (re)imagine their Black boyhoods as they saw fit in spite of racism, anti-Blackness, and other systems of oppression that put their racial and academic identities and life success at risk (Carter Andrews, 2016).

Although *Real Talk* was not conceptualized as a racial counter space, race talk, or racial dialogue, but as a space where critical topics could be discussed, like race and racism, it is important to note that the boys did not take up gender in the same manner. That is, they had challenges in locating themselves in gendered experiences and/or where their gender was "othered". Thus, the ways in which gender and gendered experiences were/were not conceptualized and made sense of speaks to the privilege associated with identifying as a boy in a patriarchal society and where marginalized identities can be positioned in a way that silences other aspects of one's identity.

Chapter Summary

Despite the racialized and gendered experiences and negative racial socialization processes that these Black boys endure and encounter in society and school, they developed and maintained strong, positive racial, academic, and social identities and promising outlooks on their lives. How these boys coped with and countered racist and anti-Black experiences and how they learned to navigate institutional and systemic racism provides insight into the personal protective factors and positive socialization processes that impact how they see themselves, make sense of their Black boyhoods, and experience the world. Armored with self-love,

resilience, and Black joy, these boys resisted society's negative expectations about them and challenged racialized and gendered stereotypes about who they are and who they could become as Black boys. They relied on a strong sense of self-awareness, confidence, mattering, and other internal values to construct positive identities and self-concepts of themselves.

The boys also surrounded themselves with people in their communities and at school who supported these positive constructions of their identities. Through interviews and identity maps, the boys reveal how peer relationships and people within their social networks play an important role in how and why they see themselves in positive ways. This type of relational support not only served as a protective factor against negative perceptions and attitudes about Black boys, but it also provided the boys with a sense of security and comfort in their identities. Moreover, it allowed the boys to be authentically themselves in ways that may have been challenging in other spaces and contexts that are less affirming.

Similar experiences were shared amongst the boys who participated in all-Black mentoring group Boys to Men Mentoring Program (BMMP). Like relational support from peers, BMMP also focuses on affirming the boys' identities and creating a space where they are free to be themselves. In addition to building on the boys' sense of agency, self-knowledge, and self-esteem, BMMP also addresses issues pertinent to being a Black boy in America and the racial and social inequities they individually and collectively face. By engaging in workshops and discussions about race, racism, and their impact on the Black community as a whole and Black boys specifically, BMMP also made the boys more aware of their racial and cultural identities. These type of critical conversations about racial discourse were also evidenced between the boys and their peers, parents, grandparents, and me. The multiple opportunities for boys to engage in what I conceptualize as real talk, provided them a chance to talk about and problematize what it

means to be a Black boy in the confines of our racist, anti-Black, and patriarchal society. In doing so, *Real Talk* emerged as a safe, nurturing, and empathetic cultural and social space for these Black boys to speak candidly and openly about race, racism, gender, and their impact on themselves and their life experiences in society and in attending a predominantly white middle school. It centered and valued their experiences, supported and affirmed their racial, academic, and social identities, and allowed them to be and become according to their own perceptions and understandings of what it means to be a Black boy.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This dissertation examined how Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school made sense of and experienced race and racism and the impact of racialization and gendering on their self-concepts. Utilizing interviews, identity maps, and non-participant observations, middle-school aged Black boys described dismissive racialized and gendered experiences and racial socialization processes, both negative and positive, with family members, adults, teachers, and peers. These experiences and processes, which occurred at home, in public spaces, and in academic and non-academic spaces of education, revealed the multiple ways racism, anti-Blackness, and patriarchal ideologies functioned in their daily lives. Moreover, the boys' individual and collective stories illuminated their recursive subjugation to racist rhetoric, anti-Black discourse, marginalization, and silencing. Even within these racially hostile and largely gendered environments, where their identities and ways of being and knowing where rendered unimportant and devalued, the Black boys in this study also described protective factors and positive experiences that affirmed their racial and gender identities. In doing so, these boys' discussions and conversations provide insight into additional areas of discussion that impact their daily lives and have implications for further research and practice among and for parents, school practitioners, and educational researchers.

Discussion

In an effort to contribute to scholarship on racial identity discourse and the racialized and gendered experiences of Black boys, this study sought to better understand how race, racism, racialization, and gendering impacted Black boys' perceptions of self. Through conversations and identity map analysis, the boys discussed racial and gender identity beliefs, the various ways their innocence, intellect, and trustworthiness were racialized, and the protective factors and

positive racial socialization processes that countered many of their racist, anti-Black, and gendered experiences. In analyzing these findings, other factors emerged that also influence the boys' self-concepts and should be considered to better understand their racialized and gendered experiences.

Race and Gender as "Matter of Fact"

The boys' conversations and identity maps provide insight into the complexities of their understandings and beliefs regarding racial and gender identity and the nuances in the formation of their self-concepts. Based on previous research on identity discourse among Black boys, race and gender are both viewed as important for understanding how Black boys construct their identities and make sense of themselves in society and schools (Buckley, 2018; Rogers et al., 2015; Tatum, 2017; Turner & Brown, 2007; Way et al., 2014). However, recognizing the heterogeneity that exists among Black boys writ large, and specifically within this study, both constructions vary significantly in importance among these boys depending on how *they* position each regarding their own identity and self-concept, their experiences, and the context of those experiences.

For example, for some of the boys in this study race and racial identity were viewed as highly central and were evidenced across interviews, discussions, and their identity maps, while others gave it less primacy (Rogers et al., 2015). Moreover, the centrality of race or the level of importance placed on race varied, as well as the public and private regard attached to race. As a result, some of the boys did not identify race as a salient feature to their identity or self-concept. The same held true for gender. In this study, none of the boys identified gender as a key part to their identity or their self-perception. This is not to say that race and gender are not salient features to their identity and self-concepts, or that race and gender do not matter. Rather, for

these Black boys, race and gender were understood as "matter of fact" aspects of themselves such that they did not need to be identified as important factors to their constructions and formations of self.

According to childhood development literature, findings suggest that when youth are asked to describe themselves, they are more likely to speak of social and academic activities, personality traits and characteristics, and/or group membership or associations above race and/or gender (Cho et al., 2001; Turner & Brown, 2007). However, among Black youth specifically, exposure to and experiences with race, racism, racial discrimination, racialized stereotypes, etc. influence how they make sense of, view, and interpret the significance and meaning of race in their lives, making many Black youth more aware of race in relation to their identities and how they see themselves (Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Copping et al., 2013; Noguera, 2015; Rogers et al., 2015; Sellers, Morgan, et al., 2001; Sellers, Smith, et al., 1998). At the same time, attendance to gender and gender centrality among Black youth seems to be contextually influenced (e.g. if their gender identity and/or sexuality is being questioned; attending an all-male school) and may reflect the broader cultural context of our patriarchal society (Buckley, 2018; Rogers et al., 2015). As we have seen in this study, most of the boys were able to describe racial socialization processes and experiences and for a few of them, these experiences heightened their racial awareness and consciousness about what it means to be Black and the role of race in their identities. Even so, identifying gender as a key factor in their identity, being able to describe how gender shapes their identities, understanding the impact of gender on their academic and social outcomes, or the meanings that gender attributes to their experiences was less apparent. Thus, the ability for Black boys to teeter between race mattering and not mattering while also enjoying the luxury of obliviousness of male privilege warrants exploration. Specifically, how do we get

Black boys to acknowledge and recognize the pervasiveness and centrality of race in their lives, the power and privilege associated with being a boy in a patriarchal society, the intersection of both, and their individual and collective impact on their identity formation and self-concepts?

