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## Perception Analytics Of An In-Depth Observational Analysis Of 6Th Grade African American Male Students' Personal Agency

DeVetta Holman Nash

*North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University*

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Perception Analytics of an In-depth Observational Analysis of  
6th Grade African American Male Students' Personal Agency

DeVetta Holman Nash

North Carolina A&T State University

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

College: School of Education

Department: Leadership Studies

Major Professor: Dr. Edward Fort

Greensboro, North Carolina

2014

The Graduate School  
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University  
This is to certify that the Doctoral Dissertation of

DeVetta Holman Nash

has met the dissertation requirements of  
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Greensboro, North Carolina  
2014

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## Biographical Sketch

DeVetta Holman Nash is the daughter of Mary Lester Holman and the late Robert Glasgow Holman . She is a native of Oxford, North Carolina, a rural farming and tobacco community in Granville County. As a child, she vividly remembers the small racially divided town as being rife with political and social strife and also remembers the social advocacy and activism of members within her community, including Dr. Benjamin Chavis.

Today, DeVetta Holman Nash continues her penchant for social change, social justice and advocacy. She pursued a career in Public Health Education and Health Behavior at the Gillings School of Global Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After a short stint as a guidance counselor at Hillside High School, she returned to UNC-Chapel Hill to pursue a Master's Degree in Public Health.

DeVetta accepted a position within the Division of Student Affairs, Campus Health Services where she counsels, educates and advocates for students in and out of the classroom. As she trumpets the need for health equity and advocacy, particularly, for underserved and under-represented students, she has become a voice for the voiceless students who navigate the halls and walls of the university campus.

DeVetta is a member of Mount Vernon Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina under the leadership of Dr. Jerome J. Washington. She is the proud mother of Master Robert-Anthony Nash. She is a member of Kappa Delta Pi Honor Society, American College Health Association, and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated. She has received numerous awards from the University of North Carolina including, The University's Diversity Award, Chancellor's Faculty/Staff Award, Inducted into the Frank Porter Graham Honor Society and most recently was inducted into the Order of the Golden Fleece, the highest honorary society at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my Mother, Mary Lester Holman, who is a warrior in life, motherhood and prayer. Your unwavering faith and unconditional love have taught me how to be a devoted mother, as well as, an advocate of the human spirit. Many teachers have come into my life, particularly, as I have grown in the academy. Your teachings, as a *mother* are unparalleled, when what *really* matters is how we treat the least of these. You embody, in your daily walk, the words of Immanuel Kant, “Treat humanity as an end and never as a means to an end”. As you always told your children, “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*” My work, as a servant leader, is a reflection of what you have instilled in me.

## Acknowledgements

This dissertation is the closing chapter of an academic journey. Yet, for me, it is the beginning of an even greater voyage which propels me to advocate for change. *“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”* ~James Baldwin~ Today, when the humanity of our society is subsumed by culture, oftentimes, our innate sensibilities and levels of consciousness are eclipsed. This doctoral process, because of the invaluable counsel and support received from family, special friends and committee members, afforded me the opportunity to dig deep and to investigate the greater systemic matters that paralyze progress in the educational arena. Dr. Abul Pitre insisted that I look beneath the surface and become an even more critical thinker. Because of this exploration, I came to realize that areas of injustice and inequities which exist must be framed as moral questions: *Who is going to listen? Who is going to believe? Who is going to care? And, who is going to carry the mantle?*

I feel compelled to acknowledge a few special people who contributed to my journey. These individuals supported and guided me as a doctoral candidate and embraced my investigative research study with as much passion as I. For this reason, a process which by nature is inherently arduous and meticulous evolved into an undertaking that was exciting, innovative, relevant and paradigm-changing.

On a sunny afternoon, Dr. Barbara Pullen-Smith walked across campus with me; at the end of our walk and talk, she confirmed for me what my heart already knew would be the next phase of my formal education. I thank her for the gentle nudge, unwavering support, and honesty.

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My source of reflection, support and the real authentic model of “othermothering” was Ms. Ericka Boone. Her daily commitment to affirm students and their success undergirded the need and relevance of this research.

My earth angels, (Mommie, Robin, Ed, Gladys, and Enrico) made sure that Robert-Anthony, who was also very supportive, was attended to on the nights I traveled to and fro. Their prayers and praise were the lynchpins that carried me through.....rays of sunshine throughout this journey. To many other unnamed friends, family members, and special people who have prayed for me, called and encouraged, supported me and my son through this process or paved the way for me, thank you.

The cornerstones of this journey, however, were the members of my Dissertation Committee. The planets aligned perfectly when each of these individuals, without reservation, agreed to serve in this capacity. In their own unique and special way, each delivered a charge to me, which fueled my spirit and commanded excellence in every stage of my research:

Dr. Masila Mutisya was my lightning rod and my Theodore Roosevelt. He walked softly and carried a big stick. He was a consummate teacher and clearly understood the power of pedagogy in transformational leadership. Dr. James Osler’s novel quantitative and analytical assessment prowess was unparalleled. With his guidance and wise counsel, I was able to co-author a new investigative tool which undergirded my research study. His every word was uplifting and spirit-filled. Dr. Cameron Seay’s breadth of knowledge, critical analysis and ability to think outside the box evoked a desire in me to look at research from a broader perspective and challenge the status quo. He pushed me to *push the envelope*. Dr. Comfort Okpala’s quiet vigilance, yet intense scrutiny, ensured the rigor and quality of my work product.



Last, but not least.....Dr. Edward Fort, Chancellor Emeritus of North Carolina A&T State University and Endowed Professor of Education, was my rock, my cheerleader and my most earnest supporter. He chaired my dissertation committee with the same conviction by which he led North Carolina A&T State University for many years.....with the utmost integrity. His genuine interest and staunch confidence in my research topic was the greatest affirmation any doctoral candidate could ever hope for. Through his guidance and teaching, this, I know unequivocally, *“For reasons of finance, morals, and ethics, we can no longer afford to let the discomfort of a few keep us from change for the many.”* ~James Baldwin~

To each of you, Much Love.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	xii
List of Tables .....	xiii
Abstract .....	2
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> .....	3
<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
Historical Foundation of the Problem .....	6
Statement of the Problem .....	8
Theoretical Framework .....	9
Purpose of the Study .....	16
Research Questions .....	17
Research Hypotheses .....	18
Mathematical Hypotheses .....	18
Definition of Key Terms .....	18
Delimitations of the Study .....	20
Significance .....	21
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> .....	24
<b>Review of the Literature</b> .....	24
Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory .....	25
Historical Implications for Schooling African American Males .....	29
Personal Factors Affecting Classroom Experiences .....	40
Students' self-identity .....	40
Stereotyping .....	46
Students' Voices .....	48
Environmental Factors Affecting Classroom Experiences .....	49
Culturally responsive teachers .....	49
Cultural and environmental influences .....	54
Discipline .....	59
School-to-prison pipeline .....	60
Parental involvement .....	64
Behavioral Factors Affecting Classroom Experiences .....	65

Othermothering .....	65
Afro-centric student learning .....	66
Conclusion .....	70
<b>CHAPTER 3 .....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Methodology .....</b>	<b>73</b>
Rationale for Mixed Methods Use of Qualitative Research .....	74
Initial Strategy of Inquiry Used to Formulate Research Question: Narrative Inquiry .....	76
The Role of Researcher .....	81
Research Participants .....	85
Selection of the Research Design Instrument .....	87
Observational Analysis Procedures .....	88
Data Collection Procedures.....	89
Qualitative observations.....	90
Documents .....	90
Data Analysis Procedures .....	90
Trustworthiness and Transferability of Research Findings and Outcomes .....	93
<b>CHAPTER 4 .....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Data Collection &amp; Analysis .....</b>	<b>96</b>
Research Questions .....	96
Qualitative Results .....	97
Quantitative Data Analysis Procedures .....	98
Research Hypotheses .....	99
Results.....	99
Summary of Tri-Squared Test Outcomes.....	101
Further Qualitative Data Analysis Outcomes .....	102
<b>CHAPTER 5 .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Discussion of Findings .....</b>	<b>104</b>
Discussion.....	104
Summary of Findings.....	112
Limitations .....	113
Future Implications & Recommendations .....	114

Conclusion .....	117
References .....	119
<i>Appendix A</i> .....	139
Institutional Research Board (IRB) Waiver.....	139
<i>Appendix B</i> .....	141
Institutional Research Board (IRB) Agency Consent Form .....	141
<i>Appendix C</i> .....	142
Osler-Holman-Nash Personal Agency Assessment Instrument.....	142
<i>Appendix D</i> .....	143
The Nash Compass of Personal Agency .....	143
<i>Appendix E</i> .....	144
Monograph.....	144

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism Model .....	27
Figure 2. Bi-directionality of Triadic Reciprocal Determinism Model .....	28
Figure 3. The Holman-Nash Compass of Personal Agency .....	117

## List of Tables

Table 1. Responses and Findings from Research Questions .....	97
Table 2. African American Males' Personal Agency Tri-Squared Test .....	100
Table 3. Qualitative Summary of Findings.....	112

## Abstract

Existing scholarship on self-concept and its relevance to personal agency in the classroom does not incorporate the lived experiences of African American middle school boys. Today, in the United States, only 10% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade African American boys can read proficiently (Holzman, 2011). This research study investigates the perceptions of seventeen middle school African American males' classroom experiences to determine factors that contribute to their classroom engagement and personal agency. The study also illustrates that there is a significant need for greater self-identity and self-concept within the learning environment, which allows African American male students to self-actualize their sense of personal agency and thus, become agents in their own learning process.

This dissertation extensively reviews the literature on Albert Bandura's Cognitive Development Theory and the application it has on agency. The bi-directionality of the Triadic Reciprocal Determinism Model is explored and variables within the model were tested using the Innovative Trichotomous Squared Investigative Instrument. The Trichotomous Categorical Variables mirror the elements in Bandura's TRD model: Behavioral, Personal and Environmental. The Trichotomous Squared Instrument extrapolated variables from the triad converting qualitative observational data into quantitative numerical application data. The findings revealed there were extremely significant differences in the contributing factors observed by the researcher in the environment that contributed to African American males adolescents' perception of their personal agency. Findings also underscored the significance and relevance of a strong self-concept and strong self-identity in informing the personal agency of African American middle school boys.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

*“What does it feel like to be a problem?”*

*~ W.E.B. DuBois~*

“What does it feel like to be a problem?” This quote from W.E. B. DuBois in his book, *Souls of Black Folk* asks the prophetic and age-old question, “What does it mean to have your very body and the bodies of your children to be assumed to be criminal, violent, malignant?” (DuBois, 1989, pp. 1-2). Today, in the United States of America, only 10% of 8th-grade African American boys can read proficiently (Holzman, 2011). As cited in the U.S. Census Bureau, Pitre (2009a) reported that African American males have the highest unemployment rates and the lowest high school graduation rates in the United States. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander reports that the United States has the highest incarceration rates of anywhere in the world with 76% of the incarcerated being African American (Alexander, 2012). If current trends hold, one-third of the Black boys born in 2001 will spend time in prison. “There is no other group in our country that is at such perils as African American males, not only in terms of education, but in so many other aspects of our society,” said Michael Nettles, Senior Vice President of Educational Testing Services in a symposium on African American middle school boys (Yaffe, 2012, p. 2).

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to investigate the perceptions of 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American males’ classroom experiences to determine the factors that contributed to the students’ classroom engagement and personal agency. In President Obama’s January 2014 State of the Union address, he committed to “reaching out and creating a new initiative, My Brother’s Keeper, to help more young men of color facing tough odds stay on track and reach their full potential” (politichicks.tv, 2014). The average Black male achievement falls far below that of



White and Asian boys. Academic rigor, social and emotional development, classroom decorum and behavior can qualify as metrics of achievement. Based on an analysis of data from the U. S. Department of Education, Saenz and Ponjuan (2011) found that 49.5% of Black students in grades 6-12 had been suspended from school, compared to 21.3% of their White counterparts. Only 12% of Black fourth-grade boys are proficient in reading, compared to 38% of White boys. Only 12 % of Black eight-grade boys are proficient in math, compared to 44% percent of White boys (Prager, 2011). By fourth grade, Black students may be three full years behind their peers (Lewis, 2010). “Research shows that while students drop out in high school, that decision is typically made in middle school” (Yaffe, 2012, p. 12).

As this class of African American middle school boys continues to grow, the nation’s society and democracy is at risk, making this one of the most challenging problems in American public education (Prager, 2011). “Children are suffering from a toxic cocktail of poverty, illiteracy, racial discrimination and massive incarceration that sentences poor boys to dead-end and hopeless lives,” stated Marian Wright Edelman, president and founder of the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) (Prager, 2011, p. 2). African-American boys have become beneficiaries of the soft bigotry of low expectations (Clark, 1965).

The literature revealed the correlates to academic achievement in a report written by Barton and Coley (2009) and published by the Educational Testing Service. The report highlights the aggregated research on the life, school conditions, and experiences that correlate with cognitive development and school achievement. Other correlates identified in the research were: parent participation, student mobility, birth weight, lead poisoning, hunger and nutrition, reading to young children, television watching, parent availability, summer gain or loss, the rigor of the school curriculum, teacher preparation, teacher experience, teacher turnover, class size, technology-assisted instruction, and school safety (Barton & Coley, 2009). The authors found

that gaps in these life conditions and experiences mirrored gaps in achievement. The sixteen factors identified helped researchers understand why the achievement gap continues. This study observed and involved seventeen 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American male students' classroom experiences and how those experiences affect personal agency. Findings revealed an overlap of causal factors in school achievement identified by other researchers. This study attempted to illuminate the confluence of classroom involvement, self-efficacy, and personal agency. The research in this study involved an investigation based off of Albert Bandura's (2001a) Social Cognitive Theory, specifically, his Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model that explores self-efficacy. The research sought to address the following question: "What do school behaviors or school outcomes suggest about the 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American males that impede or elevate their potential for achievement?" The observational analysis consisted of a cohort of 17 African American middle school boys in their classroom setting. This analytic observational narrative study was designed to reveal the experiences of 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American boys. Observational findings were represented in a way that signified the humanity and uniqueness of each individual boy; the collective outcome could have an enormous impact on the next generation of African American boys as they navigate middle school. The assumption in designing this study was that, the outcomes of the observations may lead to a discovery of a model that is contextually unique in addressing learning experiences of the middle school African American males.

In a study by Finley and McNair (2013), the findings revealed that underserved students emphasized the quality of their lived experiences in the classroom far more than they do the subject content. Students want real-world application for learning, and seek caring relationships with adults. This narrative study analyzed the observations made of African American male students' classroom experiences and how those experiences affect behavior (personal agency)

and classroom engagement. Such an analysis may allow for the construction of strategies to intervention for the next generation of African American adolescent males.

### **Historical Foundation of the Problem**

African American students are 17% of the total public school population but account for 36% of the students who are suspended from school and 32% of those that are expelled (Hutchinson, 2002). According to Butterfield (2002), there are more Black men incarcerated than there are in colleges and universities in the United States. The origin of this statement is in a report from the Justice Policy Institute titled, *Cellblocks or Classrooms? The Funding of Higher Education and Corrections and Its Impact on African American Men*. The report revealed more African American men were in the penal system (791,600) than were enrolled in higher education (603,032) (Institute, 2000). These results reveal 188,500 more African American men incarcerated than in higher education. Less than 47% of African American males graduate from high school compared to 78% of Caucasian American male students (Jackson, 2010). Nationwide, African Americans represent 26% of juvenile arrests, 44% of youth that are detained, 46% of the youth who are judicially sent to criminal court, and 58% of the youth admitted to state prisons (NAACP, 2013). These numbers correlate to the abysmal rates of achievement among African-American males in school. It is for this reason that it is both necessary and critical to examine and understand the classroom experiences of African American middle school male students.

Understanding the perception of African American middle school boys and the interpersonal dynamics between students and teachers set the stage for the perceived experiences of African American students as they matriculate in the class. Acknowledging teacher expectations and the subsequent realities of the dynamics between the informants, afforded the researcher insight into the quality and level of teaching techniques and practices, juxtaposed with the cognitive,

emotional and affective skills of the student. Critical to note is the perceptions teachers oftentimes have about African American male students prior to them being in their classroom (Crano & Mellon, 1978). Inherent in the psyche of many African American male students is the notion of not being expected to achieve academic success. The significance of teacher expectations on student achievement has been examined in many studies (Crano & Mellon, 1978). One perspective on low expectations and negative beliefs about African American students comes from mainstream society's invalidation of African American culture (Ladson-Billings & King, 1990). Students rise to high levels of expectations when taught and nurtured to do so. In *Dark Ghetto* (1965), Dr. Kenneth Clark states, "the fact that these children, by and large, do not learn is because they are not being taught effectively and they are not being taught because those who are charged with the responsibility of teaching them do not believe that they can learn, do not expect that they can learn, and do not act toward them in ways which help them to learn" (p.131).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century educational paradigm reflects the dire circumstances of academic achievement. In a survey conducted in 2012, A.D. Edwards interviewed African American high school boys and asked them why they thought other African American boys dropped out of high school. Nearly 60% of those interviewed said that they thought part of the reason was because they were unable to talk to their teachers about their problems (personal and/or academic). Teachers must be intentional and purposeful in their efforts to meet students where they are. Just as important as meeting students where they are, is the need to allow students to participate fully as partners in their own success. This means reorienting one's approach to teaching so that the concerns and interests of African American (students) become center stage (Shockley, 2011).

Teachers are the transmitters of knowledge. Teachers have been trained and socialized to impart information that is given to them from a Eurocentric perspective (Shockley, 2011).

Oftentimes, this strategy runs contrary to the cultural ways of being within African American students. When analyses are conducted on African Americans as a group within European American society, it is evident that European American-based socialization ideals are not having a positive impact on Blacks as a group (Shockley, 2011). Historically the role of education has been that of socialization and cultural transmission (Boocock, 1972). In theory, this is good; however in practice, the utility of this education strategy deteriorates into socio-psychological control and political-economic dominance or, controlling human capacity, rather than unleashing it (Baber, 2003). In the early 1990s, the phenomenon of oppressing the human potential by controlling the pedagogical processes was referred to as “silencing the voices” of marginalized members of our society, particularly in the process of knowledge construction (Baber, 2003). Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century this phenomenon of obviating student-centered pedagogy and not attending to the human spirit of students still exists.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study is a mixed methods research design that used observational inquiry to determine the factors under analysis that were validated qualitatively, using direct observation and quantitatively, using the Tri-Squared analytical statistical metric. Asante in his book, *The Afrocentric Idea in Education* stated, “How African American boys view themselves culturally, academically and socially impact their academic success and performance in school” (Asante, 1991). Findings by Asante’ underscored the critical need to further explore what aspects of the classroom either elevate or subvert the capacity of African American boys to thrive and therefore, achieve. The mixed methods analysis explored through observational analysis 17 African American male students’ personal agency in their academic environment. Under observational analysis was a North Carolina Urban Magnet International Baccalaureate Middle

School. The research investigation involved triangulation of the three elements of Albert Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model into a Tri-Squared Test Inventive Investigative Instrument (Osler, 2012) created by the researcher to specifically analyze the three factors that bi-directionally influence personal agency. The research investigation also provided a deeper and richer insight into the reality of the current educational experiences of African American males. The overall goal of the study was to shed light on how the classroom experience affects African American male personal agency in middle school. Ultimately, the outcomes of this study afforded the researcher the opportunity to forecast strategies to change the policies at a local, state, and federal level to transform middle school education to improve the educational experiences of the next generation of African American males.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The guiding theoretical framework for this mixed methods research investigation was based upon narrative study within Albert Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). Albert Bandura's SCT emphasizes how cognitive behavioral, personal, and environmental factors interact to determine motivation and behavior (Crothers, 2008). According to Bandura, human functioning is the result of the interaction among all three of these factors. In Bandura's SCT model, he theorizes that people are motivated by and make decisions based on basic, inherent needs of the individual (Bandura, 1986).

Learning skills are built around domains that support these essential factors (Burke, 2014). The learning domains most associated with classroom engagement and academic achievement are cognitive, social and affective. Children will engage in activities that propel them to learn tasks they are interested in, motivated by, and that will result in positive outcomes (Schunk, 2001). An African American student being interviewed on MSNBC's Melissa Harris Perry show begged for "more pizzazz in the class." What students think about the subject matter and the

manner in which it is conveyed speaks volumes about their willingness to engage, persist and achieve.

Bandura's SCT hypothesizes that, personal agency or "individuals as agents, individually processing information lead to cognitions presumed to manifest motivation", or how one chooses to behave (Hickey, 1997, p. 179). The capacity to exercise control over the nature of one's life is the essence of humanness. Bandura (2001a) describes personal agency as characterized by a number of core features that operate through functional consciousness: (a) intentionality, (b) forethought, (c) self-reactiveness, and (d) self-reflectiveness.

*Intentionality:* Agency refers to acts done intentionally. An intention is a representation of a future course of actions to be performed; not just an expectation of future actions, but a proactive commitment to bringing them about (Bandura, 2001b). Some social policies and practices originally designed with well-meaning intentions result in less than positive outcomes because their harmful effects were unforeseen. To put it succinctly, the power to begin an action or given purpose is the key feature of personal agency (Bandura, 2001a).

*Forethought:* Through the exercise of forethought, people motivate themselves and guide their actions in anticipation of future events. Behavior is motivated and directed by projected goals and anticipated outcomes (Bandura, 2001b). People construct outcome expectations from observed conditional relations between environmental events in the world around them and the outcomes those actions produce (Bandura, 1986).

*Self-reactiveness:* An agent has to think strategically and organize thoughts in advance of the situation; an agent has to exhibit motivation and self-regulation, as well. Hence, monitoring one's pattern of behavior and the cognitive and environmental conditions under which it occurs is the initial step in managing behavior.

*Self-reflectiveness*: Among the mechanisms of personal agency, the most pervasive and fundamental is people's belief in their capability to exercise control over their own functioning and over environment (Bandura, 1997). Unless people believe they can accomplish a task and or goal, or delay a detrimental outcome by their actions, they have very little incentive to persevere and persist in times of difficulty and challenging situations.

Critical to this study was clarifying how human learning and adaptation are grounded in social systems that are transactional in nature. Schools, family, churches, organizations, and communities constitute the person-in-environment metaphor and provide an understanding of the relationship between people and the physical environment. Humans do not operate in isolation, but rather in a transactional nature. Personal agency is embedded within a broad complex of sociocultural dynamics, which give allowance to emergent interactive agency (Bandura 1986). Individuals are neither autonomous agents, nor simply mechanical conveyers of animating environmental influences (Bandura, 1989). The most central mechanism of personal agency is an individual's belief about their capabilities to exercise control over their own lives; this is the fundamental premise of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989). Holliday (1985) sees the transactional perspective as:

1. Behavioral: a function of the reciprocal interaction of person and environment;
2. Environmental: conceptualized as bounded spaces having social qualities;
3. Psychological: processes (perceptions, expectation, attributions) to mediate relationships between behavior and environment;
4. Individual: differing in perceptions of the content and meaning of any given social setting (p.118).

A contemporary of Albert Bandura is Dr. Mervin Lynch who developed a theory of self-concept. Dr. Lynch espouses that within the context of self-concept, "frustration has been a



major concept of concern in Psychology since writings by S. Freud (1922), and more recently in works by J. Dollard et al.(1939); A. Amsel (1992); N. Maier (1949); and S. Rosenzweig (1944). It has also been a major concern of writers in education, especially as it applied to some form of thwarting of the learning process and its impact on individuals with learning and physical disabilities. Possible consequences of frustration for an individual's self-concept have been cited in more than 100 papers in the psychological literature covering the past ten years" (Lynch, 2006).

In a more recent 2013 article entitled "Self-Concept: How It May Relate to the Performance of Creatively Gifted Children" Lynch notes that regarding the notion of self-concept, "Various writers have proposed that self-concept will play an important role in the expression of contrary opinions and production of creative products by the creatively gifted (Coopersmith, 1967; Kelly & Colangelo, 1984; Hoge & Renzulli, 1993)". Lynch further states: "Coopersmith, for one, proposed that conviction stemming from strong self-attitudes or self-esteem is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the expression of opinions which differ from those of other persons. Coopersmith also states that an individual must not only be convinced that his opinions are sound and worthy, he must also be able to express those convictions and tolerate the distress and possible ostracism that might eventuate from dissent. Coopersmith also proposed that concepts of conviction and courage associated with high self-esteem are equally relevant to the production of creative innovations. According to Coopersmith, a person who produces new ideas or products or who presents us with a drastically different perspective must be convinced that the fruits of his labor are valuable" (Lynch, M. & Sullivan-Lynch S., 2013a). This is supported by research into self-concept as the precursor to self-identity. Lynch states that, "An alternative on which the present research is based is that self-concept is the antecedent to aspects of self-identity" (Lynch, M., Sullivan-Lynch S., Paneels, A. & Doran L., 2013b). A major feature of

Lynch's model is that it treats self-concept deficiencies as rule structure violations. In other words, high self-concept individuals have definitive sets of rules, whereas, low self-concept individuals do not. Furthermore, Lynch proposed that when an individual is faced with a situation in which there are few rules or there is failure to validate rules which are applied, frustration will result concurrently with a temporary shift in self-judgment. The more intense the frustrational stimulus, the greater the shift in self-judgment experienced by the person.

Frustrational reactions may result from situations such as interpersonal rejections or failure in work or academic situations (Lynch, M., Sullivan-Lynch S., Paneels, A. & Doran L., 2013b).

This finding supports the research conducted in the study regarding self-concept and Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model. Additionally, the finding supports the trichotomous design elements that led to the researcher's proposal of an instrument to delve further into the academic environment to uncover the existence of said elements in regards to personal agency.

Another theorist whose work is widely respected and undergirds the work of Albert Bandura is that of Swiss born, Jean Piaget (1896-1980). Piaget's work has influenced the field of child development. Piaget makes a clear distinction between development and learning. He states that development is a spontaneous process which is directly related to physiological and embryogenetic outcome of nature; learning on the other hand is provoked and informed by external situations and environment (Piaget, 1997). According to his cognitive-developmental theory, children actively construct knowledge and make meaning of their existence as they manipulate and explore their world. Piaget posits that a child via his "solo" mind takes in and interprets information about the world and his own environment, therefore constructing knowledge. In Piaget's theory, as the brain develops and children's experiences expand, they transition through four broad stages of development (Berk, 2012):

1. Sensorimotor (Birth-2 yrs.): Infants “think” by acting on the world with their eyes, ears, hands and mouth
2. Preoperational (2-7 yrs.): Preschool children use symbols to represent sensorimotor discoveries; thinking lacks logic
3. Concrete operational (7-11 yrs.): Children’s reasoning becomes logical and better organized; however, thinking is not yet abstract
4. Formal operational (11 yrs.-on): Individual has the capacity to think in the abstract; systematic thinking enables adolescents, when faced with a problem, to begin with a hypothesis, deduce testable inferences, and isolate and combine variables to see which influences are confirmed

Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory is critical to deconstructing and understanding how children make meaning of their lived experiences. The confluence of Piaget’s CDT and Bandura’s SCT is critical to this narrative study because it emphasizes the significance of how children construct reason to the world they live in, develop perceptions of themselves, produce conceptions of others, choose to behave and build human relationships. Each of these elements is embedded within Albert Bandura’s Triadic Determinism Model and relevant to this research study. However, for the formal operational years defined by Piaget, he posits that development has an endpoint and therefore, suggesting that growth and development is finite.

Russian born, Lev Vygotsky, takes a different approach to Jean Piaget’s position. Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory is more in alignment with Albert Bandura in that he theorizes that cognitive development is a collaborative process and “children learn through social interaction”, rather than operating in “solo” learning environments (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2011, p. 34). Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky believes the process of social learning, social development and interaction is a life-long process. In fact, he espoused that social learning actually leads to

cognitive development. Vygotsky's SDT mirrors Bandura's Social Learning Theory as it conveys how human learning and adaptation are grounded in social systems that are transactional in nature (bi-directional) and provides an understanding of the relationship between people and the physical environment. Humans do not operate in isolation (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2011).

Critical to understand in this study is the sparseness of research on self-concept and self-esteem conducted by African American researchers and theorists. The doll experiment by Drs. Kenneth and Maimie Clark contributed to the landmark decision of Brown versus the Board of Education. Their findings demonstrated another version of how children construct a sense of self. Their investigations involved Black children who categorized themselves as "bad", when compared to that of a white doll, hence, generating a self-concept of self-loathing and unworthiness (Clark & Clark, 1939a). Dr. Maimie Clark's investigations into self-concept among African American children inspired further study and sparked new areas of research, particularly within the field of developmental psychology. However, many of her important contributions have not been cited and oftentimes overlooked when referencing textbooks and empirical articles. Although Drs. Clark and Clark (1939b) quote Jean Piaget in many of their works around self-concept, both researchers (Clark and Clark) contributed to the scientific development of the mental and emotional self and the nature of consciousness as it relates to minority children.

Germane to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was the evolutionary concept born out of it: Triadic Determinism Model (Bandura, 2001a). Bandura's SCT asserts several basic assumptions about learning and the inter-relational dynamics of how personal and environmental factors inform behavior. The overarching dynamic of this theory concerns triadic reciprocal-ity, or the view that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influence one another in a bidirectional, reciprocal fashion (Bandura, 2001a). While it may seem that one factor is the

majority, or lead reason, there are numerous factors that play a role in human behavior. Furthermore, the influencing factors are not of equal strength, nor do they all occur concurrently (Wood & Bandura, 1989). For example, performance and engagement (behavioral factors) are influenced and affected by thinking/cognitive processes (personal) and environmental influences (environment). Again, Bandura's SCT asserts several basic assumptions about learning and the inter-relational dynamics of how personal and environmental factors inform behavior. The overarching dynamic of this theory concerns triadic reciprocal-ity, or triadic reciprocal determinism, the view that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influence one another in a bidirectional, reciprocal fashion (Bandura 2001a).

A person's on-going behavioral functioning is a product of a continuous interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and contextual factors (Bandura, 2001a). Learning is shaped by factors within the environment, especially the reinforcements experienced by one's self and by others. At the same time, learning is affected by one's own thoughts and self-beliefs and their interpretation of the context/environment.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to observe and analyze African American middle school males' classroom experiences and how those experiences impact personal agency. Personal agency in this study referred to how one chooses to behave or intentionally make things happen by one's actions (Bandura, 2001a). The core features of personal agency enable people to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing time (Bandura, 2001). It is important to note that social cognitive theory subscribes to a model of emergent interactive agency which contributes to motivation and action within a system of triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1989).

The researcher's mixed methods strategies involved the use of quantitative methods of data analysis that were based on narrative inquiry to formulate the items and structure of the Tri-Squared Inventive Investigative Instrument. The Inventive Instrument was designed to test and confirm the existence of Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Deterministic model elements in terms of personal agency with African American males in the middle school environment. The narrative inquiry methodology, as an investigative strategy, included a year-long internship that involved an in-depth immersion into the middle school academic environment to determine the future possibility of research via field notes and observations. The present research study evolved out of the yearlong internship which defined the researcher's topic, design, and unit of analysis (the middle school).

### **Research Questions**

The central qualitative research questions that guided this study and created the basis of the respective and reflective Research and Mathematical Hypotheses are as follows:

1. What are the Personal Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?
2. What are the Behavioral Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?
3. What are the Environmental Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?

Further Supporting Research Questions that was addressed by the study are as follows:

1. How will Personal Agency positively affect classroom engagement, if at all?
2. What is the observation of the Personal Agency intervention in the school setting?
3. What is the teacher involvement in the Personal Agency of the student in the school setting?

## Research Hypotheses

The Research Hypotheses that were formulated from the initial Research Questions are as follows:

$H_a$ : There will be significant differences in the Trichotomous Categorical and Outcome Variables as contributing factors based off of the observational analysis by the researcher in the environment that contribute to African American male adolescents' perceptions of their personal agency.

$H_0$ : There are no significant differences in the Trichotomous Categorical and Outcome Variables as contributing factors based off of the observational analysis by the researcher in the environment that contribute to African American males adolescents perception of their personal agency.

## Mathematical Hypotheses

The researcher's mixed method analysis of the Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model factors expressed the Research Hypotheses for purposes of statistical analysis. Thus,  $H_a$  becomes  $H_1$  and the Trichotomous-Squared quantitative statistical Inventive Investigative Instrument has the following mathematical hypotheses that can now be mathematically scrutinized through the Tri-Squared Test:

$$\begin{aligned} H_0: Tri^2 &= 0 \\ H_1: Tri^2 &\neq 0 \end{aligned}$$

## Definition of Key Terms

**Personal agency:** an individual's ability to make causal contributions to the course of events; how one chooses to behave (Bandura, 1986).

**Self-identity:** can also be referred to as self-concept, concerns one's perceptions about one's abilities, flaws, status, and worth (Bailey, 2003).

**Self-concept:** the sum total of our thoughts, feelings, and imaginations made up of cognitive and affective components; meanings we hold of ourselves when we look at ourselves (Rosenberg, 1979).

**Self-esteem:** one's evaluation of oneself in affective (negative or positive) terms; generalized judgment about personal value or merit (Rosenberg, 1979).

**Self-confidence:** faith in one's own ability (Rosenberg, 1979).

**Culturally relevant teaching:** pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

**Interpersonal dynamics:** roles relations among students, teachers, and administrators (Sedlak, 1986).

**Attitude:** an attitude is "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols" (Hogg & Vaughn, 2005, p.150).

**Affective:** this involves a person's feelings/emotions about the attitude object (Hogg & Vaughn, 2005). For example: I like my teacher.

**Behavioral:** the way the attitude we have influences how we act or behave (Hogg & Vaughn, 2005). For example: "I will work hard and perform well for my teacher".

**Cognitive:** this involves a person's belief/knowledge about an attitude object (Hogg & Vaughn, 2005). For example: "I believe my teacher likes me".

**Social skills:** being able to flexibly adjust our behavior to fit a particular situation and our personal needs and desires (Kennedy-Moore, 2011).



**Academic achievement:** the outcome of education; the extent to which a student, teacher or institution place emphasis on academic content, proficiency and achieving educational goals (Armstrong, 2006).

**Classroom engagement:** how students interpret processes focal to classroom learning, motivation and participation (Corno & Mandinach, 1983).

**Operant conditioning:** expectations about stimulus events in the environment (Berk, 2012)

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The delimitations of this study were typical of those in mixed methods research studies that emphasize the effective use of both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. According to Richards and Morse (2007), qualitative studies do not typically produce generalizable results because the same results would not necessarily be obtained if the study was replicated. While the samples were generally very small, validity, rather than reliability were the researcher's goal. Validity requires that the results and or findings accurately reflect the phenomenon being studied. For this study, informants were confined to seventeen 6th grade students. The setting for this study was a small International Baccalaureate magnet middle school located in the southeastern part of the United States nestled within a community of predominantly Black families. The demographics of the school reflected a homogenous population of students who were in the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades, ages 11-14 years. The teaching staff was predominantly female, but was racially mixed. It was challenging to say that what was uncovered about the lived experiences of the participants in this study was typical to other African American male students and their teachers.

## Significance

This study brought awareness to the dynamics and influential aspects of African American male students' classroom experiences and how those experiences illuminated barriers to their learning and quality classroom personal agency and engagement. Although previous studies have been done relative to academic decline and successes of students in the classroom, little empirical data has been produced specifically addressing aspects of 6<sup>th</sup> grade males' classroom experiences. Most of Piaget's research for the formal operational years (11 years on) were done in Europe and most likely included subjects other than African American 6<sup>th</sup> grade males.