Currently, scholars, critics, legal experts, university professors, PK-12 educators, parents, activists, and others are finding various ways to address the complexities that exist among Black boys and the multiple ways social systems and structures shape Black boys' identities and boyhood experiences. For example, some scholars are using the on-going tragedies and murders of unarmed Black youth to illustrate the historical, cultural, and social violence against Black boys specifically and the role that white supremacy, anti-Blackness, race, and racism play in shaping their social and academic experiences and outcomes (e.g. Dancy, 2014a; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Evans-Winters & Bethune, 2014; Fasching-Varner & Reynolds, 2014; Knaus, 2014; Love, 2013; Rowley et al., 2014). Other bodies of work are relying on ethnographic studies (e.g. Duncan, 2002; Ferguson, 2010), personal narratives from the lives of Black boys and/or their parents (e.g. I. Perry, 2019; R. Rowe, 2018), realistic fiction (e.g. J. Reynolds, & Kiely, 2015; Thomas, 2017), and documentaries (e.g. *13th* (DuVernay, 2016); *I am Not Your Negro* (Peck, 2017); *Whose Streets?* (Folayan & Davis, 2014); *3 ½ Bullets, 10 Minutes* (Silver, 2015)) to explore the impact that policing, surveillance, adultification, and criminalization has on the lives and identities of Black boys, examine the influence that patriarchal discourse has on constructions and notions of Black masculinity and identity, and understand the overall long-term effects that racially hostile environments have on Black boys. Not only are these collective bodies of work examining "how society, including the media, constructs the Black male body", but they are also attempting "to communicate to the world the humanity of the Black male child" (Evans-Winters, 2014, p. 1-2). Most importantly, these perspectives are bringing attention to the

lessons that can be taught and learned from Black boys' experiences in society and schools and the role that parents, educators, researchers, scholars, and community members play in collaboratively addressing how to best support the overall success of Black boys and cultivate the positive formation of their identities and self-concepts (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Rowley et al., 2014; Chezare Warren, 2016a).

The Intersection of Race and Gender Among Black Boys

In addition to exploring how racialization and gendering impacted the self-concepts of the eight Black boys in this study, this dissertation also sought to provide an intersectional analysis of how race and gender connected and interacted within their daily lives. Although race was seen as a "matter of fact" aspect regarding some of the boys' identities and self-concepts, it was not difficult for them to apply a racial lens to their experiences. More often than not, the boys referenced how their race or being Black shaped their daily experiences, regardless if race is central to their identity or not. This was evidenced in the many examples the boys provided in society (e.g. policing in public spaces, racial profiling) and school (e.g. teacher biases and interactions). However, the boys struggled to center gender in their day to day experiences and thus, it was difficult to offer a more detailed and nuanced analysis of gender/maleness and its relationship with race and Black boyhood. Thus, the goal of an intersectional analysis was not to place one social identity above the other. Rather, it was to examine how they interact or act in concert with each other and the implications of such.

Like me, scholars who approach identity research among Black boys from an intersectional perspective have experienced challenges in their work, noting that more emphasis is placed on race, where gender, gender norms, and gendered behaviors and communication are filtered and interpreted through a racialized lens (Buckley, 2018; Henfield, 2011; Rogers et al.,

2015; Turner & Brown, 2007). As a result, how race/Blackness interact with meanings of gender/maleness can appear to be overlooked, misunderstood, or conflated within the research. I argue that it is not because of the lack of racial and gender identity intersectionality in the bodies of work, but perhaps the lack access to racial literacies combined with challenges in understanding their own racial identity development that gets in the way of boys articulating their understanding of race and gender. For example, Rowley et al. (2014) asks, "How do Black boys deal with the intersections of being male (a position of relative privilege) with that of being Black (a position of relatively less privilege)?" (p. 326). As noted before and as revealed in this study, most of the boys did not recognize or acknowledge their position of privilege in identifying as a boy and thus, they attributed their academic experiences, differentiation in treatment by others, and other socialization processes to their race and not the intersection of their race and gender.

With these understandings, scholars like Buckley (2018) and Rowley et al. (2014) suggest that more qualitative work on Black boys' understandings and experience with gender, maleness, masculinity, etc. is needed in the field recognizing that gender, like race, is socially constructed and is influenced by racial and cultural understandings (Cunningham, 1993; Levant et al., 2003). Moreover, because race and gender are historically positioned in our society where Blackness and maleness interact and overlap in damaging ways (Carter Andrews, 2016), it is critical to see how these social identities collectively impact Black boys' experiences (Rogers et al., 2015). Lastly, due of the "paucity in writing and research about Black boys' gender socialization, [which] limits our understanding of their gender roles" (Buckley, 2018, p. 312) and its relationship to race, it is important to explore how the intersection of race and gender provide a more nuanced understanding of their identities and self-concepts.

Spirituality, Religious Practice, Family, and Black Boys

Given the context of this study, I was not surprised that race or identifying as Black was a key factor in how some of the boys saw and made sense of themselves. However, I was surprised to see how spirituality, the connection to a religious practice (i.e. Christianity), and family emerged as central in many of the boys' lives, the role it played in the conceptualization of their identities and self-concepts, and in understanding perspectives about race, racism, and racialization. Historically, the church has served as a critical social institution for Black families and communities in learning how to navigate various contexts of life (Al-Fadhli & Kersen, 2010). For many, the church is a cathartic place of solace, guidance, and worship as well as a space that helps individuals understand who they are in relationship to their ethnic, racial, national, and gender identities (Abrams, 2014; Brice & Hardy, 2015).

In this study, several of the boys referenced that loving God, their faith, going to church, and/or being a Christian, helped them understand themselves as Black boys and for some, church and being Christian was a key part of Black culture and Black history. For these boys, spirituality and connection to a religious practice seemed to provide them with a stronger sense of self and racial pride. This supports some scholarship that suggests culturally-based factors, specifically racial pride and religiosity, can influence academic achievement, encourage positive social outcomes, and promote psychological development (Butler-Barnes et al., 2012; Molock & Barksdale, 2013). Similarly, family was seen as an important aspect to many of the boys' identities, an integral structure within Black culture as well as in sustaining it, and a critical source of engaging in real talk about race, racism, and racial socialization processes. We know that among Black youth, family can play a critical part in identity construction, acceptance, and understanding and can instill positive beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding Black youth's social

identities, academic achievement, success, etc. (Hughes et al., 2006; Nasir, 2012; Rowley et al., 2014). Moreover, family can serve as a protective factor or buffer against negative influences in school and society and can prepare Black children to face the realities of our racist and anti-Black society (Nasir, 2012; Neblett et al., 2009; R. Reynolds, 2010; Tatum, 2017).

Together, spirituality, religious practice, and family functioned as culturally affirming structures for several of the boys and provided positive racial and cultural socialization experiences where messages, information, values, and perspectives about race, navigating racism, Black culture, and Black history were shared (Hughes et al., 2006; Nasir, 2012; Neblett et al., 2009; Rowley et al., 2014). Research suggests that positive racial and cultural socialization, whether from home, school, organizations, religious structure, etc., are related to the development and maintenance of positive racial identities among Black boys (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Nasir, 2012; Rowley et al., 2014; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, et al., 2006). Thus, it is important to consider how Black boys draw on spirituality, connection to religious practice, and/or family in their daily lives to gain self-confidence and self-worth, develop a strong sense of racial pride, and overall think positively about themselves, their identities, and self-concepts. Further, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of how these structures help Black boys make sense of their racialized and gendered experiences in society and school and how these affiliations offer support and provide them with resilience to cope with and respond to racism, racial discrimination, racial bias, etc.