The significance of this study is chronicled by philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer John Dewey (1897). Dewey's ideas have been influential in education and social reform for over a century. Dewey's most historic and hallmark piece of work, written in 1897 was, "*My Pedagogic Creed*." It is this creed that undergirded the significance of this study of Student-Teacher interpersonal dynamics. The tenets that Dewey illustrates in, *My Pedagogic Creed*, are both timely and relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The concepts highlight the social, cognitive and affective nature of an individual juxtaposed with Dewey's definition of true education.

Based on the literature, cognitive, social, affective and psychomotor are the four domains around which learning takes place. These are also transferable skills that help improve performance in all areas and/or disciplines (Burke, 2014). With a greater understanding of three of the four domains (cognitive, social and affective), coupled with perceptions and expectations of the student's teacher and parent(s), this study attempted to discover aspects of the student-teacher dynamic and classroom atmosphere which might affect the learning environment for a African American middle school boys.

The most recent revision of Bandura's theory places a strong emphasis on how children and adolescents think about themselves and other people. It is this revised view of his theory, which he called "social-cognitive" rather than a social learning approach (Berk, 2012, p. 18) that supports the importance of environment on self-concept and personal agency. Important to note are empirical studies by noted researchers like Albert Bandura (Canadian born), Jean Piaget (Swiss-born), and American B.F. Skinner, rarely if ever, included African American adolescent boys. Bandura defines adolescents as the age group between 11 and 14 years (Berk, 2012). To observe African American boys in their own classroom environment, juxtaposed with the theoretical findings from noted researchers and philosophers illuminated areas which influence the academic achievement and classroom engagement of African American 6<sup>th</sup> grade boys and their personal agency.

This observational narrative inquiry study provided focus for three areas: personal, environmental and behavioral aspects of 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American school boys' classroom experiences. First, this study observed persons and their behavior, which is influenced by their concept of self and environment. Secondly, the study attempted to understand the individual and their environment which involves belief and cognitive competencies developed and modified by social influences. Thirdly, this study observed the person and his/her environment, which involves the person's behavior determining their environment, which in turn affects their behavior. Individual development and thinking occur within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the environment (Berk, 2012). Subsequently, the researcher attempted to interpret and examine the meaning of the bi-directionality of these components through critical observation within the classroom environment. The researcher collected data via observation from multiple sources and used it to arrive at an optimal qualitative decision about African American males' personal agency, hence, perception analytics. These analytic

observations helped forecast strategies to address the personal agency of the next generation of African American 6<sup>th</sup> grade middle school boys.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of the Literature

*“Am I my brother’s keeper? More than being my brother’s keeper,  
I must understand that I am my brother’s brother”.*

*~ Archbishop Desmond Tutu~*

This study involved observation of seventeen African American male 6<sup>th</sup> grade students to explore how classroom experiences affect personal agency of African American males in Middle School. Middle school is a critical period in the life of any student. Geoffrey Canada, President of the Harlem Children’s Zone and Chairman of the Children’s Defense Fund reported, “Middle school years (9-13) with their physical changes, heightened academic expectations, and first steps toward independence, as being difficult years for any child, but for African-American boys, many of whom already face myriad challenges that other children do not, those years can be especially difficult” (Yaffe, 2012, p. 2). This review observed the personal aspects (self-concept, self-perception) of African American middle school boys and how efficacy affect agency in the classroom.

The following review of the literature for this study included empirical studies and scholarly research articles which supported each strand of this review. To lay the groundwork for this study, the review of the literature began with an examination of the theory on which the research was based. Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory was used as the theoretical frame to undergird the focus for this study which sought to understand and interpret the classroom experiences of African American male 6<sup>th</sup> grade students. Albert Bandura’s (2001a) Social Cognitive Theory, specifically, his Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model, explores self-efficacy. The review will then give relevance to historical implications of classroom agency. Subsequent strands that emanate from Bandura’s TRD model are: (a) personal factors affecting classroom experiences;

(b) environmental factors affecting classroom experiences; and (c) behavioral factors affecting classroom experiences.

### **Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory**

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) started as Social Learning Theory (SLT) in the 1960s by Albert Bandura. Bandura's work is based on research of how social factors influence behaviors (Bandura, 1986). SLT developed into SCT in 1986 and posits that learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment and behavior (Bandura, 1986). Many behavioral theories only focus on initiating the behavior and give little relevance to the maintenance of the chosen behavior. One such example of initiating a behavior and maintenance of the behavior is cigarette smoking; another is weight loss. Researchers believe this is unfortunate since maintenance is the desired outcome of behavior change, rather than the initiation alone (Bandura, 1986). The goal of SCT is to explain how individuals can regulate their behavior through control and reinforcement over time. The following constructs were developed to undergird Bandura's SCT (Public Health, 2014).

1. Reciprocal Determinism – dynamic reciprocal interaction between person, environment and behavior;
2. Behavioral Capability – ability to perform a behavior through essential knowledge and skills;
3. Observational – can witness and observe a behavior conducted by others and then reproduce those actions;
4. Reinforcements – internal/external responses to a person's behavior that affect the probability of continuing or discontinuing the behavior;
5. Expectations – anticipated consequences of a person's behavior, derived largely from previous experiences; and

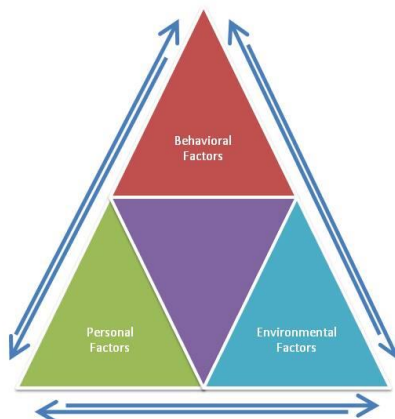
6. Self-efficacy – level of a person’s confidence in their ability to successfully perform a behavior.

Social Learning Theory (SLT) focused on what people learn from observing and interacting with other people (Berk, 2012). Self-efficacy was added when SLT evolved into Social Cognitive Theory.

Bandura’s analysis of behavior purports that environmental influences play a role in determining what people do, how they think and what they feel. In this triadic model of social learning, reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978), behavior, internal personal factors, and environmental influences all operate as interlocking determinants of each other. People’s efficacy and outcome expectations influence how they behave, and the environmental effects created by their actions in turn alter their expectations. People activate different environmental reactions, apart from their behavior, by their physical characteristics (i.e. size, physiology, race, sex, attractiveness) and socially conferred attributes such as blond hair, blue eyes, full lips, dark skin, etc. The differential social treatment affects recipients’ self-concepts and actions in ways that either maintain or alter the environment biases.

Bandura’s SCT illuminates learning and the inter-relational dynamics of how personal and environmental factors inform behavior. The overarching dynamic of this theory concerns triadic reciprocal-ity, or the view that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influence one another in a bidirectional, reciprocal fashion (Bandura, 1989). The model below gives a visual conceptualization of Bandura’s doctrine.

## Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism



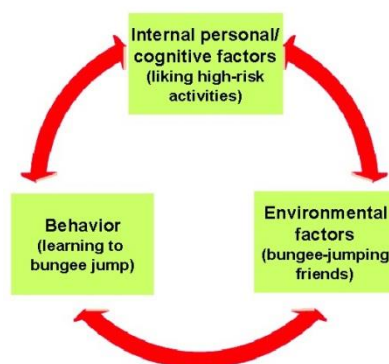
*Figure 1.* This is Bandura's TRD Model.

Triadic Reciprocal Determinism (TRD), which was a component of Bandura's original theoretical paradigm, was the approach that guided this narrative inquiry research study. TRD is the central concept of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. TRD refers to the dynamic, reciprocal interaction of the person (individual with a set of learned experiences), environment (external social context), and behavior (responses to stimuli to achieve goals). TRD suggests people produce their environments, and are not just products of it (Davidson, 2005).

A person's on-going functioning is a product of a continuous interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and contextual factors (Bandura, 2001a). For example, when a student enters the school building and the bell rings, presumably, the student makes sense of what the bell means and will head to his/her designated class to begin the classroom session. Cognitive, behavioral and contextual elements have been employed in the aforementioned example. Classroom learning is shaped by factors within the academic environment, especially the reinforcements experienced by oneself and by others. At the same time, learning is affected by students' own thoughts and self-beliefs and their interpretation of the classroom context.



Cognitive capabilities such as self-regulation, self-reflection and forethought work inter-dynamically with behavior and environment. With Social Cognitive Theory, Bandura has created a grand theory that is most relevant and used as a model in twenty-first century education.



*Figure 2.* Bi-directionality of TRD.

Students are constantly engaged in complex interactions between external environments, internal headspace and outward behavior. Each of these dynamics ultimately morph and impact the other. This dynamic is not just one that impacts the student; this dynamic is reciprocal and impacts how teachers behave in response to the reaction of the student. Students in the classroom get feedback on their behavior, which oftentimes change their expectations, fears, desires and goals. Classroom learning is shaped by factors within the academic environment, especially the reinforcements experienced by oneself and by others. At the same time, learning is affected by students' own thoughts and self-beliefs and their interpretation of the classroom context.

This division of learning and behavior is a shift from the position advocated by behavioral theorists that defined learning stridently as a change in the form or frequency of behavior. It also means that students can learn but not demonstrate that learning until motivated to do so (Bandura, 2001b). Teachers are critical. Teachers have the potential of playing an integral role

in helping to shape attitudes and behavior, given the gravity of the role they play in the classroom. Considering the integral role that teachers play in the lives of students, the next section will illuminate the historical roles teachers played in the schooling of African American boys.

### **Historical Implications for Schooling African American Males**

People, in general, respond to how they are treated. Students, specifically, respond to people who they perceive are invested in them as human beings, rather than subjects being integrated into programs. African American students have dreams and ambitions but respond to people who relate to them on a more personal and humanistic level (Fashola, 2005). The literature revealed that by gaining an understanding of the world in which these students live, one begins to uncover some of the societal and interpersonal challenges racial and ethnic minority students face that hinder their growth and human potential (Andrews, 2013). The literature revealed that in order to get a handle on the crisis confronting African American boys in school is to understand how they construct personal meaning for both their academic and social lives; Black boys are both loved and loathed at school (Fashola, 2005). After achieving this understanding, researchers and educators alike can identify and address factors which seemingly undermine the academic success and achievement of African-American students, thereby, reversing the tide of academic failure.

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the gap in educational attainment started to narrow (Barton & Coley, 2010). Yet in the mid-1960s progress generally halted; this was a time when landmark legislative victories heralded an end to racial discrimination. Was there a correlation between educational achievement and gaining equality before the law? This study will not delve into the causal factors; however, researchers have neither identified, nor quantified the

specific culprits associated with why the gap began to increase, thus placing African American students on a downward spiral for gaining academic success and achievement.

The nation's efforts to address the achievement gap have a long history. Expectations increased with the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* desegregation decision and with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 (Barton & Coley, 2010). Most of the progress in narrowing the divide in achievement among Black and White students occurred during the 1970s and 80s. Since then, narrowing the overall gap has slowed and even reversed (Barton & Coley, 2010). A clear and concise explanation for what has happened over the past four to five decades remains a mystery when probed with statistical tools such as multivariate analysis (Barton & Coley, 2010).

Subtle and not so subtle factors (person, places, and things) contribute to the negative trajectory of academic achievement among African American boys. To better understand the role of family in the achievement gap discourse, researchers agreed with James Coleman's famous mid-1960s report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, stating that conditions in families have very much to do with student achievement (Barton & Coley, 2010). Another factor which may have contributed to narrowing the achievement gap was the federal government's investment in Head Start and Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Yet, another debate speaks to reducing class size as a factor contributing to increases in achievement (Mishel & Rothstein, 2002). Berends, et al (2008) found that the perceived increase in school opportunities was consistent with the trend in reductions in test score gaps.

Equality within schools and an increase in school opportunities signaled the landmark decisions of *Brown vs. Board*. While the premise of desegregation was to promote equity and equality in all realms of society, the differences in the rate of desegregation by region were very

large. Studies of the effects of desegregation on achievement concluded that it had a positive effect on Black students and no effect on White students (Jaynes & Williams, 1989). Barton and Coley (2010) suggest that desegregation could have signaled to Black parents and students nationwide, and also their teachers that Black children's education was a national priority that would be backed by money and legal authority. This could have led to a nationwide shift in beliefs, attitudes and motivation of Black parents and students and their teachers that could help explain the subsequent and nationwide improvement in the achievement gap (Grissimer, et al. 1994). Yet, this narrowing of the achievement gap was transient. The achievement gap was slightly larger in 2000 than in 1990 (Barton & Coley, 2010). The most noticeable change in the nation's achievement gap occurred after desegregation. In order to gain a clearer understanding of the effect of desegregation, one would have to look at the broader sociocultural and historic roots of Black people and how such a system is implicated in the learning process (Irvine & Irvine, 1983).

Along with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling and desegregation, also came the dissolution of unity in the community. African American children no longer had teachers who were also their neighbors and Sunday school teachers. "It takes a village to raise a child" is an old African proverb with a profound meaning. The adage personifies African American life prior to desegregation and speaks to a growing branch of sociology, called social capital (Barton & Coley, 2010). According to James Coleman, "while physical capital is tangible, social capital exists in relationships among persons" (Barton & Coley, 2010, p. 20). After desegregation, the quality of the Black community changed; villages waned. Today, for many children, there are no villages. In Barton's and Coley's report (2010), sociologist, William Julius Wilson stated, "The individual level analysis of social inequality focuses on the different attributes of the individuals or their social situations; collective outcomes are then derived from individual effects" (p.19).

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that African American males have the highest unemployment rates and the lowest high school graduation rates in the United States (Pitre, 2009). In Michelle Alexander's, *The New Jim Crow*, she reports that the United States has the highest incarceration rates of anywhere in the world with 76% of the incarcerated being African American (Alexander, 2012). If current trends hold, one-third of the Black boys born in 2001 will spend time in prison. There is no other group in our country that is at such perils as African American males, not only in terms of education, but in so many other aspects of our society, said Michael Nettles, Senior Vice Presidents of Educational Testing Services in a symposium on African-American middle school boys (Yaffe, 2012). Becker and Luthar (2002) report that despite concentrated efforts at improving inferior academic outcomes among disadvantaged students, a substantial achievement gap still exist. This study also documents social and emotional factors at multiple levels of influence that create barriers which undermine academic performance in the classroom. Gay (2000), in her book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, suggests that teaching to the existing cultural, social and emotional capabilities of the student will result in academic success. This means redirecting the epistemological orientation of teaching students of color away from the "don't have, can't do" orientation toward a "do have, can do" mindset (Gay, 2000, p. 181). Brandon Corley, a Black male New York City public school math teacher said, "You're not a savior; you are a teacher. You're not there to save their lives; you're there to give them the tools that they need to save their own lives" (Yaffe, 2012 p. 2). Students rise to the level of high expectations and surrender to low expectations. The literature will reveal that this notion may have some historical underpinnings.

When investigating the achievement gap in comparison to other racial/ethnic and gender groups, African American boys enter both middle and high schools at a disadvantage and continue to have the most disparate achievement outcomes (Johnson & McDaniel, 2011). This

has not always been the case in the lives of African American boys. The most noticeable change in the nation's achievement gap occurred after desegregation. In order to gain a clearer understanding of the effect of desegregation, one would have to look at the broader sociocultural and historic roots of Black people and how such a system is implicated in the learning process. Irvine and Irvine's (1983) article discussed the interrelationships between and among the interpersonal, institutional, community and African American achievement variables before and after the historic 1965 Brown decision. These variables mirror the variables within Albert Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model, asserting several basic assumptions about learning and the inter-relational dynamics of how personal and environmental factors inform behavior.

The overarching dynamic of Bandura's theory highlighted triadic reciprocity, or the view that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influence one another in a bi-directional, reciprocal fashion (Bandura, 2001a). Irvine and Irvine (2007) suggested that during the pre-Brown era, personal and environmental factors interacted and influenced each other in culturally compatible ways. Significant to note is the downward trajectory of the achievement and academic success of African American students in general and African American boys, specifically. Interpersonal (personal), community (behavioral) and institutional (environmental) dynamics support the narrative for a bi-directional flow and interaction to undergird the overall success of African American students in the classroom. After desegregation, "A Nation at Risk" (Education, 1983) was released illuminating the following facts:

1. African American students were three times as likely to be enrolled in a class for the educable mentally retarded, as were White students, but only one-half likely to be in a class for the gifted and talented;

2. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data confirmed that although 53% of the White eleventh grade students could perform complex reading tasks, only 20% of African American students performed similarly;
3. The average SAT verbal score for African American students was 377 as compared to 466 for all other test takers; and
4. One-half of African American students who were sophomores in 1980 had dropped out or graduated “high-risk” by 1984.

These figures show an unusual decline in the academic achievement of African American students during this particular ground breaking time in the United States’ history. African American students attended schools operated mostly by experienced, dedicated, concerned and skilled Black educators who were more familiar with the cultural context of their students than their White counterparts (Service, 1959).

Because teachers lived in the same communities in which they taught, they forged significant and meaningful relationships with the parents of the students they taught. This allowed for the development of a sense of family or oneness and meaningful relationships outside the confines of school (Milner, 2004). After the Brown decision, many African American teachers lost their teaching positions, which marked the beginning of a troubled cycle of underachievement for many African American students and the quality of education that was ensured by African American teachers.

The following narrative comes from U.S.A. Today reporter, Toppo. It is his detailed assessment of the events that took place surrounding the historic Brown versus the Board of Education case. Toppo’s summary is detailed as follows (Toppo, 2004):

“In the spring of 1953, with the Brown vs. Board of Education desegregation case pending in the U.S. Supreme Court, Wendell Godwin, superintendent of schools in

Topeka, sent letters to black elementary school teachers. Painfully polite, the letters couldn't mask the message: If segregation dies, you will lose your jobs. "Our Board will proceed on the assumption that the majority of people in Topeka will not want to employ Negro teachers next year for White children," he wrote.