Black Boys' Meaning Making in a Predominantly White Middle School Context

For Black boys, the messages and communication they receive regarding their identity and perceptions of self, specifically regarding race and gender, become especially fervent during the middle school years. Tatum (2017) argues that as Black boys enter and mature through

adolescence, “their self-perceptions are shaped by the messages they receive from those around them, [where] the racial content of those messages is intensifying” (p. 133), and where race and gender are at the front of consciousness (Buckley, 2018; Jackson, 2012; Rogers, Scott, & Way, 2015). Reflecting on the context of this study, it is important to consider how raced and gendered constructions develop and evolve specifically in predominantly white middle schools where whiteness and white supremacy manifests in overt and covert ways, and where the permanence of racism, anti-Blackness, and patriarchal discourse is readily expressed.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education acknowledges that race is a social construction, filtered through a Eurocentric, hegemonic lens and that the centrality of race and racism infiltrates education through curriculum, instruction, policy, etc. and is institutionally perpetuated in schools. Not only does this impact the overall academic, social, cultural, and psychological experiences of students of color writ large, including Black students (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate,1995; Tate, 1997), but it contributes to the false understandings about how race and racism have subsequent effects on our lives. For Black boys attending predominantly white middle schools, who are subjected to increased racist and anti-Black experiences via racial bias, racial discrimination, and other negative racial socialization processes at the hands of teachers, other adults, and peers, how do these types of experiences shape how they come to see, understand, and experience race and gender? Recall in this study that several of the boys identified instances where racialized and gendered stereotypes were imposed upon them by their white teachers and peers in both educational and non-educational contexts (e.g. the white gym teacher who projected the “tough, Black boy” stereotype on his Black student even when he was hurt, the racial biases of grouping Black students together or negatively spotlighting Black students, including Black boys, separating them from the rest of

the class). Recognizing that Black boys are not monolithic in their experiences, understandings, epistemologies, and overall existence, it is critical then to examine how Black boys are talking about and making meaning of race and gender in highly racialized spaces. Further, it is important to consider how this type of space shapes the understandings of their diverse experiences with race and racism and its intersection with notions and constructions of gender, maleness, masculinity, etc., how Black boys experience being and becoming, and how they evaluate, perceive, and feel about themselves.

Practices and Structures for Supporting Black Boys

Often times school policies and practices are put into place based on literature that school leaders have read about Black boys and schooling, frameworks, theories, or models that address academic and social disparities among Black boys, or the recommendations of school boards, conferences, symposia, etc. about how to address "problems" among Black boys (I. Jackson et al., 2014; Love, 2013; Nasir et al., 2009). However, there is danger in essentializing Black boys' experiences and realities and imposing practices in buildings and classrooms without addressing the diversity among Black boys, understanding the complexities within their racial, academic, and social identities, or emphasizing the social and cultural capital and knowledge that they already possess. While research and literature are indeed important to guide decisions for school leaders and school policies, so are the Black boys that they serve. This is especially true when attempting to engage in real talk about racism, racialization, gendering, and racial socialization processes with Black youth attending predominantly white schools.

Conversations with Metro Middle School (MMS) school leaders reveal how important it is to (re)evaluate current school policies and procedures, address racial discrimination and bias among school personnel, assess current teaching practices and attitudes that marginalize students

of color writ large, and solicit feedback from Black boys to learn how to better support them across their schooling experiences. For example, Principal Ann acknowledged that she and her staff need to become more "culturally responsive in our efforts of educating our students, continue to be mindful of our disciplinary practices, ensure the supports we have in place are not discriminatory, continue our conversations around race, and self-reflect on our own implicit biases." She added that because "there is a lack of diversity of staff, I felt it was important to bring an opportunity for students to have interaction with roles models who are people of color." The opportunity that Ann is referencing is the Boys to Men Mentoring Program (BMMP) that most of the boys in this study are a part of. In her opinion, BMMP is one program that helps create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys at MMS. She also mentioned that this is the second year that staff "have watched the docuseries *America to Me* to help us facilitate our conversations about race. Also, finding other opportunities to bring in high school students of color who can mentor our middle school students." Although Ann's actions and decisions highlight how certain structures and practices can potentially improve MMS's current culture and climate in supporting Black boys' academic and social success, they are centered around what she believes the administrators, teachers, staff, etc. need to do. Assistant Principal Jack, shares these beliefs, however, he also believes that it is important "to get feedback from the students."

As you recall, Jack wanted to use his training and "skills to change the [current school] paradigm to a supportive/counseling/teaching approach rather than a punitive one." With this perspective, he believes that in order to create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys at MMS, school personnel must be "culturally competent, [understand] bias recognition, [recognize the importance of] relationship building, [and provide Black boys

with] safe spaces." Jack also noted that within the past five years, MMS has "slowly moved to a restorative approach to student behavior, focusing on relationship building and addressing the "smaller" things (although I don't think they're small) such as dress code." In his opinion, "traditional dress codes are sexist and in many cases culturally incompetent. Ann and I both feel strongly that our environment should be one where all students feel comfortable to express their culture with their dress." Like Ann, Jack also mentioned BMMP as a program that supports Black boys, but he firmly asserts that the best way to specifically support Black boys is "to find more opportunities for them to give ME feedback about how they feel about me and my interactions with them." He says, that although "that can be a very scary thing to do," getting feedback is "the best way for me to further recognize my biases" and to better support my Black boys.

From the perspectives of both school leaders, there are practices, policies, and pedagogical approaches that if implemented and sustained can possibly shift the current environment for Black boys. However, as Jack pointed out centering and valuing the voices and experiences of Black boys is most important. Without assessing what is needed and what is/isn't working, it is unproductive to implement changes when those who are most affected are not sought. This is one of the premises and purposes of *Real Talk*. If we construct Black boys as knowers and self-authors of their own experiences, then we can gain the "knowledge needed to support schools that not only teach Black boys well but also are willing to learn from and be shaped by them" (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 43), rather than designing and implementing "solutions" aimed at "fixing" them.

Implications

Real Talk brings attention to the roles that parents, school practitioners, and educational researchers play in how race, racism, and racialized and gendered experiences are understood, framed, and discussed among and about Black boys attending a predominantly white middle school. How each engages in real talk within these different spaces and contexts play a significant part in disrupting and challenging the beliefs, attitudes, practices, and policies that continue to marginalize the voices and experiences of Black boys in society and in school settings. Given the current sociopolitical and racial climate and the historical legacy of race and racism in this country, it is important to consider the implications of this work within and across these settings.

Parents

Many of the boys in this study highlighted the benefits of engaging in *real talk* with their parents or other adults in the home regarding race, racism, and the racialized experiences of Black people in society writ large. Thus, how parents talk about, frame, and invite their Black sons to participate in conversations about race, racism, racialization and gendering, and other race-related experiences cannot be overemphasized (Cater Andrews, 2016; Reynolds, 2010; Rowley et al., 2014; Tatum, 2017). We know in general that Black children are exposed to, become aware of, and learn about race, racial labels, racial name calling, group separation according to race, and race naming at an early age. We also know the important role that parents, grandparents, and others who help raise them, play in helping Black children understand these racial socialization processes. Tatum (2017) argues that "all parents, regardless of their own racial group membership, send messages to their children, directly or indirectly, about race" (p. 319). However, for Black parents specifically, they have to be more explicit in how they

socialize their children, the messages they send about race, the consequences related to identifying as Black, the importance of understanding their Black history and heritage, etc. (Carter Andrews, 2016; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Tatum, 2017). The challenge, however, is that parents writ large, and especially non-Black parents raising Black boys, must first self-assess and evaluate their own racial ideologies, attitudes, and assumptions, and how they racialize behaviors, expectations, and outcomes for their Black sons. If parents are not in tuned to their own racial (mis)understandings and biases, racial consciousness or lack thereof, or racialized and gendered perceptions, how then can they engage in *real talk* with their Black sons? Moreover, how can they help their Black sons thrive in this highly racialized and racially fraught world?