A year later, the high court declared segregation unconstitutional. Over the next 20 years, thousands of black educators in Topeka and elsewhere lost their jobs. Researchers say the firings decimated the black teaching force and educational tradition, helping set the stage for decades of poor performance by black students. It's a little-known and unintended consequence of the ruling, but observers say the nation is still paying the price. "By and large, this culture of black teaching died with *Brown*," says Vanessa Siddle Walker of Emory University, author of *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South*.

In 1954, about 82,000 black teachers were responsible for teaching 2 million black children. In the 11 years immediately following *Brown*, more than 38,000 black teachers and administrators in 17 Southern and border states lost their jobs.

In Arkansas, for instance, virtually no black educators were hired in desegregated districts from 1958 to 1968. In Texas, 5,000 "substandard" white teachers were employed, while certified black teachers "were told to go into other lines of work," says Carol Karpinski, an independent researcher and New York City educator.

Black principals fared even worse. By some estimates, 90% lost their jobs in 11 Southern states. Many were fired, and others retired. Still others lost their jobs for minor transgressions, such as failing to hold monthly fire drills. Those who stayed often were demoted to assistant principal or to coaching or teaching jobs. Others were offered clerical or even janitorial work.



In 1964, Florida had black principals in all 67 school districts. Ten years later, with integration underway and the black school-aged population growing, only 40 districts had black principals.

In North Carolina, the number of black principals dropped from 620 to 40 from 1967 to 1971. Because school districts usually closed down all-black schools during desegregation, black educators were easier to fire, despite often having better credentials than their white peers. National Education Association data from the period shows that 85% of minority teachers had college degrees, compared with 75% of white teachers. “It’s not just that they were trained,” Walker says. “They were well-trained.” But their jobs were still imperiled, researchers say.

In June 1955, a group of white residents in Greenville, Miss., demanded that local school boards fire black teachers who were registered voters. That August, the Georgia State Board of Education adopted a resolution barring teachers from membership in the NAACP. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave the federal government power to stop the firings, but observers say enforcement was spotty. Teachers got little help from unions — in the mid-1950s, the American Teachers Association, an all-black union, was too weak, and the larger National Education Association “was controlled by prejudiced people,” says Helen Pate-Bain, NEA’s president from 1970-71.

Teachers’ attitudes have changed since Pate-Bain first attended NEA’s annual meeting in 1959. “The big conversation was against integration of schools. Teachers had to grow up as well.”

By the mid-1960s, even integration supporters were worrying that Black students weren’t always being well-served in their new schools, that Brown could bring about “a wholesale destruction of the black educational tradition,” says historian David Cecelski,

author of *Along Freedom Road : Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools in the South*. “By that point, the Southern grass roots, African-Americans, were growing ambivalent about school integration in this very profound way,” he says. “And not school integration per se, but the way in which *Brown*’s legacy was being enacted. Many parents were regretting it.” Losing so many black teachers only helped sour more families on *Brown*.

“It took a chunk out of the black middle class,” says Linda Tillman of Wayne State University. Educators say the effects are still with us: From 1975 to 1985, the number of black students majoring in education dropped by 66%, says Mildred Hudson, chief executive officer of Recruiting New Teachers, a Massachusetts organization that helps train and retain teachers. “Those of us who would have been teachers stopped majoring in education.”

In 2000, 84% of teachers were white, while only 61% of students were white. Blacks make up about 17% of public school students but fewer than 8% of teachers; in 2000, 38% of public schools had not a single teacher of color.

The NAACP anticipated some job losses. In 1955, it created a “Department of Teacher Information and Security.” At the time, a U.S. Health, Education and Welfare Department attorney observed, “In a war, there must be some casualties, and perhaps the black teachers will be the casualties in the fight for equal education of black students.”

In the Irvines’ article, it was noted that prior to desegregation, African American teachers’ high expectations for their African American students contributed to their school achievement (Irvine & Irvine, 2007). This point is crucial and fundamental to the foundation of this research study. Teachers’ “expectations” were woven into the strands throughout this literature review. Kenneth Clark stressed the importance of the teacher being educated to respect people and

therefore attributing to African American students the same expectations as those ascribed to Caucasian students. Journalist D. R. Browning, (1991) quoted Dr Kenneth Clark, “Teachers, and society in general, should stress that no person can be called educated if he lacks respect for people because of race or ethnicity” (p. 6). Similarly, major themes in Sonia Nieto’s (2003; 2008) books examines how teachers shape the future of students. It is here that teacher expectations and instilling a sense of hope and self-worth is shown to have a lifelong impact on students. Yet, the pupil-teacher relationship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century paradigm has significantly changed since the Brown decision. As mirrored in the USA Article above, less than nine percent of public school teachers are African American or Hispanic—and fifty percent of low-income African American students drop out of high school. Ninety-one percent of teachers in urban neighborhoods are White and less than two percent of America’s teachers are African American males, according to Secretary Arne Duncan (Certain, 2014). The makeup of the nation’s teacher workforce has not kept up with the changing demographics. At the national level, students of color make up more than 40 percent of the public school population. This is a problem for students, schools, and the public at large. Teachers of color served as role models for students, giving them a clear and concrete sense of what diversity in education—and in our society—looks like. A recent review of empirical studies also shows that students of color do better on a variety of academic outcomes if they are taught by teachers of color (Boser, 2011). Researchers found that fewer African American students were suspended, expelled, or placed in special education classes. Additionally, more African American students were placed in gifted and talented programs and graduated from high school. The review of the literature consistently reveals that teachers, particularly those who are “child-oriented” and “interpersonally competent”, are critical to the classroom performance and academic success of students (Gay, 2000, p. 50). Gay gives a personal anecdote of a student who “Johnny”, who feared his eleventh grade teacher; but he

respected her. He stated, “She was hard on you, and you couldn’t run no game on her. She knew everybody and she didn’t make you feel stupid even if you didn’t know the answers. That’s why I always got my homework done even when I wouldn’t do it for anybody else”. Johnny and his teacher had the same last name; she told Johnny “People with our last name always do the best they possibly can” (Gay, 2000, p., 49). The exchange exemplifies how one teacher cultivated competence, respect, confidence and a “can do, will do” spirit in the student she interfaced with. In short, Johnny’s teacher made this student’s educational experience more fulfilling which potentially informed his personal agency.

After the Brown decision, Black schools operated “under the radar” of the White school bureaucracy and school officials (Irvine & Irvine, 1983, p.416). The passage and the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 provided a glaring example of the loss of independence and autonomy in African American schools. In response to this new paradigm shift, these schools developed a unique mode of operation that addressed the cultural and psychological needs of African American students and their families (Irvine & Irvine, 2007). Irvine and Irvine raised the question, “What has happened to the historic Black community”? Prior to desegregation, the African American community was the crucial nexus for the achievement of its children. Key to this discussion is the community variable that argues how the “historic” Black community drastically changed. As a consequence, there was a vocal emergence of conservative African American voices and multiple African American communities (Irvine & Irvine, 2007). To this end, the continuity, the cohesiveness and a sense of oneness dissipated, thus allowing for the dissolution of perceived unity and familiarity with and among African American people.

The Brown decision considerably altered the nature of the African American community, diluting its collective whole, collective struggle and collective will (Irvine & Irvine, 2007).

Robert J. Starratt's model effectively emphasizes and weaves together the themes of care, critique and justice (Starratt, 1991) that is the fabric of the African American community. The "care" component of Starratt's model is, essentially, the pillar that undergirds the collective struggle within the African American community. Of major importance, under the theme of care are quality of life, cultural enrichment, individuality, loyalty, empowerment, environment, human dignity and human potential (Starratt, 1991). These tenets serve as the prophetic glue that bond teacher, student and family together in a way that nurtures and reinforces the academic success of the African American student. Canons from the Starratt paradigm have key features which are fundamental to Albert Bandura's TRD model. This next section will review factors affecting the classroom experiences of African American middle school boys.

### **Personal Factors Affecting Classroom Experiences**

**Students' self-identity.** As Black boys mature toward adulthood, they run up against pervasive stereotypes of Black men as uneducable and criminal. Cultural messages burden them psychologically and influence the way that schools educate and discipline them (Yaffe, 2012). Of critical importance is the potential annihilation of self-identity in African American middle school boys and the influence self-identity has on academic achievement and overall classroom engagement. The review of the literature gives a great deal of relevance to research which examines the factors that impact the academic success of African American middle school boys. (Whiting, 2009; Uwah, 2008). However, much of the existing research is heavily slanted towards highlighting problems in African American communities and problems inherent in boys (Service, 1959). The literature highlights very little solution-based research showing evidenced-based interventions to improve African American boys' academic achievement and classroom engagement as it relates to self-esteem, self-image, and self-identity (Porter, 1997).

Given the research on the academic decline of African American boys, (Lynch, 2006) there was significant utility in examining the correlation between African American 6<sup>th</sup> grade middle school boys and how they view themselves (self-identity) relative to their academic success. Findings and examples, such as the aforementioned, clearly illuminated the problems and challenges that African American boys face as they begin to navigate life and pursue their education. Acknowledging social barriers, school challenges and negative stereotypical views associated with African American males, this study highlighted how this aspect of identity and self-concept influenced perceptions African American boys had of their classroom experience. Specifically, the study examined the interpersonal dynamics between teacher and student relative to the student's classroom experience and engagement. African American boys are equal to their counterparts until they reach middle school (Harper, 2011; League, 1992). Little research has been done to explain the subsequent decline and downward spiral in academic performance resulting in higher rates of high school dropouts (Harper, 2011).

A robust sense of self and self-identity invoke meanings in the form of expectations in regard to others' and one's own behavior (Ickes & Knowles, 1982; McCall & Simmons, 1978). These expectations and meanings form a set of standards that guide behavior (Ickes, 1982). In shaping identity, the essential components are self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-concept. In a proposal by Stets and Burkes (2000), a correlation was shown between self-image and the ability to achieve. Their study examined feelings of self and self-identity to see if identity would reverse the negative perceptions that serve to stifle African American boys' abilities to believe they could achieve well in school.

McCall's and Simmons' (1978) Identity Theory and Tajfel's and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory both address self-identity and share commonalities. In Social Identity Theory, findings show "self" is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and classify or name itself

in particular ways in relation to other categories or classifications (Stets & Burke, 2000). In identity theory, this naming process is called identification (McCall & Simmons, 1978).

Through the process of self-categorization or identification, an identity is formed (Stets & Burke, 2000). Discussions around the similarities and comparisons of these two theories continue. The key point for critical application and consideration in this study was maintaining the denotative meanings of image, concept and identity, while utilizing these terms as a common ground for building a structure related to self-image, self-concept, and self-identity (Bailey, 2003). These terms are integral components of *both* identity and social identity theory research.

In earlier formulations of identity theory, motivation was tied to commitment. The greater the commitment to an identity, the more effort would be put into enacting the identity (Ickes & Knowles, 1982). Self-esteem is implicated as a motivator; the evaluation of his or her performance would influence the feelings of self-esteem (Ickes & Knowles, 1982). If the person performed well in the role, he or she would feel good, given the appraisals by others (Ickes & Knowles, 1982). These ideas are confirmed in recent identity theory research, showing that self-esteem and self-efficacy are increased by self-verification, which occurs through performing a role or task well. These findings all link the relevance and impact a strong sense of self or self-identity has on academic performance and success (Ickes & Knowles, 1982).

Identity Theory was further supported by the Nigrescence Identity Model (Cross 1991). Cross' Nigrescence Identity Model examines the negative images and feelings of self-loathing experienced by African American boys. This point is critical given the negative stereotypes placed upon African American boys and how they sometimes define themselves. Internalization of these negative adjectives and descriptors lead many African American boys to live up to the negative stereotypes they are given. What becomes apparent is the difference in opportunity and values that create a *culture deprivation* for them at an early age. Martinez and Rury (2012),

document a national effort by educators to comprehend and address long-standing patterns of social and educational inequity which contribute to low educational success in behavior, beliefs, attitudes and/or skills. Not only does identity play a role in academic achievement, but different parental aspirations, lead to different modes of nurturance, motivation and encouragement and preparation for education. Families of under achievers are consequentially blamed for raising their children with a negative attitude towards education and are considered to be consequentially responsible for educational under achievement (Martinez & Rury, 2012).

Academic success and achievement is a categorization of a student's status relative to school performance. In identity theory and social identity theory, self-categorization and "naming" is relevant to the formation of one's identity. One's identity is composed of self-views. Naming invokes meanings in the form of expectations with regard to others' and one's own behaviors (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Ickes & Knowles, 1982). These expectations and meanings form a set of standards that inform feelings and guide behavior, hence, the rationale for using these theories to undergird this study. Identity theory supports the logic that positive reinforcements, appraisals and perceptions by others significantly impact self-image, self-esteem, self-concept, and self-identity.

Self-identity and self-concept, concerns one's perceptions about one's abilities, flaws, status, and worth (Bailey, 2003). As indicated by the literature, the key point for practical application is that by staying consistent with the original denotative meanings of image, concept, and identity, a clearly defined structure is in place to address self-image, self-concept and self-identity (Bailey, 2003). One influential view of self-identity is that of George Herbert Mead, who argued that a person does not begin life with a self, but rather develops a self (and self-consciousness) by interacting with others (Bailey, 2003). The 16th century word "*identity*" ("*sameness*", "*oneness*") originally referred to a set of definitive characteristics that made a person a "*natural*



*self*” .....a “*real self*” preserved over time. The stability, of this innate or “*natural self*”, creates a birth to death “*sameness*” pattern of experiences or way of dealing with life. By contrast, the acquired “*environmental self*” has continually changed since birth as a result of mental and physical growth, of experiences in one’s immediate environment, and of experiences associated with society at large (Bailey, 2003).

Researchers and educators alike, often use identity models to explain the subjective processes which inform why African American males make the decisions they make in school around social groups and academics (Ladson-Billings, 1990). Social Identity and Identity Theory possess similarities that allow linking the two theories, making them both relevant and valuable (Stets, 2000). Cross’ Nigrescence Identity Model supported these two theories because the model examined the negative images and feelings of self-loathing experienced by African American boys (Vandiver, 2001). This point was critical given the negative stereotypes placed upon African American boys and how they sometimes define themselves. Internalization of these negative adjectives and descriptors lead many African American boys to live up to the negative stereotypes they are given.

Arthur W. Chickering is one of the leading researchers in student development and identity. His ideas and research have helped education administrators understand the developmental progress of their students and acted as a foundation for other student development theories detailed in his first influential publication in 1969—*Education and Identity* (Chickering, 1993). Chickering’s theory details dimensions of student development which include developing ethnic and racial identity, interacting with the dominant culture, developing cultural aesthetics and awareness, developing self-identity, developing interdependence, and fulfilling affiliation (Chickering, 1993).

The literature by Signithia Fordham revealed that African American boys are labelled as exceptional, sent to in-school suspension, and expelled; they perform poorly on tests, disrupt classroom efforts, miss school, engage in violent behavior and disengage in classroom experiences (Fordham, 1996). The notion that attitudes of Black students are the result of negative cultural orientation toward schooling and negative stereotyping by school leaders is most closely associated with research by theorist, Signithia Fordham (1996).

A robust sense of self and self-identity invoke meanings in the form of expectations in regard to others' and one's own behavior (Ickes & Knowles, 1982; McCall & Simmons, 1978). In shaping identity, the essential components are self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-concept. In a proposal by Stets and Burke (2000), they showed a correlation between self-image and the ability to achieve. Their study examined feelings of self and self-identity to see if identity would reverse the negative perceptions that serve to stifle African American boys' abilities to believe they could achieve well in school.

This research study hoped to show that a healthy sense of self and self-identity would enhance an African American boy's ability to more readily engage in school, ignite his passion for learning and kindle his innate spirit to achieve and engage in the classroom experience. A positive self-identity is essential to the overall well-being and success of African American boys. Identity has to be addressed in a manner that affirms their individualistic being and validates who they are and, more importantly, what they can become (Cross, 1991). Cross' Nigrescence Identity Model defines identity clusters that explain how African Americans might internalize, accept, immerse and develop social attitudes regarding racial identity. The Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale (Vandiver, et al, 2001) reported evidence linking one cluster of the theory (pre-encounter identity) to poor ego identity development, low levels of self-actualization, feelings of inferiority, and a lack of self-acceptance (Looney, 1988).

The correlation between Cross' Nigrescence model and academic achievement in African American middle school boys was noteworthy because it supported the assertion that a robust sense of self (self- image, self-esteem, self-awareness) can impact the academic success of African American males in school (Banks, 2008). Cross' Nigrescence Identity model has gained attention over the years and is seen as a social scientific interruption of the conventional discourse about African American males (Cross, 1991). Cross' model explores levels and stages of beliefs and values relative to how African American males see, accept, and view themselves personally, societally and academically. Self-awareness is fundamental in preventing the nothingness and give rise to hope; self-awareness must be taught (Porter, 1997). Positive, uplifting, student-centered learning embeds seeds of self-esteem, self-identity and self-actualization into the minds and thought processes of African American boys. Intervening at an earlier age in life will strengthen the probability of achieving academic success (Whiting, 2009).

**Stereotyping.** In today's society, negative stereotyping persists and perpetuates a belief among young African American males that can irreparably damage their self-image (Banks, 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2011). Destructive to one's self-concept and self-image is the lowering of one's realistic success aspirations for unjustifiable excuses such as being assigned by society at large to the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Self-identity is the result of a series of involved experiences over a long period of time (Bailey, 2003). The weight of negative stereotyping in the media, in society and particularly, in the classroom, can impact the self-esteem and the self-identity of African American boys.

In our nation's schools, African American boys are more likely than other students to be placed in lower academic tracks and less likely to be placed in gifted or high academic tracks (Lamotey, 1990). In her book, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, Ann Ferguson described how a group of twelve-year-old males were identified by school

personnel as “bound for jail” and how these youth construct a sense of “self” under such adverse circumstances (Ferguson, 2000). The author focused on the perspectives and voices of pre-adolescent African American boys. How does it feel to be labeled “unsalvageable” by your teacher? How does one endure school when the educators predict one’s future as “a jail cell with your name on it” (Ferguson, 2000)? DuBois asked the age-old question, “What does it feel like to be a problem” (DuBois, *The souls of Black folks*, 2005)?

“Lessons and teaching methods communicate the feelings of predominantly White teachers and reinforce negative ideas about African American boys being unable to succeed in a larger society” (Pitre, 2009a). Unfortunately, *some* Black teachers, themselves, are pedagogically oppressed and have a racial inferiority complex which also devalue and contribute to the dehumanization of African-American boys in school (Pitre, 2009a). Teachers and administrators who view African American boys as culturally disadvantaged, culturally deprived, or culturally deficient can do irreparable damage to the self-image of African American males (Nieto & Bode, 2011). For instance, street credibility through the trafficking of drugs or objectifying the opposite sex are means by which many Black boys feel affirmed and validated. Affirmation and validation are not experienced in the school setting because of the lack of individual affirmation and validation. Creating supportive environments, proposing actions to challenge negative attitudes and affirming and appreciating differences are hallmark tenets of Sonia Nieto (2011). Albert Duncan highlights the conventional construction of African American youth identity from the perspective of law enforcement agencies, social workers and educational institutions, which depict African American youth either as social deviants or as a mentally and emotionally debilitated social group (Duncan, 2005).

Negative stereotyping in the media, in society and particularly, in the classroom, can impact the self-esteem and the self-identity of African American boys. Negative images and

representations play a critical role in how young African American males view themselves, as well as, their level of academic achievement. Middle school boys in general and African American middle school boys, in particular, experience developmental changes socially and cognitively during the pubescent and adolescent stages of 11-14 years (Burke, 2014). Yet, there is very little seen in both the media and the classroom that negates the stereotypical diatribe that persists regarding African American boys (Whiting, 2009). Related research points out students of color in general, are often misrepresented as “dangerous minds” that live in “dangerous times” (Ladson-Billings, 1998). How might America stem the flow of negative stereotyping and perceptions which impact how African American boys view themselves and in some ways obviate their identity development? Observations from this perception analytic study highlighted areas to be further examined in how middle school 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American males negotiate agency in the classroom.

**Students’ Voices.** Very little research and information is reported in the literature on the personal agency of African American middle school adolescent boys. In an article by Dr. Quaylan Allen (2013), “They Think Minority Means Lesser Than”, he shares the psychological condition surrounding deficit thinking and how African American boys act out those behaviors they believe authority figures have of them. In *Voices from the Field*, (Fashola, 2005), states the voice of the voiceless has been given very little platform. Serious to note is the meager investigation and limited research given to the voices of African American adolescent middle school boys relative to their perceptions of classroom experiences, academic engagement and interpersonal dynamics with teachers.

With the realization that there is an ever-expanding achievement gap between African American boys compared to other ethnic and gender groups, it is reasonable to believe there is need for further investigation to understand why this cohort of students have the most disparate

achievement outcomes (Johnson & McDaniel, 2011). At the 2012 Educational Testing Service Symposium, Professor Tyrone Howard from the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, University of California at Los Angeles, reported, “What we know from the research is that, while students drop out of high school that decision is typically made in middle school” (Yaffe, 2012, p. 7). The next section of this review will look at elements within the student’s school environ which might affect his perception of the classroom.

### **Environmental Factors Affecting Classroom Experiences**

**Culturally responsive teachers.**As Dr. Cornell West lamented in his closing thoughts of UNC-Chapel Hill’s Black History Month Educations series in February 2014, “White kids get taught; Black kids get tested.” Outside of playing and sleeping, there is no other activity that takes up as much time in a student’s life as going to school. For this reason, it is extremely important that the environment of that school setting is one that values, sustains and promotes the human capital. Developing strategies for mitigating the effects of low expectancies, cultural ambivalence, or general misunderstandings between teachers and students can be challenging at best. In fact, Fashola (2005) suggests that attempts to change expectancies and cultural sensitivities cut to the core of teachers and other school personnel as individuals, as well as, the social conditions students face in school and in their community. By virtually every measurable academic indicator, African American boys face a most heinous future in the traditional public schools (Fort, 2013).

Geoffrey Cohen, in his article, “Recursive processes in self-affirmation” conducted randomized field experiments that examined the effect of self-affirming writing exercises on the performance of African American male students in the 7<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades. Compared to the control group, the students completing the intervention improved GPA and reduced classification as “at risk.” GPA improvement was even greater among lower performing students,

demonstrating the profound effect of psychological stress and stereotype threat on the performance of young African-American male students (Cohen, 2009). This study brings legitimacy to the role teachers play in order to enhance the “opportunity gap”, rather than the achievement gap. Milner provides a new framework that examines the achievement gap as an “opportunity gap” and delves into the way systemic issues (colorblindness, cultural conflicts, meritocracy and low expectations contribute to opportunity deficits for African American students (Milner, 2012). “At the end of the day, authentic, competent, highly qualified caring teachers have a profound influence on the outcomes of Black males” (Yaffe, 2012, p. 11).

Caring, that binds individuals to their society and to their communities (school), is one of the major pillars of culturally responsive pedagogy for ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2000). Gay goes on to assert that “caring manifests itself in the form of teachers’ attitudes, expectations, and behaviors about students’ human value, intellectual capability and the performance responsibilities (Gay, 2000, p.45). A teacher can positively influence the dynamics of their relationship with the student by inspiring, motivating, and expecting them to reach their full individual potential of excellence. Strongly associated with expectations is respect for the ideas and experiences students bring to the classroom environment. In general, every human is a product of their lived experiences; in particular, African-American boys are a product of their lived experiences, social environment and various social determinants that construct and inform how they view themselves. Because positive and negative teacher attitudes and expectations have profound effects on student achievement, it is essential that teachers create a pedagogical environment and climate that support the elements which promote positive self-concept, self-efficacy, value, honor, decency and virtue before taking on the more regenerative aspects of reform (Gay, 2000). Four integral concepts of care which informs a teacher’s ability to be culturally responsiveness are (Gay, 2000):

1. Concern for person and performance;
2. Action-provoking;
3. Prompts effort and achievement; and
4. Multi-dimensional responsiveness.

Centrally aligned with Gay's concept of caring is Robert Starratt's model, which highlights care, critique and justice. Dr. Cornell West posited in his speech at UNC-Chapel Hill, "Justice is what love looks like in public." Justice, critique and care are the hallmark tenets of Robert J. Starratt's ethical school setting model (Starratt, 1991). It is these three pillars that set the framework for promoting an ethical environment in the classroom.

Predominantly of primary importance within the student-teacher paradigm is culturally relevant subject matter. For students to be participants in their own learning and actors in their own stage play, the subject matter has to be relevant and interesting. Realizing that teachers do not have exclusive control of the content, nor do they have experience in every area of the student's interest, teachers, to a great degree can make the subject matter interesting by connecting it to current events, as well as, to their everyday lives. Getting the student engaged is the key to processing and learning topical content matter. According to the *Classroom Interaction Model of Student Engagement*, meaningful engagement is most likely to arise when (a) there is an environment with a strong, positive student-teacher relationship; (b) students are interested in and committed to learning the subject matter because it is in some way relevant to them; and (c) teachers are well-versed in the content so as to maintain the rigor of the material and provide relevant challenges to the student (Trust, 2014).

Teachers, regardless of the racial or ethnic background should be attuned to the uniqueness of the student, as this uniqueness is what makes the pedagogical experience a paideia experience. Dr. Cornell West, noted scientist, researcher, social activist and scholar described the need to



infuse Paideia principles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning paradigm, particularly, as it relates to African American boys. Paideia is Greek for “the upbringing of a child”. This teaching philosophy subscribes to Park’s (2014) belief that:

- (a) All children can learn;
- (b) They all deserve the same quality of schooling, not just the same quantity; and
- (c) The quality of schooling to which they are entitled is what the wisest parents would wish for their own children; the best education for the best being the best education for all

Paideia espouses the philosophical principles of:

- (a) Didactic teaching;
- (b) Coaching that produces the skills of learning; and
- (c) Socratic questioning in seminar discussion (building critical thinking skills).

The results of these three types of teaching should be:

- (a) Acquisition of organized knowledge;
- (b) Formation of habits of skill in the use of language and mathematics; and
- (c) Growth of the mind’s understanding of basic ideas and issues.

Hence, these doctrines support the premise that schools were established to serve a high moral purpose, to prepare the young to take their responsible place in and for the community, and to contribute to the greater good of society.

Research around the cultural competence and responsiveness of teachers is closely linked to the instructional process. How teaching happens is strongly tied to the four learning domains, which are cognitive, social, affective and psychomotor (Burke, 2014). These domains reflect the theoretical underpinnings of Albert Bandura’s (1978) Social Cognitive Theory. Polce (1987) provided an overview of learning styles in terms of cognitive, affective, physiological and environmental factors. Critical to this study is the fact that although sociocultural factors affect

learning styles, no mention is made of how this impacts African-American students or other students from different cultures. Evidence shows that the culture of African Americans is a distinct one that has socialized Black children to survive in a way that is different from White students (Boykin & Toms, 1985). Polce (1987) cites four major assumptions to consider. First, he reports that learning style is crucial to the quality of a child's school experience; secondly, he supports the Black child socialization research of Boykin and Toms, in addition to how culture and socialization affects cognition, attitude, behavior and personality (Hale-Benson, 1986). Thirdly, and most critical, is the tacit assumption that the differences between Black and White children's cognitive functioning and learning styles are simply differences and not deficits (Polce, 1987). African American students' unique strengths and learning needs should be addressed in the schools without folding them into a discourse of deprivation (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Several studies have been completed exploring the effects of African American movement and body language on how teachers view, react and engage them. Something as benign as a "hoodie" connotes the perception of an African American boy being a thug. Richard Sherman's bravado behavior after winning a playoff football game was considered unsportsmanlike, thuggish behavior. Dredlocks and uncombed hair, similar to that of Dr. Cornell West and Frederick Douglas is perceived as "hood". The "swag" and prideful gait that many African American boys embrace as they feel good about themselves is quoted as being "cocky" and aggressive. In LaVonne's, McCray's, Webb-Johnson's and Bridgest's (2003) study, they found that teachers related African American students' movement styles with being lower in achievement, higher in aggression, and more likely to need special education services than students with standard movement styles. Findings also show that both African American and White teachers behaved more positively (head nodding, eye contact, verbal responses to indicate

listening) with members of their own race and that African-American and Whites behave differently at a nonverbal level and interpret nonverbal behaviors in different ways (Ray & Bowman, 2006). Teachers' understanding of and response to children's behavior is influenced by their own race and culture, gender, psychological factors, and professional characteristics such as training, experience, and attitudes and beliefs about teaching (Ray & Bowman, 2006). Similar to LaVonne et al's study, a case study by Rivers (2010) revealed findings from 170 elementary and middle school teachers in New York City. The author's findings reflected 86% of the teachers surveyed thought understanding the culture of a student was instrumental to their academic success. However, 81% of those surveyed said that they learned most of what they know culturally about African American middle school boys through teaching them and not from any formal training program (Rivers, 2010). This type of organic learning can be costly, time consuming, and detrimental to overall success of African American middle school students. Cultural sensitivity and responsiveness is an integral component of engaging the student and providing optimal classroom experiences. Including cultural competency training into the teacher's certification requirements could drastically improve the classroom experience and academic engagement of African American middle school boys.

**Cultural and environmental influences.** Throughout the nation, African American youth and other minorities have no choice but to enroll in school systems which are designed to fail them (Porter, 1997). Environments have to be created and students nurtured in a manner that will affirm, rather than annihilate their self-esteem. Black males in particular, will benefit from the opportunity to shed the "badge of inferiority" (Asante, 1991). Negative images and representations play a critical role in how young African American males view themselves, as well as, their level of academic achievement. This phenomenon of negative images and how they impact identity development in middle school African American boys is directly correlated

to academic success in school. During a very tenuous time during the developmental stages of middle school, boys in general and African American boys, in particular, developing an identity which will validate them as relevant entities and human beings, is critical. Media images are the most readily available and the most prominent; however, there is little seen in both media and the classroom that contradicts the stereotypical dialogue regarding African American boys (Whiting, 2009). The question remains as to how to abate the flow of negative stereotyping and categorization which impacts how African American boys see themselves, thereby, stunting their identity development? This is a question that calls for further research and examination.

To further confound negative societal stereotyping, in schools from kindergarten to the twelfth grade, most African American children are taught a curriculum that devalues the achievement of African American people. This devaluation is an advanced form of programmed destruction continuing to chip away at African American boys' self-image, self-awareness and self-identity (Porter, 1997). African American males do not view excelling in school as a priority; studying hard is touted as "acting white" or not being true to one's own ethnic identity (Asante, 1991). This ambivalence towards school presents a challenge for most educators and educational systems (Swanson, 2003).

Studies show that African American males are being viewed as high school dropouts destined to fail (Thompson, 2011). Underachievement in African American males in public schools has been persistent, pervasive and disproportionate. Data shows that when examining schools across the country, the cohort that continues to show a significant lag in test scores, educational achievement, academic preparedness and school readiness is African American boys. The biggest concern is there appears no change is taking place to reconcile the divide in educational achievement (Johnson & McDaniel, 2011). The challenge reflects a social oxymoron: seeking to advance the status of a population that the larger society has systematically oppressed. On one

hand, society espouses rhetoric of concern and desire to elevate Black males, but on the other hand, society practices a policy of oppression, prejudice, and disregard (Jenkins, 2006).

Teachers and administrators, alike, have expectations of the individuals that come through the doors of their schools. These expectations, unfortunately, do not capture or take into consideration the lived experiences that each student brings with them. It is this conundrum that clearly obviates the ability to connect with students who are diverse in culture, background, ethnicity and most importantly, race. When Black boys enter the classroom, they do so with an inherent belief that their prospect for learning is all for naught. This quote from *Slavery in America from Colonial Times to Civil War*, (Schneider & Schneider, 2001) characterizes a form of deficit-thinking in African-American boys, “Misses, what for me learn to read? Me have no prospect!” (p 47). The aforementioned quote is from a slave, Israel, who is responding to his Master’s wife when asked why he never tried to learn. Juxtapose this exchange with the dynamics and interactions of students in the classroom with teachers who are culturally incompetent and/or non-responsive. “If teachers watch television, if teachers go to the movies, if they watch the news, they probably go into their classroom with some misconceptions about African American males; we have to clear up these misconceptions” (Yaffe, 2012, p. 4).

Kenneth Clark (1989), in his book “Dark Ghetto”, suggests that the socio-psychological experience of Black boys are created in their minds long before they realize the systemic and intrinsic relevance it has in their lives. Human conditioning is shaped in schools and generates a “ghetto” mentality long before children even know they live in the ghetto (Clark, 1989). The author suggests that low expectations shape the minds and thinking of African American (Black) children and promulgates negative thinking and a culture of deprivation. A quote from a 17-year old African American boy underscores the deep-seated perceptions of a student and his classroom experience:

“Discrimination is even in the school I attend right now. I know my teacher is very prejudiced because I have certain questions that have to be answered for my knowledge, but he will never answer. He would always call on the little white boy to give the answer. I told him one night, to his face, that if he didn’t want to answer my questions just tell me and I would leave. There are always other teachers. He didn’t say anything. He just looked at me and figured I was going to—so he said, “Well, maybe next time”. There is no next time----this is the time and I’m not taking second best from any white man” (Clark, 1989, p. 6).

Misconceptions which abound in the classroom can be manifestations of the philosophies and principles which govern the leadership practices within the school. Again, Robert J. Starratt’s model of ethical leadership subscribes to fundamental principles of justice, critique and care (Starratt, 1991). Justice is demonstrated in one of two ways: (a) an individual choice and (b) the school community’s choice to direct or govern its actions judiciously. Both understandings inform the inherent cognitive decision to administrate the school fairly and with the well-being of all students being at the forefront of decision-making. The twin citizens of justice are equal access and participation. It is imperative to recognize and acknowledge the obligation that society and schools in particular, have to students. Equal access *to* and participation *in* quality and equitable education is paramount to addressing pedagogical excellence and optimal classroom experiences. Critique, as a pillar, forces teachers and school leadership to confront the moral issues involved when schools disproportionately benefit some groups in society and fail others. When an educational administrator confronts the structural issues involved in the management of education, such as teacher evaluation; the process of grading on a curve; the process of calculating class rank; the absence of important topics in textbooks; the lack of adequate due process for students; labelling and naming some students gifted and others handicapped; then ethical burdens surface. It is these structural issues which impose a

disproportionate advantage to some at the expense of others (Starratt, 1991). Last, but certainly not least, is the pillar of care or caring. Starratt defines care as exhibiting fidelity by the willingness to acknowledge the right of others to be who they are, openness to encountering them in their authentic individuality, and a loyalty to the relationship. It postulates a level of caring that honors the dignity of each person and desires to see that person enjoy a fully human life. These three pillars of the Starratt model provide the blueprint for ethical school leadership and consistency of human dignity to promote a classroom environment suitable for all students to learn and grow.

In the limited research that has investigated the quality of relationships between teachers and African American students, two factors surface which greatly influence the teacher-student relationship. The first is African American students find it challenging to connect with their teachers because they do not view them as being authentic, sincere, realistic role models (Guiffrida, 2005). Research suggests that it is important for African American students to be exposed to and to connect with Blacks who are successful and good role models; these connections have been linked to increasing their self-efficacy and self-concept (Burrell, 1980; Sedlacek, 1987; Willie, 1972). Secondly, research indicates that students often perceive their teachers as culturally insensitive, insensitive and unapproachable (Fleming, 1984).