As this study highlights, Black boys occupy a liminal space in society where their Black boyhoods are erased, where they are perceived and treated as men, and where they face a devalued status as problems in society and schools. As these boys explore who they are, make sense of their identities, build relationships with peers, seek independence, etc., their adolescent experiences and processes are compounded by their race and gender. As such, engaging in *real talk* with Black boys is particularly important in countering their social positioning in society and in navigating the barriers they face regarding their racial, academic, and social identities (Carter Andrews, 2016; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Howard & Flennaugh, 2011; Reynolds, 2010; Tatum, 2017). Thus, it is imperative that parents actively relay positive messages about what is means to be a Black boy in this society. Moreover, they must affirm their Black sons' existence in ways that society does not. At the same time, parents can also create and/or find environments, spaces, programs, etc. that positively reflect and represent their Black sons. Most importantly, parents must engage in conversations about the realities of racism, anti-Blackness, and its interaction with gender, while also equipping them with strategies and mechanisms to cope with and

challenge racist encounters and experiences and patriarchal discourse. By doing so, scholars believe the impact of society's messages are reduced and these type of racialized and gendered socialization processes can positively impact the formation of their identities and the construction of their self-concepts (Carter Andrews, 2016; Rowley et al., 2014; Tatum, 2017).

For example, parents might consider partnering with schools, practitioners, community organizations, and others who are important in the lives of Black boys and who can support the development of healthy racial and gender identities. Because parents bring a different context, perspective, and acuity to the conversation about racial and gender identity and racialized and gendered experiences, Black boys have perceptions of themselves and experiences that may differ or counter what others have observed, and how others perceive and interact with them may vary given the relationship and context, it is important to work in coordination with others to bring a more nuanced understanding regarding Black boys, their identities, and their overall social and academic outcomes. This supports research that highlights the importance of cultivating strong, positive, productive relationships amongst the various groups that are central to Black boys that can contribute to their overall success in society and schools (Carter Andrews, 2016; Chezare Warren, 2016a; Chezare Warren et al., 2016).

School Practitioners

Tatum (2015) argues that "if we acknowledge that we need to address issues of race and racism in order to support the positive identity development of students of color, first we have to be able to talk about them" (p. 48). As the boys in this study revealed, one of the major challenges in engaging in *real talk* and critical discourse, promoting racial and gender consciousness, and engaging in positive racial socialization processes among students of color, Black boys specifically, is that 80% of public school principals, teachers, and staff are white

(NCES, 2019b). Thus, to open dialogue about race and gender at school, school practitioners must first address their own implicit and explicit racial biases, attitudes, practices, and pedagogies that position Black boys as unteachable, troublemakers, disrupters, and "problems" to be fixed. Moreover, they must be aware of and deconstruct the racialized and gendered stereotypes that they consciously and unconsciously subscribe to and perpetuate *before* attempting to learn from or understand Black boys' racial understandings, racialized and gendered experiences, racial identities, etc. In other words, there cannot be a paradigmatic shift in how schools perceive and treat Black boys if school practitioners are not aware of the systemic racism and anti-Blackness that schools propagate in marginalizing Black boys or the "stereotypes and biases they bring to their interactions with them" (Carter Andrews, 2016, p. 55).

Implications of this study also suggests that there needs to be a strong sense of trust, care, empathy, and support between school practitioners and Black boys in order to begin dialogues about race (Flynn, 2012). Black boys need to know and feel that they are in a safe environment for discussion, that their voices will be heard and valued, and that their ways of knowing and being and overall humanity is honored (I. Jackson et al., 2014; Tatum, 2015). From this understanding, school practitioners should consider how to create such spaces, how to enter them as learners, and how to position Black boys as knowers, self-authors, and social and cultural authors capable of teaching and helping them understand what it's like to be a Black boy in this country and within the contexts of schools. By doing so, school practitioners will become aware of how Black boys make sense of race, gender, racism, and their racialized and gendered experiences, which can help them understand and address social, emotional, and academic concerns from identity-affirming, empathetic, and supportive perspectives (Carter, 2007; Carter Andrews, 2012; 2016; Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

Educational Research

There is no shortage of scholarship and literature about the academic and social inequities and challenges Black boys face in society and in schools. Harper (2012) argues that what is "more troubling than the problems themselves is the way they are continually mishandled by educators, policymakers, and concerned others" (p. 3). He believes that "amplifying the troubled status of Black [boys] at all levels of education has, unfortunately, yielded few solutions. This is attributable, in part, to the deficit orientation that is constantly reinforced in media, academic research journals, and educational practice" (p. 3). Within educational research, we must take a critical inquiry into the experiences of Black boys that goes beyond highlighting these inequities. Recognizing the heterogeneity among Black boys, the complexities in their identities, and the diversity in their experiences in society and schools, we should, for example, interrogate the impact of deficit narratives on the self-concepts of Black boys, examine how and why some Black boys choose to adopt certain identities and orientations and why others engage in reactive mechanisms, or consider how educators and school practitioners can better address and support Black boys in affirming ways (A. Brown & Donnor, 2011; Carter Andrews, 2016; T. Howard & Reynolds, 2013; Nasir, 2012). Like school practitioners, it is important to shift the paradigm and perspective in what we research regarding Black boys such that we are not perpetuating or continuously highlighting the social and academic inequities they face.

At the same time, more bodies of work regarding racial and gender discourse are needed that center the voices and experiences of middle-school aged Black boys. Most studies about race, racism, racial identity, racialized experiences, etc. and its intersection with gender among Black boys focus on experiences in P-12 settings collectively or post-secondary contexts. Very few studies center the racial understandings and/or racialized and gendered experiences from the

perspective of Black boys (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Gordon et al., 2009). Dumas and Nelson (2016) argue that "the paucity of research on younger Black boys is merely a symptom of the broader unimaginability of Black boyhood" (p. 31). In other words, educational research as a whole has largely ignored, consciously or unconsciously, the contributions and complex understandings that Black boys can bring to the field regarding identity construction, Black boyhood, racial understandings, etc. (Carter Andrews, 2016; Ferguson, 2010; Flennaugh, 2016). Thus, knowing that the experiences of Black boys need more exploration specifically from their first-hand, detailed accounts, there is a need then to create more space to share their stories, as well as examine and deconstruct the phenomena influencing their racialized and gendered experiences from non-hegemonic research practices, theories and paradigms (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Lastly, educational researchers need to do a better job in framing and applying language to describe Black boys' experiences especially in relationship to their developmental stages. For example, Black boys may not use the term "racially microaggressive" to describe the "brief and commonplace daily, verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). They may not even have the language to describe or articulate these types of interactions. At the same time, not all Black boys are adultified *and* criminalized, yet we see the two terms meshed together often in scholarship and literature to frame Black boys' experiences. As Henfield (2011) points out, many of the terms we use to describe the racialized and gendered experiences of Black boys are more indicative of our perspectives and lenses as researchers, are reflective of experiences and situations of Black adults, and in some cases do not accurately or effectively describe or relate to the boys'

experiences at all. He argues that terms like criminalization, intellectual inferiority, anti-intellectualism, and assumptions of inferior status, should be reconceptualized to be developmentally appropriate. In his study, for example, Henfield (2011) changed notions of criminality where "individuals believe that they are perceived as criminals" (p. 151), to "assumptions of deviance" where "students seemed to believe that they were perceived as exhibiting deviant behavior that served to separate them from school norms" (p. 151). In his opinion, which I agree, assumptions of deviance were more appropriate and fitting in describing how Black boys were perceived and treated by their teachers. In sum, the usage and specificity of language that we use as educational researchers to describe the realities of Black boys is critical. It is important that we are not imposing societal perspectives, narratives, and notions on them. Rather we are nuancing and problematizing our language to better reflect their racialized and gendered experiences according to what they reveal and share with us.

Conclusion

The history of race and racism in America is a long, painful and oppressive one. For Black people "experiences with [race and] racism is nothing new" (Carter Andrews, 2012, p. 2). Race has *always* had very real "consequences for the life experiences and life opportunities for African Americans" (Sellers, Smith, et al., 1998, p. 18), and although race is one of *the* most significant social constructions in the lives of Black people, it is rarely discussed specifically among Black boys. *Real Talk* emphasized the need to critically engage Black boys in conscious-raising dialogue about critical topics, where having these type of difficult, but necessary conversations, create opportunities for them to experience and process *being* and *becoming* according to their own conceptions and perceptions. By centering and prioritizing their voices, experiential knowledge, and narratives, these boys were willing to share their *real* life stories

about what it means to be a Black boy in the face of racism, racial stereotypes, racialized issues, race-based implications, racist ideologies, and in the contexts and confines of our white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society (hooks, 2003).

Real Talk also established conversational spaces for *real* discussions that explored and examined the myriad of factors that impact Black boys' life outcomes, opportunities, identities, and sense of self. These honest conversations and open dialogues about the *realness*, legacies, and consequences of race, racism, racialization, and gendering were not only necessary in facilitating the understandings, examinations, and meanings of Black boys' realities, but it also revealed the strengths and assets that these boys are already equipped with to cope with and navigate racism, anti-Blackness, and patriarchal discourse. Moreover, this study unveiled other factors that were not considered that influenced these boys' identities, conceptions of self, and overall experiences at home, school, and in society. Specifically, the centrality of race and gender on identities and self-concepts, the influence of spirituality, connection to a religious practice, and family on identity formation, meaning making in a predominantly white educational context, and how practices and structures support Black boys as they navigate through middle school. Most importantly, this study demonstrated that many Black boys are rarely, if at all, given opportunities to engage in real talk whether at home, school, or other spaces. The lack of opportunities, platforms, and spaces to hear and learn from the unique voices, stories, and experiences of Black boys has implications for future work and practice among and between parents, school practitioners, and educational researchers, where we can collectively work together to (re)position, (re)imagine, and (re)conceptualize how we think about, frame, understand, and treat Black boys in this society.

EPILOGUE

The completion of this dissertation came at the conjuncture of a pandemic that has adversely affected Black communities and at the apex of police brutality, the killing of unarmed Black people, and the constant fight for racial equity and justice for Black humanity. The impact of these realities on me as a Black woman, researcher, and teacher educator, the partner to a Black man, and more recently an expecting mother of a Black son, was and still is mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausting. I have spent many days and hours trying to make sense of the world around me, especially when that world constantly tells you that you do not matter as a Black person and that you are expendable; that our Black bodies are worthy of cultural appropriation, imitation, and entertainment, but unworthy of safety, protection, and nurturance; that we are good enough to build this country and economy literally from the blood, sweat, and tears of our Black bodies, yet we are not human enough to live freely in it or benefit from it. How then do you focus on a body of work that seeks to show Black boys that they do matter, that they have value, and that the world *needs* their Black joy, when they see Black bodies hunted, shot, and hung on a routine basis? The implications of this work then and how Black boys think about their racial and gender identity, their Black bodies, and their overall existence comes at a very challenging time in our history. To be clear, the disregard for Black humanity, the presence of white supremacy and racism, and their impact on Black boys is nothing new. Rather, the veil of post-racialism and post-civil rights is slowly lifting, exposing to the color-evasive and color-resistant how intentional systemic racism and anti-Blackness is and how it permeates our society to recursively dehumanize and marginalize Black people writ large and Black boys specifically. Thus, as the boys in this study and Black boys across the world look into society and question

themselves, who they are, and who they want to be, they "simply" want to be alive to enjoy their Black boyhoods, friends, and families; walk and jog in their neighborhoods and parks safely; attend school without fear and mistrust from adults, teachers and peers; be in public spaces without being policed and surveilled. But like the boys in this study, we know that life looks very different for Black people, especially Black boys. But I urge us and encourage them to not walk in fear or terror, but to rely on our strength, resilience, faith, and fortitude, and that of others to make our voices heard and presence felt. The world *needs* us and our Black joy.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Key Terms and Concepts

1. *Adolescent* or *adolescence* "typically describes the years between ages 13 and 19 and can be considered the transitional stage from childhood to adulthood" (Psychology Today, 2018). However, social, emotional, physical and psychological changes can start as early as the preteen years, ages 9 through 12. For this study, adolescents/adolescence refers to ages 11 through 14 or the middle school years.

2. *Black* is used as the preferred term to describe individuals who racially and/or ethnically identify as partially or totally of African descent or ancestry. This includes persons whose family ancestry can be traced to Africa, the Caribbean, and/or the United States. To be more inclusive of populations and their ancestry, the hyphenation "American" was not used. Both Black and African American are used interchangeably throughout the text.

3. *Gender* is a social construct where behaviors, expectations, performances, scripts, etc. are influenced by cultural and social norms about masculinity and femininity and what it means to be male and female (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2016).

4. *Middle school* is the level between elementary and high school, typically for students in grades six to eight. Middle school, middle grades and middle level education are used interchangeably throughout the dissertation.

5. *Race* is a social construct used to group individuals on the basis of skin color, hair texture, eye shape, nose structure, and other phenotypic differences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Leonardo, 2013).

6. *Racial identity* refers to how individuals identify and understand themselves racially and the significance and meaning an individual places on race in defining themselves (Arroyo & Zigler, 1991; Sellers, Smith, et al., 1998; Swanson, Cunningham, Youngblood, et al., 2009).

7. *Racialization* broadly refers to how society perceives and treats racial groups differently (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012), while *racialized* signals "underlying assumptions about the fluidity and social construction of racial boundaries" (Nasir, 2012, p. 4) and how identities, knowledge, social interactions, positioning, etc. are made racial.

8. *Racial socialization processes* refer to experiences, messaging, interactions, and communications that shape and inform an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and understandings about the history, culture, values, etc. of their racial group (Anyiwo et al., 2018; Nasir, 2012). These processes also reveal the ways in which other people, groups, and institutions view, perceive, challenge, accept, or appreciate an individual's history, culture, values, etc. (Stevenson, 2004).

9. *Racism* is a system of oppression based on race that is immersed in rhetoric, practices, laws, policies, ideologies, and is embedded in structures and social institutions as well (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gillborn, 2016).

10. *Self-concept* or *self-conceptions* refers to an individual's construction and perception of self (Buckley, 2018; Tajfel, 1978). Self-concept is often a collection of ideas, feelings, knowledge, beliefs, etc. about how someone perceives themselves. This perception can change over time, in various contexts, spaces and settings. According to social identity theory, self-concept "is derived in part from the knowledge and feelings about being a member in a social group and the importance ascribed to that membership" (Buckley, 2018, p. 313).

11. *Youth* can mean and refer to diffident ideas depending on the context. The term is fluid and may/may not refer to age groups (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2013). For this study, youth is used to humanize and restore the images, identities, and experiences associated with Black individuals.