Darrell Andrews (2013) reports, in his article, “The No Excuses Philosophy: *Strategies for Motivating Students of Color*”, ‘to never judge a book by its cover’. Too often assumptions are made about students based on preconceived notions and perceptions. Rarely is the rest of the quote recited: ‘that you must absolutely read the book first’. Most people refuse to read/understand the book (student) and allow the cover (image) to become their only blueprint for interacting with minority students. By accepting this paradigm, and allowing it to shape classroom expectations, educators, specifically, are missing an opportunity to close the

achievement gap and many other challenges associated with educating African American youth (Black males, in particular). Without the level of consciousness which allows one to relate on a human level, aspirations to be culturally competent and the skill set to critically teach/educate, rather than train, will continue to eviscerate the educational system.

An impactful pedagogical environment should nurture, inspire, constructively critique and promote a regime of learning; ironically, today's educational environment counters the African American males' lived and storied experiences. The public education system is a construct which is upheld as an institution to educate and advance pedagogy, but has failed to do so, based on (Pitre, 2009b). The influence of the social label of Black man as the villain, made teachers, White and Black, hesitate to engage and interact in a close and nurturing way with Black boys; often failing to provide them with superior educational service (Noguera, 1997). hooks (2004) asserts, "Even before Black boys encounter a genocidal street culture, they have been assaulted by the cultural genocide taking place in early childhood educational institutions where they are simply not taught" (p. 1). If for no other reason, self-identity and self-perception are critical in warding off the damaging messages that pervade society about African-American boys. Like Paulo Freire, hooks views education as the practice of freedom. Yet, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, today, African American boys are under assault, under attack and under siege by the criminal justice system, by the prison industrial complex and most egregious of all to the educational system.

**Discipline.** The rate of suspension has doubled since the 1970s as a growth in "zero tolerance" policies have gripped school districts around the United States (Strasser, 2014). Across all grades, African-American students suffer suspensions or expulsions at three times the rate of their white counterparts. The U.S. Department of Education found that suspensions are being given based on a controversial policy defined as "defiance". States, such as California,



sought to get rid of suspensions caused by “willful defiance”, pointing out that such an amorphous term amplifies the opportunity for discrimination (Strasser, 2014).

Heavy-handed school discipline feeds African-American boys into a pipeline that ultimately deposits them behind bars as boys. Over time, these boys, who have been repeatedly and harshly punished conclude that no one believes in them, and give up looking for a better path (Yaffe, 2012). Merla Carstarphen, superintendent for Austin Independent School District, noticed that for a white student scrawling graffiti, the measure of punishment might draw community service; however, for an African American boy doing the same, the result would be calling the police, juvenile court and a misdemeanor charge. A misdemeanor charge creates the beginning of a criminal paper trail for the African American youth. More times than not, this begins the downward spiral of that youth in the criminal justice system. “Over a very long period of time, we err on the side of heavy-handed criminalization of our Black boys’ behavior” (Yaffe, 2012, p. 5).

**School-to-prison pipeline.** Students exhibiting minor infractions or misbehavior find themselves suspended and on a pathway to the delinquency and criminal systems (Carolinian, 2013). The most recent research in North Carolina, relative to school success and academic achievement among students, particularly African-American students, reflect the disproportionality of punishments meted out to students. In the report released by Advocates for Children’s Services (ACS), a project of the Legal Aid of North Carolina, it reflected that 14,626 suspensions, thousands of which were for so-called Level 1 offenses such as attendance issues and “noncompliance, were meted out. In a system where only 24.7% of the student population is African American, more than 60% of the suspensions fell on African American (Black) students (Carolinian, 2013). Important to note is that North Carolina earned a C+ (77.7) among schools in the United States for academic success and achievement (Hightower, 2013). This new

analysis from the EPE Research Center for the Chance-for-Success Index and school finance categories, respectively, captures critical aspects of the broader educational environment and the level and equitability of school funding. Hightower (2013) noted that the Chance-for-Success Index provides a unique perspective on the link between education and beneficial outcomes at each stage of a person's life. The report from ACS is "the most comprehensive school-to-prison pipeline report ever produced about a school district in North Carolina", stated Jason Langberg, an attorney for ACS and co-author of the report (Carolinian, 2013).

For the first time in 15 years, the Department of Education published data on patterns of inequality and disparity by race in public schools. This pattern spelled out the scope of a problem with access, opportunity and discipline in public schools in the United States. A UNC-TV PBS NEWSHOUR report covered an interview with Judy Woodruff and reporter, Hari Sreenivasan. Points, integral to the school to prison pipeline, highlighted concerns similar to those reported by Wake County Schools. Facts that generated a great deal of attention conveyed that African American children comprise 18% of all students enrolled in school, but account for nearly 50% of all suspensions (UNC-TV, 2014). During the PBS interview, Catherine Lhamon, Assistant Secretary, Office for Civil Rights, Department of Education shared data which released a picture of inequity in schools across the country. She described how suspensions send an unmistakable message that children who are suspended are not welcome in school and that U.S. schools are not prepared for them. Lhamon, (UNC-TV, 2014), states that schools are teaching an appalling lesson at an early stage in students' educational experiences about their worth in life. Unequivocally, she believes that this is absolutely a contributing factor to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Another PBS Frontline report examined the work of Johns Hopkins researcher, Dr. Robert Balfanz. Dr. Balfanz uncovered a series of indicators that he says can predict how likely a

student is to drop out of school: attendance, behavior and course performance, which he describes as the “ABCs” (Frontline, 2012). According to Balfanz’s research, if a sixth grader in a high poverty school attends school less than 80 percent of the time, fails math or English, or receives an unsatisfactory behavior grade in a core course, there is a 75% chance he or she will drop out of high school. These findings are alarming in that these indicators are intricately connected to elements of Albert Bandura’s TRD model, which could have an impact on personal agency. Dr. Balfanz suggests there is a key period in middle school that determines whether a student will eventually drop out (Frontline, 2012). A Harvard study suggests that middle school might not be the best options for young teens and that they might be better suited for a K-8 environment. They were uncertain as to what specific elements about the transition to middle school contributed to plummeting student achievement in African American males.

Understanding course offerings within schools might help to bring a clearer understanding of the classroom dynamics and student preparedness. The Department of Education (UNC-TV, 2014) found that while more than 80% of Asian American and more than 70% of white students had access to a full range of math and science courses in high schools, only 67 % of Latinos were at a school that offered advanced classes and only 57 % for African American students. Because of the discrepancies in school course offerings, data from the report show that not only does discrimination exist, disparities exist, as well. The school-to-prison pipeline could be a consequence of students coming out of schools without access to the same basic science and/or math education. To this end, historically marginalized youth are unable to be productive, contributing members of society and find themselves inside the nation’s growing prison industrial complex system.

In an effort to offset the number of students falling out of the school system and effectively address the challenges that overshadow the academic achievement and classroom engagement

among African American middle school students, the tenets of James A. Banks' paradigm might be useful to explore. Banks' paradigm consists of five musts for a virtuous school (Banks, 2001):

1. Content Integration - teachers infuse a variety of diverse sources to illustrate and explain key concepts and principles throughout the subject matter;
2. Knowledge Construction Process – teachers deconstruct frames of references, illicit cultural assumptions and historical biases in order to help students understand how knowledge is created;
3. Equity Pedagogy – teachers adapt their teaching styles to meet students where they are, allowing the facilitation of academic achievement and enhanced classroom experiences from diverse racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds;
4. Prejudice Reduction – teacher's ability to modify the students' racial attitudes to better facilitate learning; and
5. Empowering School Culture and Social Structure – teacher examines elements within the school culture that will enhance and promote an environment of learning.

Banks asserts these dimensions of multicultural education are foundational components in advancing the level of classroom engagement and academic achievement.

Sonia Nieto, scholar and educator, is another strong proponent who moves beyond tolerance in her work in multicultural education. In her book, *Affirming Diversity*, Nieto examines the lives of real students who are affected by multicultural education, or the lack of it. She highlights seven basic characteristics to ensure authentic diversity in the classroom (Nieto & Bode, 2011):

1. Anti-Racist posture;
2. Basic Education (fundamental principles of reading, writing and arithmetic);

3. Education for all (not just for minority at risk);
4. Pervasive (teach more than a specific subject matter; make classroom experience real and meaningful);
5. Social Justice (understand the relevance decisions and behaviors have on the human condition);
6. Process (think critically); and
7. Critical Pedagogy (teaches students to question, explore, critique and ask “why”).

Sonia Nieto asserts that when classroom pedagogy and leadership embody these seven affirming characteristics, overall classroom dynamics will change in a way that influences the academic and classroom experiences of students.

**Parental involvement.** Who can teach African-American boys? In the equation of success is the invaluable role that parents play, both cognitively and affectively by investing in the human capital of the African American sons they send into the classroom every day. Parental involvement is integral to Bandura’s triadic determinism causation model. Intervening at an earlier age in life will strengthen the probability of achieving academic success (Whiting, 2009). Past research has established that close family relationships, academic achievement, and peer group acceptance are markers of competence during preadolescence and adolescence (Murry, Berkel, Brody, Miller, & Chen, 2009). African Americans, regardless of geographic residence or economic status, have historically viewed academic achievement as an avenue for escaping poverty and gaining social mobility (Billingsley & Billingsley, 1968). However, sparseness still exists in the empirical studies of the mechanisms and dynamics of childhood socialization in African American families that promote academic orientation and engagement. At a recent conference at North Carolina Central University, Durham, NC, the keynote speaker, Temple University Professor, James Earl Davis addressed the topic: *Black boys as social capital*.

“We’ve made lots of progress on Black boys and education”, Davis said. “But it is also a paradox, because the more we know, the more we don’t know.” An increased number of studies have focused on Black male identity from a variety of theoretical perspectives, but few illuminate the significance of the parents. Of the research conducted with Black families, Hughes & Kwok (2007) looked at the interactions between teachers, students and parents. Findings revealed that “African American children and their parents, relative to Hispanic and Caucasian children and their parents, had less supportive relationships with teachers” (p.39). The study also revealed that because students do better in school when both parents and their student experience supportive relationships with teachers, this has important implications for academic achievement. Similarly, in Wood’s (2007) study, the research found that parents and teachers tend to report lower expectations for African American boys. The report additionally showed that African American boys tend to have lower expectations of themselves academically. The study showed that African American boys’ expectations of themselves were very much related to their parents’ expectations. The two protective factors that countered the low expectations from parents were a positive school environment and teachers’ expectations (Wood, 2007). Low expectations have a deleterious effect on the self-efficacy, and desire of African American boys in the classroom. Low expectations can oftentimes impact behavior, as implicated in the Bandura’s TRD model (Bandura, 2001a). Some ways to address these concerns are addressed in the following section.

### **Behavioral Factors Affecting Classroom Experiences**

**Othermothering.** Just as important as the pedagogical exchange between teacher and student is the role teachers play as surrogate parent figures, disciplinarians, counselors, role models and overall advocates for students’ academic, social, cultural, emotional, and moral development (Milner, 2004). To this end, the concept of Othermothering plays a major role in the successful

navigation of African American students in the school setting. Recent research strengthens the aforementioned findings of Irvine & Irvine (1983) and Milner (2004). Othermothering is a term considered to be an invaluable concept to nurture the self-esteem and self-concept of students of color as they navigate the academic and educational constructs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Originally traced to slavery, othermothering was a survival mechanism that served as a vehicle for educational and cultural transmission. In today's world, othermothering exists within the urban elementary school context. African American female educators, in particular, play an integral role in fulfilling the psycho-educational needs of the urban child (Case, 1997). As in community othermothering, this same concept and maternal identification also happens within the school setting. Students, particularly in HBCU's had "dorm mothers". In the academy today, "othermothers" are women teachers who nurture Black female and male students. It is a sharing of self, an interactive and collective process, and a spiritual connectedness that epitomized the Afrocentric values of sharing, caring and accountability (Collins, 1990). Othermothers have an understanding of the traditions and culture of the student. They command respect and express ethics of caring and personal accountability (Case, 1997). Again, the theme of care is consistent with Robert Starratt's triangulated model of care, critique and justice. These attributes are transferred to the student, while allowing students to believe someone cares about their well-being and academic achievement.

**Afro-centric student learning.** Marian Wright Edelman, President, Children's Defense Fund, stated, "We know that young Black boys can do anything that anybody can do. They've been the whipping boys of our history, but we're here to reclaim our children" (Yaffe, 2012, p. 3). The literature suggests skillsets, mindsets and behavioral tendencies all advance or obviate the academic success, achievement and classroom experiences of African American males. This study will amplify the messages from empirically researched data regarding the necessary tools,

pedagogical modalities and student-centered classroom engagements techniques necessary to reverse the negative trajectory of academic achievement and engagement of African-American middle school boys.

In Andrew Smallwood's *Afrocentric Analysis* (Smallwood, 2000), he states that at the center of the examination of African American education is the issue of control. Traditionally, African Americans viewed education as a tool to combat racial hostility by increasing their access to employment opportunities. The traditional perspective held by Smallwood and bell hooks (2004) is diametrically opposed to the view that students have in classrooms today. One possibility is the absence of Afrocentric discourse about African American culture and history. Societal influences have redirected how African American students think, feel and view themselves. History is a people's memory; and without a memory, a man is demoted to the level of the lower animals (Smallwood, 2000). When you have no knowledge of your history, you're just another animal; in fact, you're a Negro; something that's nothing (Smallwood, 2000). The author raises questions that seek to understand the meaning and relevance of history as an influence in the lives of African American people and how they view themselves. Consequently, the lack of a concentrated and collective effort to formally infuse Afro-centric history into the educational curriculum allows for little understanding of the African heritage and the pride that is associated with self-worth, self-esteem and self-acceptance.

As Carter G. Woodson (1933) contends in, *The Mis-education of the Negro*, African Americans have been educated away from their own culture and traditions and attached to the fringes of European culture; thus dislocated from themselves. Being dislocated from oneself is a variation of losing one's self-identity. It is this premise on which the lack of classroom engagement and low academic achievement is based. For this reason, Woodson places extreme importance and responsibility on the school process in general and African American schools, in



particular, to cultivate the rich origins of African people. This alert recognition, more than 80 years ago, that something is severely wrong with the way African Americans are educated underscores the principles and philosophies of both Sonia Nieto's (*Affirming Diversity*) and James Banks' (*Cultural Diversity and Teaching: Foundations, Curriculum and Teaching*).

In education, centricity refers to a perspective that involves locating students within the context of their own cultural references so that they can relate socially and psychologically to other cultural perspectives (Asante, 1991). The centrist paradigm is supported by research showing that the most productive method of teaching any student is to place his or her group within the center of the context of knowledge, hence knowledge construction (Asante, 1991). For White students, this is common place and a way of life because educational pedagogy is from the standpoint and perspective of the classroom teacher, who has been educated via European standards and associated textbooks. Culturally competent and culturally attuned teachers must afford students the opportunity to study the world and its people, concepts, and history from an African world view. Anything less than this effort relegates the student to a nonperson, one whose aim in life might be to one day shed the "badge of inferiority": his or her Blackness (Asante, 1991). In Afro-centric settings, teachers do not marginalize the African American children by causing them to question their own self-worth. By seeing themselves as the subjects rather than the objects of education, African-African students come to see themselves, not only as seekers of knowledge, but as integral participants in it.

Learning how to "not-learn" is an intellectual and social challenge of African American boys. Reasons for this decision have been supported through the literature and research compiled to further this research study. Herbert Kohl (1991) cites in his book, *I won't learn from you*, students make decisions not to learn because they refuse to be molded by a hostile society.

Deciding to actively “not-learn” something involves closing off part of oneself and limiting one’s experiences. It can require actively refusing to pay attention, acting dumb, scrambling one’s thoughts, and overriding curiosity (Kohl, 1991). The cause and effect of this pattern evolves from what the literature has shown an environment that has not celebrated the history, value, virtue, identity, experience, culture and uniqueness of the social capital of African American middle school boys. *Not* learning tends to take place when a student has to deal with unavoidable challenges to their integrity and identity (Kohl, 1991). To agree to learn from a teacher who does not respect your integrity and self-worth causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject the teacher’s world, in this case the classroom. To name the student who chooses not to learn as unintelligent is a misnomer. To frame this paradigm as one in which an environment poses challenges and barriers to educational access and knowledge construction is more appropriate. Kohl cited in his research students who had consciously placed themselves outside the entire system that was supposed to help them. These students were engaged in a struggle of wills with authority and what seemed to be at stake for them was nothing less than their pride and integrity (Kohl, 1991). Most of them did not believe that they were failures or that they were inferior to students who succeeded on the schools’ terms, and they were easy to distinguish from the wounded self-effacing students who wanted to learn but had not been able to do so. (Kohl, 1991).

What does it feel like to be a problem? This rhetorical question is played out in disruptive classroom behavior and the resistance to learn. Students spend time daydreaming and drowning out the sound of their teachers’ voices. (Kohl, 1991). They sometimes, fail to raise their hands before speaking out in class, walk around the room without permission, get out of their chairs, fall out of their chairs, talk to other classmates, chew gum, throw pencils, ad infinitum. All of these disruptions create an environment that does not allow the teacher to have the students’ full

attention. Therefore, the student cannot and does not want to learn what the teacher is trying to teach. On that level, no failure is possible since there has been no attempt to learn. Kohl reported that since students have no way to legitimately criticize the schooling they are subjected to or the people they are required to learn from, resistance and rebellion are stigmatized. The system's problem becomes the victim's problem (Kohl, 1991).

### **Conclusion**

The totality of studies incorporated in this literature review revealed the intersecting and dynamic relationship occurring between and among personal, environmental and behavioral models found in Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model. In each component of the model, the literature addressed aspects of learning experiences which directly and indirectly impact the perceptions of African American boys' classroom experiences.