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

REAL TALK

A Research Study For and About Black Boys

I want to learn about your:

- Experiences as a Black boy
- Views about race, racism, gender, and self-concept
- Opinions on Black culture and what it means to be Black or African American

You will:

- Complete a short form about your background and interests
- Share your thoughts and experiences in two one-on-one conversations and in a group discussion
- Create artifacts to illustrate your experiences
- Enjoy free refreshments

To participate you must:

- Attend _____
- Be in grades 6, 7 or 8
- Identify as a boy
- Identify as Black or African American

To learn more or sign up, contact:

Effat Id-Deen
Michigan State University College of Education
620 Farm Lane, Room 313
East Lansing, MI 48824
eiddeen@msu.edu or 734-646-6534

Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews, Principal Investigator
Michigan State University College of Education
620 Farm Lane, Room 318
East Lansing, MI 48824
dcarter@msu.edu or 517- 432-2070

Appendix C: Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Study Title: Real Talk: Conversations about Race, Racism, and the Impact of Racialization and Gendering on the Self-Concepts of Black Boys in Middle School

Primary Investigator: Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews

Researcher and Title: Effat Id-Deen, MSW; PhD Candidate

Department and Institution: Teacher Education; Michigan State University

Address: Erickson Hall, 620 Farm Ln, Room 313, East Lansing, MI 48824

Contact Information: 734-646-6534; eiddeen@msu.edu

1. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study that captures Black boys' understandings and experiences about race, racism, gender, and identity as they enter and move through the middle school grades.

2. WHAT YOU WILL DO

As part of the study, your child will complete a student demographic form highlighting his age, grade level, hobbies, extracurricular activities, etc. He will participate in two individual in-depth interviews lasting about 30-45 minutes each. In the interview, your child will be asked open-ended questions about his experiences as a Black boy and their attitudes, beliefs and opinions about race, gender, racism and its impact on himself. Your child will also complete an identity map and mini autobiography, activities that will allow him to express how he understands and sees himself. Your child will also participate in a focus group exit interview where he will be asked open-ended questions and engage in conversation with his peers about his experiences. This will last about 60-90 minutes. All interviews will be conducted on different days and will not occur during instructional time. Interviews will be conducted in the school library or classroom.

3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Although there is no direct benefit from participating in this study, possible indirect benefits of participation could be your child gains a better understanding of oneself, builds effective communication skills, engages in self-discovery and self-exploration, and learns about topics that are important to him.

4. POTENTIAL RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

5. PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Students will be assigned an ID number to establish anonymity and confidentiality. Only the research team and the MSU Human Research Protection Program will have access to the data. Data will be used for research purposes only, will be stored on a password protected device, will

be archived after transcription, and will be destroyed 3 years after the study has ended. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in journals, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.

Future Research: Your interview data collected as part of the research, even if information that identifies you is removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

6. YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW
If you have read this form and have decided to allow your child to participate in this project, please understand his participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your child also has the right to refuse to answer questions during the study. The alternative is not to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

7. COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY
There is no cost to you or your child to participate in the study.

8. CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the Primary Investigator: Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews at, 620 Farm Lane, Room 318, East Lansing, MI 48824, dcarter@msu.edu, 517- 432-2070

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

9. DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT
Your signatures below indicate that you voluntarily give your permission for your child to participate in this research study and that your child has given his/her assent to participate.

[Student's Name Printed]	[Grade]
[Student's Signature]	[Date]
[Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent]	[Relationship to Student]
[Signature of Person Obtaining Consent]	[Date]

10. AUDIO RECORDING

Interviews will be audio recorded. Recordings will be used for research purposes only, will be kept on a password protected device, will be archived after transcription, and will be destroyed after the study has ended. Recordings are used because the researcher cannot capture all of the important discussions by hand. Some sections of the audio recording might be shared in research, scholarly works, and/or at research conferences, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.

I agree to allow audiotaping of the interview. ☐ Yes. ☐ No Initials_____

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Appendix D: Child Assent Form

Study Title: Real Talk: Conversations about Race, Racism, and the Impact of Racialization and Gendering on the Self-Concepts of Black Boys in Middle School

Primary Investigator: Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews

Researcher and Title: Effat Id-Deen, MSW; PhD Candidate

Department and Institution: Teacher Education; Michigan State University

Address: Erickson Hall, 620 Farm Ln, Room 313, East Lansing, MI 48824

Contact Information: 734-646-6534; eiddeen@msu.edu

PERSON LEADING THE STUDY
Effat Id-Deen

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS RESEARCH?
The reason we are doing this research is to learn about how you understand and experience race, racism, gender, and identity.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?
You are being asked to participate in this study because we believe your experiences are important and can help researchers and teachers learn more about you to better work with and teach you.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THE STUDY?
You will complete a short form telling me your age, grade level, hobbies, extracurricular activities, etc. You will participate in two individual interviews lasting about 30-45 minutes each. In the interview, I will ask you questions about your experiences as a Black boy in middle school. You will complete two activities, an identity map and mini autobiography, to show and tell me how you understand and see yourself. At the end of the study, you will also participate in a group interview where you can share your experiences with your classmates. This will last about 60-90 minutes. All interviews will be conducted on different days and will not occur during class time. Interviews will be conducted in the school library or classroom. The interview will be audio recorded. Do I have permission to audio record the interview?

I agree to allow audiotaping of the interview. ☐ Yes. ☐ No Initials_____

RISKS AND BENEFITS
Although there is no direct benefit from participating in this study, you may gain a better understanding of yourself, build effective communication skills, engaged in self-discovery and self-exploration, and learn about topics that are important to you. In terms of risks, there are no risks associated with participation in this study.

WHO WILL BE TOLD THE THINGS WE LEARN ABOUT YOU IN THIS STUDY?
Information learned from this study will only be shared with the research team and the MSU Human Research Protection Program. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in journals. Your name will not be in any report of the results of this study.

Future Research: Your interview data collected as part of the research, even if information that identifies you is removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

WHAT IF YOU OR YOUR PARENTS DO NOT WANT YOU TO BE IN THIS STUDY?
You can only participate if both you and your parents agree for you to be in the study. Nobody will be upset if you do not want to be in the study. It is your decision. If you decide to be in the study, and later change your mind that is okay too. You can stop being in the study anytime you like.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY?
If you have any questions about the study, you can either tell your parents and have them talk to me or talk to me yourself. Here is my phone number and email address: 734-646-6534; eiddeen@msu.edu

DOCUMENTATION OF ASSENT
If you sign your name on this page, it means that you agree to take part in this research study. You may change your mind at any time.

[Student's Name Printed]	[Grade]
[Student's Signature]	[Date]

Appendix E: Student Demographic Form

Student Name	
Student ID [Given by Researcher]	
Age	
Grade	
School	
Extra-Curricular Activities or Clubs	
Sports or Athletic Activities	
Do you live in your school's neighborhood?	
If no, where do you live?	
Anything else you want to share?	

Appendix F: Student Interview Protocol 1

Name:	**Date:**	**School:**
Grade Level:	**Gender: Male**	**Race/Ethnicity:**
Interviewer: Effat Id-Deen, PhD Candidate, Michigan State University		
Pre-Interview Comments or Leads: • Introductory Protocol • Introduction		
Other Topics Discussed:		
Documents Collected:		
Reflective Memos:		

Introductory Protocol

Good morning/afternoon. My name is Effat and I am from Michigan State University working on a project that looks into how Black boys' in middle school understand and experience race, racism, gender, and identity. Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this project. Remember that this interview is voluntary, and you can stop at any time. Everything that you share is confidential and will not be shared with anyone except the research team.

Introduction

Today we are going to be talking about some of your daily experiences at home, school, in the community, etc. I'm going to ask you some questions related to your background, your attitudes and experiences with race, gender, identity and Black culture. The reason I invited you here to speak with me is because you have a great deal to share as a middle school student.

What you say is very important to me and I know I won't be able to remember everything, so I am going to audio record our conversation and take a few notes. The interview will last between 45 – 60 minutes. During this time, I will ask you several questions. If you don't want to answer a question, you don't have to. Remember there is no right or wrong answer. I want to learn what you think. Do you have any questions so far?

[Respond to any questions.]

Finally, I may publish my results as a book or in journal articles, and I may present the findings at conferences, but I won't use your name or any other information that would identify who you are. If after the interview is over, you want to withdraw from the study, I'll destroy your information. You won't get in trouble for withdrawing. I will provide you with my contact information after the interview, if you decide later that you don't want to participate anymore. Do you have any questions before we begin?

[Respond to any questions.]

Personal Background

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself, e.g. name, age, where you grew up, family?
2. What are some of the challenges and triumphs you've experienced thus far while in middle school, specifically as a Black boy?

Identity and Identity Mapping

3. What does identity mean to you?
4. What aspects of yourself are most important to your identity? Explain.
5. How do others see you or say you are supposed to be? Explain.
    a. Parents
    b. Peers
    c. Teachers
    d. Other adults
6. How does/doesn't that align with who you say you are or think you are?
7. Based off what you told me, let's now create a visual representation of how you see yourself. We are going to do that by drawing an identity map (refer to Appendix G).

Race and Racial Consciousness

8. So, we've talked about some aspects important to your identity, one of them being race. If you had to explain to someone, a peer, a sibling, etc., what race is, what would you say?
9. So, what does race mean to you?
10. Based on how you understand race, what race/racial group do you identify with? Why?
11. Describe the first time or one of the first times that you became aware of your race, racial identity, or own racial group.
    a. How did that make you feel?
    b. How, if at all, did that contribute to how you understand race?
12. How did this experience (and others) contribute to how you see yourself as a Black boy?
13. How often and in what ways do you discuss race or racism:
    a. At School? With who?
    b. At home? With who?
    c. In other spaces? With who?
    d. How, if at all, did these conversations contribute to how you understand race?

Race and Gender

14. Describe a time where you believed you were treated differently because of your:
    a. Race? What was your reaction or response? How did that make you feel?
    b. Gender? What was your reaction or response? How did that make you feel?
    c. Race and Gender? What was your reaction or response? How did that make you feel?
15. In what ways do you think your experiences are different than others of a different:
    a. Race?
    b. Gender?
    c. Race and gender (e.g. white female)?

Racism

16. Describe a time where you've witnessed someone being treated differently based on race.

17. Describe a time where you were treated differently because of your race.

Other

18. Is there anything else you would like to share before we end?

Appendix G: Identity Map Guidelines

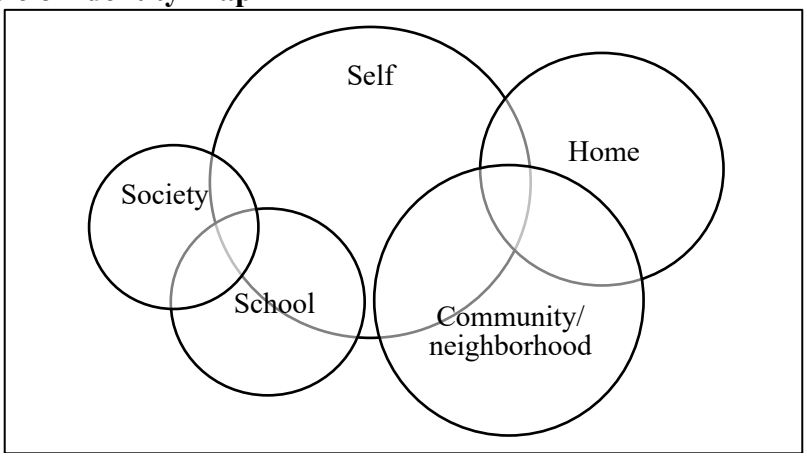
Introduction

Thinking about how you see and understand yourself and all of the many aspects that make you who you are, I would like for you to create an identity map. An identity map is a visual representation of a collection of overlapping and/or disconnected circles that represent aspects of your identity within and across various spaces and contexts.

Instructions

You will use at least five circles, each circle representing a different context: self, home, school, community/neighborhood, and society (see Figure 2). You can add additional circles, or contexts, however, these five contexts are required. The size of the circle or each context depends on the value or significance that you assign or attribute to it. To help you in determining how to construct your identity map, I've provided an example (see Figure 2) and a Map Key. Remember, there is no right or wrong answer. You are putting in words, ideas, aspects, etc. about how you first see yourself, and then how you believe you are perceived and/or treated in other spaces. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Figure 2. Example of Identity Map



Map Key

- **Overlapping Circles**: indicate how close or connected certain contexts are and the influence they have on your identity.
- **Circle Size:** indicates the significance of influence of that context. Each circle should be labeled small (s), medium (m), or large (l).
- **Content**: aspects, ideas, elements, etc. about your that go inside each circle in your map.

Grand Tour

1. What aspects of yourself are most important to your identity?
2. When looking at your identity map,
    a. What do you notice about the other circles?
    b. The size of the them?
    c. What's in the circles?
    d. The overlapping and spacing of the circles?

3. What do you notice about your identity in different spaces?
    a. Why do you see yourself in the manner that you do?
    b. Why do you think others see you in the manner that they do?
    c. What influences you to see yourself one way versus another?
4. What else do you notice?

Appendix H: Student Protocol 2

Name:	**Date:**	**School:**
Grade Level:	**Gender: Male**	**Race/Ethnicity:**
Interviewer: Effat Id-Deen, PhD Candidate, Michigan State University		
Pre-Interview Comments or Leads: • Introductory Protocol • Introduction		
Other Topics Discussed:		
Documents Collected:		
Reflective Memos:		

Introductory Protocol

Good morning/afternoon. My name is Effat and I am from Michigan State University working on a project that looks into how Black boys in middle school understand and experience race, racism, gender, and identity. Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this project. Remember that this interview is voluntary, and you can stop at any time. Everything that you share is confidential and will not be shared with anyone except the research team.

Introduction

Today we are going to be talking about some of your daily experiences at home, school, in the community, etc. I'm going to ask you some questions related to your background, your attitudes and experiences with race, gender, identity, and Black culture. The reason I invited you here to speak with me is because you have a great deal to share as a middle school student.

What you say is very important to me and I know I won't be able to remember everything, so I am going to audio record our conversation and take a few notes. The interview will last between 45 – 60 minutes. During this time, I will ask you several questions. If you don't want to answer a question, you don't have to. Remember there is no right or wrong answer. I want to learn what you think. Do you have any questions so far?

[Respond to any questions.]

Finally, I may publish my results as a book or in journal articles, and I may present the findings at conferences, but I won't use your name or any other information that would identify who you are. If after the interview is over, you want to withdraw from the study, I'll destroy your information. You won't get in trouble for withdrawing. I will provide you with my contact information after the interview, if you decide later that you don't want to participate anymore. Do you have any questions before we begin?

[Respond to any questions.]

Identity and Identity Map Reflection

1. The last time we met, we talked about identity and some of the things that are important to you. We also talked about race, gender, and how people are sometimes treated differently because of it. How have our conversations sparked your thinking about race, gender, identity, etc.?
2. Have you experienced or witnessed anything that has shifted the way you think about **your** race, gender, identity? Explain.

Racial Identity, Racialization, and Racial and Gendered Stereotypes

3. Have you experienced, witnessed and/or heard anything that has made you become (more) aware of being Black? Explain.
4. Thinking about your identity map and daily experiences at home, school, community, etc.:
    a. How do you view yourself as a Black boy?
    b. What influences how you see, understand, and view yourself? Explain
    c. How do you view other Black boys your age? Why is that so?
    d. How do you think society views or perceives Black boys your age? Why do you think this is so?
5. You mentioned some of the ways that society perceives and treats Black boys your age. What (other) racial and gendered stereotypes are you familiar regarding Black boys?
    a. Where have you seen and/or heard these?
    b. Where do you think these ideas come from?
6. Not every young Black boy believes these stereotypes about Black boys to be true or pertain to themselves. Why do you think some people accept or believe these ideas and others do not? Explain.
7. What do you think influences whether or not someone will accept or reject how society may view them? Explain.