African American boys are socialized differently and have grown to embrace the social norming attributes of "not valuing" the importance of self-awareness, self-esteem and higher learning (League, 1992). Inconsequential feelings around academic underachievement are highly associated with the African American male. And yet, African American boys are *too* important to fail (League, 1992). Throughout the nation, African American youth and other minorities have no choice but to enroll in school systems which are designed to fail them (Porter, 1997; Pitre, 2009a).

Dialogical narratives become scripts that are played and replayed in the minds of youth shaping how they perceive themselves and what they believe they can do (self-efficacy). Therefore, when articles, such as the one authored by Jordan, "explain" why Black boys are labeled an "endangered species", it further perpetuates the negative stereotypical view that many Black boys own and embrace (Jordan & Cooper, 2003). Literature revealed, "These stereotypes are poisonous, and they really undermine kids' sense of themselves and their potential for being

successful; their vision of what they can become gets very, very narrow and circumscribed” (Yaffe, 2012, p. 4). Environments must be created and self-esteem nurtured that afford Black children, Black males in particular, the opportunity to shed the “badge of inferiority” (Asante, 1991). Positive, uplifting, (afro) centric learning embeds seeds of self-esteem, self-identity and self-actualization into the minds and thought processes of African American boys. A mentality of death originates from feelings of nothingness and hopelessness (Asante, 1991).

Each strand of this study was supported by literature which affirmed the critical role all three areas of Bandura’s TRD model plays in determining the climate and the experience of an African American boy in the classroom. The synergistic role of teachers, parents, personal agency, structural and cultural influences and the students in their own success create a dynamic that factor into the overall classroom experiences of an African American male middle school student. There was a sparseness of literature that spoke directly to African American male middle school adolescent boys and giving voice to the voiceless; although the literature revealed that middle school is the era when African American males make the decision to drop out of school. There has been no mass movement to address the social plight of African American boys because there is not enough empirically-based, collective knowledge about African American middle school boys to be alarmed. And in fact, this failure to study and ascertain the actual social condition of black boys is a centuries-old problem. This literature review helped the researcher better understand variables which contributed to the perceptions of African American male middle school boys from a singular perspective. *E Pluribus Unum* is a Latin phrase on the United States seal, which describes an action: *Many uniting into one*. This review of African American middle school boys has been gathered from many sources to illuminate aspects of the classroom that shape the perceptions of their experiences. This literature review

began at a 50,000 feet level to understand the lived experiences of African-American boys through the lens of one.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

*“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”*

*~Frederick Douglass~*

This chapter is used to outline the research methodology, justification for mixed methods strategy, and the role of the researcher. The foundation for the mixed methods inquiry was an in-depth qualitative narrative inquiry of African American male 6<sup>th</sup> grade students' perceptions of how classroom experiences affect personal agency. The results of the narrative inquiry led to the creation and development of a Tri-Squared research instrument based on Albert Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model ideally designed to determine the existence and frequency of the trichotomous elements of personal agency (identified as: behavioral, social, and environmental). Qualitatively, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This particular methodology was selected because Connelly and Clandinin reported that the general notion of human experiences translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories. Both teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The careful and meticulous observation and interpretation of African American males in the academic environment provided rich data on their experiences contextually. Thus, a greater insight was acquired from the observational analysis of these African American males' experiences. This will greatly contribute to the construction of knowledge in educational research and educational policy, in general. The findings from such an in-depth observational analysis can provide strategies for intervention in the academic environment, thereby, eliciting a much needed change to impact future African American male students and provide a foothold for future research. The following sections provide the rationale

for the study, the strategy for inquiry, the role of the researcher, the selection of participants, the data collection procedures and the overall trustworthiness of the study.

### **Rationale for Mixed Methods Use of Qualitative Research**

A mixed methods research design was used by the researcher to convert qualitative observational data analysis into quantitative numerical data for the purposes of detailed assessment via trichotomous instrumental metrical application. The qualitative component of this study allowed the researcher to explore and understand the meaning individuals give to a human problem, as well as, acknowledge the importance of rendering the complexity of the situation (Creswell, 2009). There is limited literature in the research which highlights the classroom experiences of African American male 6<sup>th</sup> grade students and how those experiences affect personal agency. In narrative research, stories are what the inquirer collects, observes, retells and writes. This is an important element of narrative research. Central to the construction of a narrative are time, place, character and “I”, who speaks as researcher, teacher, woman, commentator, research participant, narrative critic, and theory builder (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). This study sought to examine the classroom experiences of African American 6<sup>th</sup> graders and to observe how those experiences inform personal agency. The initial strategy of inquiry involved emerging questions and procedures, data construction from specifics to patterned themes, and the researcher as a collaborating participant making meaning of the data being collected (Creswell, 2009). To capture the essence of these experiences, detailed journaling, note-taking and in-depth observations (Bernard, 1994) were conducted and from the insight gained from these observations the researcher made a connection to Bandura’s Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model which will formulate the research investigative instrument. The researcher observed seventeen African American 6<sup>th</sup> grade males in the academic environment

and recorded the outcomes of this observational analysis using the research instrument. This mixed methods research design afforded the researcher an opportunity to become more aware of the subtleties of the interactions that took place in the academic environment. The social constructivist worldview most aptly defined the researcher's role and research paradigm in this context. Constructivism, as a theoretical paradigm for this study, allowed the researcher to gain understanding by actively interpreting participants' perceptions. A positioned participant approach was used in order to recognize and assert the researcher's belief that "participants actively interpret and make sense of their everyday worlds" (Conrad, 2001, p. 203). This research attempted to acknowledge and give authority to students' voices (Capporimo, 2001) through the assessment of the outcomes of the observational analysis and through the objective recording of the research instrument.

The underlying philosophical pillars for this mixed methods study were supported by the following assumptions (Wiersma, 1995):

- (a) Researchers should not force their world views, assumptions, definitions, research designs, etcetera onto emerging data;
- (b) The researcher's role is to objectively record what is being observed and collected from the informants in their natural environment;
- (c) The informant's viewpoint is their "reality" through their own lenses;
- (d) Phenomena cannot be reduced into simplistic inter and independent factors, phenomena has to be viewed in totality; and
- (e) A priori conclusions should be avoided (pp.211-212).

The researcher's philosophical assumption and worldview was that of a social constructivist. This is relevant and appropriate for this study because as the researcher, the research investigator qualitatively aimed to interpret and make sense out of meanings the participant shared about the



world in which he or she lives. The researcher realized that human beings engage with and comprehend their world based on their historical and lived experiences. The goal of this research was to rely as much as possible on the participants' actions and interactions as the phenomena being studied. For this reason, using detailed rich, thick descriptions afforded the researcher to specifically capture the essence of the situation and events being observed. Consequently, the researcher was able to construct meanings of situations generated through the interactions of others.

### **Initial Strategy of Inquiry Used to Formulate Research Question: Narrative Inquiry**

Defining the terminology of "Narrative Inquiry" in the context of this research investigation provides clarity regarding the nature and purpose of this study. The "Narrative" portion of the aforementioned terms "Narrative Inquiry" directly refers to the researcher's qualitative in-depth discussion regarding observable behaviors within the unit of analysis. The term "Inquiry" is broadly defined as "an official effort to collect and examine information about something", thus, "Narrative Inquiry" in this context is the researcher's lived experiences juxtaposed with the critical examination of the information that was observed. The following section details the process of narrative inquiry that was used to formulate the research study questions which lead to the researcher's design of the of the trichotomous research instrument, based off of Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model. Narrative research evolves from the humanities and social sciences and is a strategy of inquiry whereby the researcher studies the stories and experiences of the informants through the lenses of the informants. The narrative combines views from the informant's life with those of the researcher's life in a collaborative narrative (Creswell, 2009, p. 13).

To use narrative inquiry as a strategy of inquiry entails adopting a particular narrative view of experiences as phenomena to be studied. Narrative inquiry emanates from a view of human

experiences in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The stories of many marginalized groups and oppressed people shape the contemporary narrative landscape (Denzin, 2011, p. 428). As such, giving voice to the voiceless and identifying the disenfranchised were hallmark tenets of this type of research. In retelling stories of the informants, Creswell (2009) reports a specific set of features that emerge and define boundaries for a narrative study. The author suggests the list of boundaries is not exhaustive; however, some of the elements integral to this type research approach are collecting stories; telling of individual experiences; creating the story by gathering different forms of data; shaping the story into a chronology, using various forms of analysis; acknowledging turning points may emerge, such as tensions or interruptions; and realizing narrative stories occur within specific places or situations (Creswell, 2013).

In using this observational narrative as the strategy of inquiry, the researcher was able to connect diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed processes (Polkinghorne, 1995). These processes were configured, organized and integrated into an organized whole story. Bruner (1990 p.64), states that “People do not deal with the world event by event or with text sentence by sentence; they frame events and sentences in larger structures”. The utility of employing an observational narrative study was to examine the life experiences of seventeen African American 6<sup>th</sup> grade students uninterrupted in their classroom environment(Creswell, 2013). It was the researcher’s intent to make primary data, that which is observed, central to the study design. Detailed note-taking and observations of the students’ personal affect, behavioral and environmental factors were described in rich context. Body language, facial expressions, tonations and movement were recorded in detail. Humans strive to make sense of their own worlds, realities and lived experiences (McMillan, 1993). It is for this reason the researcher acknowledged the importance of allowing meaning to flow from observable data, themes, situations, and events naturally and organically.

Underneath the category of narrative inquiry are many types of qualitative modalities (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). Of these, the most familiar are characterized as: (a) autobiographies; (b) autoethnographies; (c) biographies; (d) life stories and histories; (e) memoirs; (f) narrative ethnography; (g) narrative performance; (h) oral histories; and (i) testimonies (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). Each of these modalities amasses the essence of the lived experiences of the participant(s) based on the storied recapturing of the situation and as interpreted by the researcher. How modalities were utilized is informed by the researcher. Some considerations were time availability, time span, number of participants, the relationship researcher has with participant(s), familiarity within the community, cultural norms, political motivations (testimonies) and how the information is to be captured. The aforementioned were all integral components of qualitative research modalities within narrative inquiry.

This narrative inquiry was approached using life story. As described by Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle (2010), life stories is the description of the life events of one or more individuals, representing a social group or cultural context spanning a lifetime or illuminating a specific event or episode. This approach allowed the researcher to gain a greater appreciation of the lived experiences, perceptions, storied lives and perceptions of African American boys in middle school. Creswell (2012) reports when people tell stories to researchers, they feel listened to and their information brings the researcher closer to the actual practice of education. Thus, stories reported in qualitative narrative research enrich the lives of both the researcher and the participant. It is, specifically, this definition that conveys the essence of this research study. Cortazzi (1993) cites several trends which influenced the development of narrative research as it relates to students:

- i. Student's reflections;

- ii. Student's knowledge (what they know, how they think, and how they develop and grow as a student; and
- iii. Student's voice (bringing voice to the forefront by empowering them to talk and speak about their lived experiences).

The researcher used the student's voice through critical in-depth observations of their classroom interactions. Each observation was seven hours in duration for a two-week period of time. Although the researcher did not interview or personally engage any of the students (which is a critical part of insuring that there is no researcher bias during "Observational Analysis"), the researcher was able to gain insight into the lived experience within that unit of analysis (the classroom).

Prior to the two week in-depth observations, the researcher was enrolled in an internship course in the Department of Leadership Studies within North Carolina A&T State University's School of Education. The internship class afforded the researcher the opportunity to engage with school personnel, teachers and students for a full academic year. This longitudinal observation was the critical part of the research methodology that greatly aided in the ability of the researcher to gain access to the sample and later develop the unbiased, reliable, and valid instrumentation that was a necessary and vital part of the research study. This process of gaining trust is referred to in research as a "backyard observer", an important part of "Participant Observer Research". Marshall and Rossman (1989) define observation as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" (p.79). Observations enable the researcher to describe existing situations using the five senses, providing a "written photograph" of the situation under study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). DeMunck and Sobo (1998) describe participant observation as the primary method used by anthropologists doing fieldwork. Fieldwork involves "active looking, improving memory, informal interviewing,

writing detailed field notes, and perhaps most importantly, patience” (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p.vii). Participant observation is the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities (Kawulich, 2005). This afforded the researcher to become a part of the environment and to be less intrusive, gain trust and not be perceived as an outside entity or threat to those under observation. It was during this internship that the student researcher was required to submit weekly reflections and critical analysis of educational processes within the school system. It was from the strength of these exercises that the researcher was able to focus in on the topic, hone the research methodology, formulate research questions and decide on the unit of analysis.

Researchers may identify with the nature or complexity of an issue and choose a methodological approach which correlates to their professional training and expertise. This was the case with the decision to use an observational narrative inquiry approach based on the growing acceptance and use of this method in studies of educational practice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As a counselor and educator, active listening, reframing, authentic reflection, staying objective and appreciating the unique lived and storied experiences of the informant is consistent with the tenets that underscore the philosophical design of qualitative narrative research. Connelly and Clandinin’s (2006) definition of narrative inquiry was distinct to the features within this study, given that this narrative inquiry was the study of African American boys’ experiences as interpreted and restoried by the researcher. This particular methodology of adopting a particular view of experience was what defines narrative inquiry methodology (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Voices of the historically marginalized and disenfranchised were not heard until the personal narratives of slaves and women came to the fore via oral narratives, highlighting how these narrated experiences were as important as the meaning communicated (Casey, 1995). For this

reason, in-depth observations of these African American males became paramount in an attempt to examine, understand and interpret their classroom experiences and how those experiences affect personal agency.

The focus on individual experiences, as described by Connelly & Clandinin (1990), draws on the philosophical thoughts of John Dewey's (1897) *Pedagogic Creed*. Dewey saw that individual experiences were a central lens for understanding a person, consistent with how this study attempted to understand the experiences of African American middle school boys. As described by Connelly & Clandinin (2006), a distinct form of qualitative research, a narrative typically focuses on studying a single person, but in some cases will include another individual. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) broadened the personal experience story to be both personal and social, and conveyed this position as the essence of the experiences reported about teachers and teaching in schools. Other narrative studies focus on students in the classroom. In children's stories, narrative researchers ask the children in classroom to present orally or in writing their own stories about their learning experiences (Ollerenshaw & Ritchie, 1998). The researcher was cognizant of the importance of the informants' stories. "Observing dialogue allows the researcher to construct a meta-narrative of whole people, not reducing people to parts, but recognizing in the interplay of parts, the essence of wholeness. Only then can the real be imagined (Josselson, 1995). When participants tell a story, it helps them understand topics they need to process (McEwan, 1990). Essential to this approach is the focus given to the micro-analytic picture – individual stories – rather than the broader picture of cultural norms or abstract theories (Creswell, 2012).

### **The Role of Researcher**

As researcher in this mixed methods qualitative process of inquiry, the researcher's role was that of a mother, educator, counselor and African American woman who, through in-depth

observation was afforded the opportunity to objectively create and interpret meanings of the lived experiences of participants in this research study. This research study analyzed the perceptions of participants via the researcher's in-depth observational analysis of classroom experiences of seventeen African American 6<sup>th</sup> grade males. This research study had particular value to the author, who is a mother of a 12-year old African American middle school male, currently enrolled in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. The researcher also served as a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Executive Board Member and is a trained certified public health professional, who in her professional role, is a counselor, life skills coach, and a public health educator at a preeminent public flagship university where the enrollment of African American males has consistently declined in the past 5 years and the graduation rate for this same population is presently at 49%. . Realizing the diminishing high school graduation rates, increase in the school to prison pipeline, diminishing scores on academic tests in the K-12 public education and in the halls of higher education, the plight of the African American males proved both distressing and disturbing.

The growing rate of school suspensions within the African American male population was significant. Facts from the U.S. Census bureau, National Health Institute and most recently, The Foundation Center and the Open Society Foundation's report on *Strengthening the Field of Black Male Achievement*, substantiated the need to address the academic and human conditions of African American boys in an effort to construct intervention strategies and affect change on a systemic, personal and academic level.

As a parent, the researcher was familiar with the culture, climate, activities and personnel within the middle school setting. Thusly, the researcher was an involved and a concerned parent, who was also a servant leader. To that end, the researcher was compelled to help amplify the voices of students who were observed. In the current role that was served, the researcher was also granted the opportunity to bring attention to and generate discourse with upper level

administrators to highlight and illuminate the concerns that disenfranchised and historically marginalized students' experiences. As an educator and counselor, the researcher was confronted, tangentially, with the challenges being faced by African American males (and females) on a collegiate level. For these reasons, a high level of vigilance was essential to maintain objectivity during each phase of this research study. To guarantee fidelity in the process, the researcher had to bracket the "other roles" that personally existed in order to effectively engage this particular inquiry as an unbiased researcher. Yow (2005) advocates having a critical reflexivity, managing emotional reactions to participants, challenging one's personal interests and ideological biases, thinking beyond the questions and developing a different modes of observation, when possible. One of the researcher's goals was to alleviate bias and prejudice when collecting and analyzing data.

The researcher's goal was to collect information about the participants via in-depth, critical observation and to retell their stories as it unfolds; this is the essence of narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2012). The storied experiences of informants were juxtaposed with the analytical processes of the researcher. Through the various roles being played out in daily life, the researcher assumes that reality is constructed intersubjectively through meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially (Guba, 1994). In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is to serve as an instrument in the process (Creswell, 2013). As such, the researcher relied ultimately on observational analysis and significant, intricate note-taking as required (an integral component that exists within the parameters of the Tri-Squared Investigative Instrument). The meticulous attention to minutiae was imperative to ensure that the knowledge which was produced as outcome of the study observational analysis was truly reflective of the participants' realities. Additionally, the researcher determined the research site, identified participants, generated a hypothesis, developed questions and procedures, collected



and organized data, conducted statistical analysis of the research findings, and reported research results to insure the overall integrity and ethical operations on all levels throughout the process of inquiry.