Blackness, Black Identity and Black Culture

8. In your opinion, what does it mean to be Black?
    a. What words or ideas come to mind?
    b. What people come to mind?
    c. What places, events, or movements do you think of?
9. Have you heard the phrases: “too Black”, “not Black enough”, or “acting Black”?
    a. What do you think those phrases means?
    b. What do you think people are trying to say or imply?
    c. How do you respond to those types of comments?
10. As someone who identifies as Black, how would you describe Black culture?
    a. What words or ideas come to mind?
    b. What people come to mind?
    c. What places, events, or movements do you think of?
11. Thinking about your personal experiences or experiences with family, friends and others, how have you explored or experienced Black culture?
12. How have these experiences helped you understand yourself as a Black boy?

Other

13. Is there anything else you would like to share before we end?

Appendix I: Administrator Interview Protocol

Name:	**Date:**	**School:**
Interviewer: Effat Id-Deen, PhD Candidate, Michigan State University		
Pre-Interview Comments or Leads: • Introductory Protocol • Introduction		
Other Topics Discussed:		
Documents Collected:		
Reflective Memos:		

Introductory Protocol

Good morning/afternoon. As you recall, my name is Effat and I am from Michigan State University working on a project that investigates how Black boys in middle school understand and experience race, racism, gender, and identity. I am also examining how these understandings and experiences inform their self-concept and what practices and structures can create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for them. While most of this study centers the experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of Black boys, it is also important to gather additional data to provide context for the bigger picture of this study. Today's interview will focus on the administrative aspect of the study. It is voluntary and you can stop at any time. Everything that you share is confidential and will not be shared with anyone except the research team.

Introduction

Today, I want to talk with you briefly about what practices and structures are in place that can create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys. As a reminder, what you say is very important and I know I won't be able to remember everything, so I am going to audio record our conversation and take a few notes. This interview is very brief and will last about 15-20 minutes. During this time, I will ask you a few questions about what is currently happening in the school and what you wish to implement. If you don't want to answer a question, you don't have to. Do you have any questions so far?

[Respond to any questions.]

As another reminder, I may publish my results as a book or in journal articles, and I may present the findings at conferences, but I won't use your name or any other information that would identify who you are. If after the interview is over, you want to withdraw from the study, I'll destroy your information. You won't get in trouble for withdrawing. I will provide you with my contact information after the interview, if you decide later that you don't want to participate anymore. Do you have any questions before we begin?

[Respond to any questions.]

Background

1. How long have you worked in the field of education and in what roles?
2. What educational and/or work-related experiences facilitated your decision to serve as a school administrator?
3. How long have you worked at Metro Middle School and in what capacities?

Structures

4. What structures currently exist in the school that create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys?
5. What facilitated your decision to implement these structures (e.g. programs, initiatives, projects, etc.)?
6. In what ways do you think you can better support Black boys?

Practices

7. What strategies and tactics do administrators use to create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys?
8. What strategies and tactics do teachers use to create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys?
9. What have you done or plan to do to ensure administrators and teachers create and maintain affirming experiences and supportive spaces for Black boys? Explain.

Sustainability of Racial Discourse and Dialogue

10. How, if at all, do you see *Real Talk* fitting in with the current culture and climate of the school?
11. How, if at all, would you like to see *Real Talk* in Metro Middle School long-term?

Other

12. Is there anything else you would like to share before we end?

Appendix J: Focus Group Exit Interview Protocol

Name:	**Date:**	**School:**
Number of Students Present:		
Interviewer: Effat Id-Deen, PhD Candidate, Michigan State University		
Pre-Interview Comments or Leads: • Introductory Protocol • Introduction		
Other Topics Discussed:		
Documents Collected:		
Reflective Memos:		

Introductory Protocol

Good morning/afternoon. As you recall, my name is Effat and I am from Michigan State University working on a project that investigates how Black boys in middle school understand and experience race, racism, gender, and identity. Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this project. Remember that this interview is voluntary, and you can stop at any time. Everything that you share is confidential and will not be shared with anyone except the research team.

Introduction

Today, we are going to recap a little of what we talked about during your individual interviews and if you choose to, share and discuss your artifacts with the group.

As a reminder, what you say is very important and I know I won't be able to remember everything, so I am going to audio record our conversation and take a few notes. This exit interview is more of a discussion and will last between 60-90 minutes. During this time, I will ask you a few questions. If you don't want to answer a question, you don't have to. Remember there is no right or wrong answer. I want to learn what you think. Do you have any questions so far?

[Respond to any questions.]

As another reminder, I may publish my results as a book or in journal articles, and I may present the findings at conferences, but I won't use your name or any other information that would identify who you are. If after the interview is over, you want to withdraw from the study, I'll destroy your information. You won't get in trouble for withdrawing. I will provide you with my contact information after the interview, if you decide later that you don't want to participate anymore. Do you have any questions before we begin?

[Respond to any questions.]

Racialized and Gendered Experiences

1. If you had to describe your day to day experiences as a Black boy, how would you sum it up in one word? Explain.
2. Let's dig a little deeper about your experiences. What are some of the specific challenges and achievements you've experienced as a Black boy in middle school?
3. Based on what you've shared, I want to capture your individual stories, each of your thoughts and ideas independently and in your own words through a free write. For this activity, I would like for each of you to share one experience that stood out to you (see Appendix J).

Racial Identity, Racialization, and Racial and Gendered Stereotypes

4. Since we last met, what experiences have you had that has made you become (more) aware of your race, gender, racial stereotypes, racism, etc.?
5. Why do you think society upholds certain racial stereotypes about Black boys?

Identity-Affirming Experiences

6. While we know that every Black boy does not believe in these stereotypes, why do you think some people accept these ideas and others don't?
7. What do you think contributes to whether or not someone will accept or reject how society views them?
8. What experiences, if any, have been empowering or uplifting to who you are as Black boys?
9. What, if at all, has helped you see and understand yourself in a positive way?

Other

10. What did you learn (about yourself, others, the world, etc.) from participating in this project?
11. Is having conversations or real talk like this something you would like to do more often? Why or why not?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share before we end?

Appendix K: Writing Prompt

Introduction

To better understand and capture your experiences in your own words, I would like for you to complete a short mini autobiography. It's a free write and I am not worried about grammar or punctuation. I just want you to freely write down your thoughts and experiences as a Black boy.

Instructions

Think of a movie or song that reflects who you are, where you are from, your experiences, etc. For example, Tupac's *Keep Your Head Up*, Nas' *I Can*, or Big Sean's *One Man Can Change the World*, are all great songs that are empowering, uplifting and discuss the triumphs and challenges of their lives specifically as Black boys.

I would like for you to write a short piece entitled *"If My Life Was a Movie or Song…"*. You can construct this written piece in various formats including, prose, poetry, song, stanza, short story, rap, etc. The goal is for you to express your life experiences free of criticism, judgement or worry.

After you choose the title of a movie or song, the meat of the piece is to **explain how and why you chose that particular title and how it relates to your life experiences as a Black boy**. Provide as much detail and examples as possible so that it is clear to me what you mean. You will be asked to share an excerpt from your autobiography with the group. However, you do not have to, and the autobiography will only be shared with me.

Do you have any questions before you begin?

Discussion Questions

1. What title did you choose and why?
2. How does this relate to your life experiences as a Black boy?
3. What stood out to you the most in your autobiography in terms of being a Black boy?
4. Why did you choose to include these experiences in your autobiography?
5. Is there anything else you want to share?

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