Critical and necessary to the ethics of any research inquiry involving human subjects is requesting IRB approval from the Institutional Review Board (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A complete IRB packet containing the required research data was submitted to North Carolina A&T's Office of Research Compliance and Ethics and was subsequently approved.

Christians' (1995) call for a collaborative social science research model makes the researcher responsible, not to a removed discipline, but to those being studied. This call implements critical action, which forcefully aligns the ethics of research with a politics of the oppressed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The research findings idealistically created a process of indirect interaction via research investigator observation that indirectly occurred between the researcher and the research participant serving as a type of ancillary informant (thereby creating an indirect "inquirer" and "inquiree" associative relationship). The researcher acknowledged that this type of association was shaped by actual lived experiences and that these experiences evolved from the knowledge that was generated as a researcher, as well as, data generated by the informants. Creswell (2009) states that narrative inquiry allows for meanings of experiences to serve as the catalyst for creating stories, *inclusive* of the researcher's experiences. Hence, the researcher's role was that of "passionate participant" and facilitator of multi-voice reconstruction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

As a passionate but indirect participant, the researcher maintained authenticity in interpreting the informants' stories via observational analysis. The researcher, by the nature of professional experiences and access, had an understanding of matters which directly pertained to school attendance, behavior, disciplinary measures, teacher competency and student-teacher

interactions. When there is a connection between the researcher, the participant(s) and the research site, authors, Glesne and Pleshkin (1992), coined this as “backyard” research” as was mentioned earlier as “Backyard Observation” and more clearly defined as “Participant Observation Research”. “Backyard” research involves critically looking at the researcher’s own influences and surroundings. If studying the “backyard” is necessary, the researcher will employ multiple strategies of validity to create reader’s confidence in the accuracy of the findings. Subsequently, the researcher will have familiarity with the participant(s) and will presumably lessen the reservations the participant may have towards observation. Even when the researcher is known to the informant, there is always an initial period of gaining trust in the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

The researcher has a delicate line to walk; they can be perceived as friend or foe, spy or adversary, champion or manipulator. Therefore, trust must be gained and relationships nurtured to gain access into the everyday lives of informants. Hammersley and Atkins (2007) note how important the role of sociability is. The teacher and student, in particular, inform the student’s classroom and academic experience. External elements such as class size, room set up, and student/teacher ratio also play a role in this paradigm; however, the matter of how informants relate to one another, as well as, their perceptions of these interactions is paramount in identifying potential barriers to sociability, which contributes to the students’ overall classroom experiences and sense of personal agency.

### **Research Participants**

In qualitative data collection, purposeful sampling is used so that individuals are selected because they have experienced the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). Patton states that in purposeful sampling, a criteria is chosen, then circumstances or individuals meeting the criteria were selected for participation in the investigation (Patton, 2001, p. 238). The idea behind

qualitative research is to purposefully select participants that best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question (Creswell, 2009). One 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom with seventeen African American males was selected via recommendations from the school's guidance counselor, principal and teacher. However, the students within the particular core class were a product of convenience sampling. Convenience sampling allows the researcher to use members of the population who are accessible and immediate (Creswell, 2013). Educational protocol, the community and accessibility within the school defines this sample as convenient by nature. The principal of the school where the researcher conducted the observational analysis was provided consent to participate in the study via written permission for classroom observation. The students participating in this study were enrolled in a 6<sup>th</sup> grade middle school class during the academic school year 2013-14. This mixed methods research study involved a small number of students, but will benefit from the deeper, more critical observation of a smaller sample size that had statistical significance due to the nature of the Tri-Squared distribution selected at the outset of the study as the method of data analysis. The smaller sample size was supported by research. According to educational researcher O'Leary, the researcher will be afforded the opportunity to provide a richer, more robust understanding that evolves from an intense, targeted focus of a few, rather than a cursory exploration of many (O'Leary, 2004).

The study focused on seventeen African American males in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade in an urban community middle school in the southern part of the United States. The specific location of the research environment was an International Baccalaureate Magnet Middle School in northeastern, North Carolina. The research took place in a classroom of 28 students that was equipped with different forms of technology such as: a smart board, a computer, a CD player, books and desks. In terms of specific population demographics, the school is 92% African American, 6% Latino, and 2% who identified as "Other". It was important to note that the city's crime rate became a

source of contention among elected officials; the school, itself, is nestled within the heart of an economically viable community and is situated approximately one mile from an HBCU (“Historically Black College and University”). Interestingly enough, this city, known for its research and academe, has two major research institutions within a 13-mile radius from one another. Many of the students enrolled in the middle school under study have never been to the campus of the neighboring HBCU.

### **Selection of the Research Design Instrument**

The instrument used in this study is a Tri-Squared Inventive Investigative Instrument (Osler, 2012) was developed and designed by the researcher and is named the Holman-Osler Tri-Squared Inventive Investigative Instrument. Mixed methods narrative inquiry was most appropriate for the analysis of quantitative data in this study because the researcher grounded the variables in the research instrument from an in-depth observational inquiry of the academic environment, in which, careful investigation actively “describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people’s lives and write narratives of individual experiences that capture the essence and particularities of the research inquiry” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994, p.413). Thus, by nature of the observational narrative inquiry, informed practice influenced the design of the researcher’s Trichotomous Inventive Investigative Instrument which was a core element of the Tri-Squared Test (Osler, 2012). The outcomes of the observational inquiry focused on interpreting classroom events and understanding the intentions and meanings of the actors (students) rather than just explaining and predicting their behavior. Furthermore, by grounding and translating the qualitative narrative inquiry into a quantitative metric, the researcher established a ground-breaking methodology for the mixed methods transformation of qualitative inquiry into quantifiable quantitative data so that research assumptions can be expressed and tested by means of quantitative inquiry.

## **Observational Analysis Procedures**

In-depth observational analysis in context of this study was defined through the analysis of unit (classroom) experiences. These experiences represented participants' feelings, thoughts, and beliefs and were interpreted by the researcher through the lens of personal agency via the Trichotomous Inventive Investigative Instrument. The observational analytics as detailed cognitive, affective, psychomotor, and social learning domains were carefully and critically informed by classroom dynamics and the observed interpersonal relationship the African American males had with their teacher. The observational analysis of the unit is clarified in detail as responses to the research questions in Chapter 4 (see Table 2). The dynamic between teacher and students contributes to the learning process of the student (Brekelmans, Wubbels, & Brok, 2002). Personal agency is characterized as the capacity to exercise control over the quality of one's life (Bandura, 2001a). Through observational analysis this study analytically observed seventeen 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American boys during the first four periods of each school day. Additional observations were made during their lunch period in the cafeteria, in gym and when classes changed throughout the day. The data collected from their classroom experiences was used to draw inferences about their personal agency, as defined by the interpretations, feelings, thoughts, and beliefs of the observer.

The instrument used to measure the validity of the researcher's observation analysis of African American males' personal agency based on Albert Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model was the Tri-Squared Test (Osler, 2012). The researcher used a fixed trichotomous research procedure designed to combine, compare and analyze data to determine the validity of the research hypothesis through an investigative strategy. The Trichotomy-Squared Test illustrated a standard  $3 \times 3$  Tri-Squared format that is based on the Tri-Squared mathematical equation and its associated qualitative table of outcomes which reported results

using the Standard Tri-Squared  $3 \times 3$  Table. The recorded and tabulated sample data was meticulously analyzed using the Trichotomous-Square Three by Three Table which was designed to analyze the research questions from an Inventive Investigative Instrument (which were gleaned from the narrative inquiry) that established the following Trichotomous Categorical Variables:  $a_1$  = Behavioral Factors (expressions) ;  $a_2$  = Personal Factors (self-esteem); and  $a_3$  = Environmental Factors (classroom). The Standard  $3 \times 3$  Table will have the following Trichotomous Outcome Variables:  $b_1$  = Positive;  $b_2$  = Negative; and  $b_3$  = Non-Existent. The categorical variables will be informed by elements of Albert Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model trichotomous elements which are as follows: 1) behavior; 2) environment; and 3) person.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The methodological approach used to explore my research study was narrative inquiry. This design allowed the researcher to examine the scope of lived experiences and perspectives of seventeen 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American middle school males and perceptions of their classroom experiences. The students served as key informants by which the researcher gained critical information. The anticipated data for this study bears relevance to the research topic, statement of purpose, significance of the study and research questions.

Creswell (2009) cites several characteristics of narrative inquiry data collection strategies. They are as follows:

1. Natural setting - compiling and collecting data in indigenous surroundings and familiar environment where the problem is being studied;
2. Researcher is the key informant – compiling data by way of observing behavior, examining documents and/or interviewing participants; and

3. Researcher uses multiple sources of data which will be compiled and reviewed for the school into patterns, themes, or categories.

The primary sources of data collection to be used by the researcher to pursue the investigation was critical in-depth observation, narratives, and field notes. To retrieve these interpretations and examine the meanings of the stories of the informants, the researcher used the following data collection sources referenced by Creswell (2009):

**Qualitative observations.** The researcher gathered data as a participant observer (as a “backyard observer”). This information was compiled in the form of field notes, journals and observations. The research questions were developed over the length time that the researcher longitudinally spent in the research environment and would later contribute to the overall data collection process.

**Documents.** The researcher used journals, letters, classwork, projects, and other items to better understand the students and to gain greater insight into their feelings about classroom experiences. This particular type of data source was authentic to the informant and allowed usage of the informants’ own words and language. As written evidence, this source also saved the researcher the time and expense of interviewing and of transcribing.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis for this mixed method study consisted of preparing and organizing text data from observations. The procedures were based upon the Tri-Squared Statistical Analysis (Osler, 2012).

1. Data was gathered from 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American male students from a school in the south.
2. Data was analyzed using the tri-squared test.
3. An Effect Size was determined based upon  $n_{Tri}=17$ .
4. Data was categorized according to  $n_{Tri}$  and placed into specified Categorical Trichotomous Variables.

5. The Standard  $3 \times 3$  Tri-Squared Table was developed according to observations based upon data.
6. Data was analyzed trichotomously according to Observed and Expected Frequencies determined from existing Trichotomous Categorical Variables.
7. The Tri-Squared Test was used to test the mathematical hypotheses and determine the level of statistical significance from the research findings.

Rather than relying totally on the traditional methods of coding and analyzing data by pointing out central patterns in the data collected, the researcher listened to the voice of the informants, as observed in the classroom settings and decided which analytical lens to use. The narrative researcher used the following five lenses as described by Chase (2005):

- (a) Analytic lens to view the empirical data;
- (b) Verbal actions will be used as the researcher/narrator retells the story, construct meaning, blend reality, and infuses self along with the subject, location and social position;
- (c) Social circumstances and resources were based on the researcher's community, social affiliations and cultural location;
- (d) Socially interactive performances were translated into narratives; and
- (e) Researcher's lenses used as part of the scripted narrative as they develop interpretations and form meaningful ideas about the data being collected.

Observational analysis through field experience was used to record the data elements into a coherent development of accounts. The process of in-depth observational analysis as form of ongoing (qualitative) narrative analysis through trichotomous instrumentation was groundbreaking and actually a method of synthesizing the data rather than a separation of it into its constituent parts (Polkinghorne, 1995). As such, the researcher related the events and actions to one another by configuring them as contributors to the advancement of a plot by recording the



outcomes of observations in the research instrument. For example, the researcher for this mixed methods study configured events into an explanation of how African American male students' classroom experiences affect their personal agency (via the observations recorded on the Tri-Squared research instrument). As the research investigation narrator, the researcher used the first person (as needed) to emphasize the role they played in condensing the accounts of their informants (Chase 2005). Not all data elements were needed for the telling of the story; however, as the plot began to take form, the researcher realized events and details that were crucial to the story's development (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The data analysis process and criteria used by Creswell (2009) are:

1. Inductive data analysis – data, organized into increasingly more abstract units of information emerge from categories or themes built from the bottom up. Juxtaposing themes to create a comprehensive pattern of themes;
2. Participants' meanings – data interpretation focuses on the participant's meaning concerning the issue rather than the meaning held by the researcher or the review of the literature;
3. Emergent design – all phases of the research may change after the researcher starts the data collection process;
4. Theoretical lens – lenses such as culture, gender, race, or class differences to view the study, as well as, the political, social, or historical context relative to the study;
5. Interpretive – interpretations emerge from that which is seen, heard, or understood based on the researcher's own backgrounds, history, contexts, and prior understandings, and Additional interpretations may surface from the participants and the reader producing multiple levels of interpretations; and

6. Holistic – in developing a complex picture of the problem, multiple perspectives are reported, identifying the factors involved in a situation, and depicting the larger picture.

The aforementioned six criteria mentioned in the research of Creswell was used by the researcher and expressed in the following manner:

1. Inductive data analysis – as the formulation of the Tri<sup>2</sup> Trichotomous Categorical and Outcome Variables;
2. Participants' meanings – as interpreted through Bandura's TRD;
3. Emergent design – as demonstrated through the innovative use of the Tri<sup>2</sup> Test;
4. Theoretical lens – via the emphasis on Personal Agency;
5. Interpretive – from the research's narrative inquiry, observational analysis, and lived experiences; and
6. Holistic – in the entire research design and methodology.

The accounting of stories, capturing the thoughts of the informants and generating data by qualitative methods can be voluminous (Creswell 2013, p.182). The process of data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not distinct steps in the process and often go on simultaneously within a research study. The analysis process conformed to a general outline that allowed the researcher to make sense of observations and research instrument recorded field notes. The researcher inevitably “learned by doing”, within the boundaries of the methodological approach to mixed methods narrative inquiry.

### **Trustworthiness and Transferability of Research Findings and Outcomes**

In research, “validity” refers to the goal of getting as close as possible to the essence of reality. As a novel mixed methods scientist (who formulated the research questions through rigorous narrative inquiry) the researcher cannot be 100% exact in reflecting another's reality; only the person(s) or community of people can do that. Thus, rather than testing the validity of a

particular construct, the narrative researcher assesses their authenticity to the individual(s) or community. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that because reliability and validity are determined differently in qualitative inquiry, qualitative researchers should use the following aspects of *trustworthiness*: truth value, which is the credibility of the inquiry; applicability, which is the transferability of the results; and consistency, which is the dependability of the results. Reliability and validity, however, are still regarded as essential in qualitative inquiry (Richards & Morse, 2007). Reliability requires that the same results will be obtained if the study is replicated, and validity requires that the results accurately reflect the phenomenon being studied. Validity, as stated previously, is thus replaced with credibility as a test of the plausibility of argumentation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is ensured by detailed, explicit documentation of findings. Writing rich, thick descriptive narratives (Geertz, 1973) to retell the storied experiences of an event or people and substantiating it with data will allow the researcher to show familiarity with both the informant and the research site.

The researcher insured the quality and scope of data, the interpretation of the results, and the connection to Bandura's TRD model of the theory. Due to the fact that the researcher (for the most part) was so very fundamental in the creation of the research instrument, the study is only as good as the researcher (Richards & Morse, 2007). The researcher developed research inquiry skills (via the in-depth mining of the supportive data extracted during the meticulous search through the existing research literature); insured that a high level of research competency was developed (the ability to reason both deductively and inductively as a part of research discovery); and crafted rigor (through an ever ongoing exploration and examination of research). Thus, an essential component of research rigor is bracketing. Whatever the research method, bracketing is a central and necessary process. Bracketing affords the researcher the ability to set aside

personal and previous knowledge gained from the literature so that the research problem can be viewed authentically (Richards & Morse, 2007).

It is for this reason that the research employed a new triangulated model of statistical analysis called Trichotomy–Squared (Osler, 2012). As such, this mixed methods test infused and integrated both qualitative and quantitative data analyses to determine the validity of the research hypothesis through an in-depth investigative strategy. The utilization of multiple methods of data collection (triangulation) strengthens reliability and internal validity. The Tri–Squared Test has its own triangulation model (Osler, 2013). Other research triangulation strategies, cited by Creswell (2013) are: a) prolonged engagement and persistent observation; b) peer review or debriefing; c) refine working hypotheses; d) member checking (soliciting informant’s views); e) clarifying member bias; and f) external audits (peer reviews) (pp.250-251). This concludes Chapter 3’s Data Analysis, which carefully outlined the research methods (supported by research) used to observe and capture seventeen 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American male students’ perceptions of their classroom experiences and the affect those experiences have on personal agency.

## CHAPTER 4

### Data Collection & Analysis

*“Don’t try to fix the students, fix ourselves first. The good teacher makes the poor student good and the good student superior. When our students fail, we, as teachers, too, have failed.”*

~Marva Collins~

The purpose of this study was to analyze through an in-depth observational analysis the personal agency of seventeen African American 6<sup>th</sup> grade middle school boys. The instrument used for this study was the Tri-Squared Inventive Investigative Instrument designed by the researcher under the guidance of the author and creator of the statistical analysis methodology. Data analysis procedures follow and are described in detail.

### Research Questions

The central qualitative research questions that guided this study and created the basis of the respective and reflective Research and Mathematical Hypotheses are as follows:

1. What are the Personal Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?
2. What are the Behavioral Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?
3. What are the Environmental Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?

Further Supporting Research Questions that was addressed by the study are as follows:

4. How will Personal Agency positively affect classroom engagement, if at all?
5. What is the observation of the Personal Agency intervention in the school setting?
6. What is the teacher involvement in the Personal Agency of the student in the school setting?

## Qualitative Results

Table 1

### *Responses and Findings from Research Questions*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Response</b>
<b>What were the Personal Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?</b>	Personal factors affecting the classroom experiences are the students' perceptions of self. The in-depth observations of the researcher were in direct alignment with the empirical studies and the theoretical framework of Albert Bandura. The interaction between the person and their behavior (Personal) is influenced by their thoughts and actions (self-concept and self-identity) (Bandura, 1986; 1978). Self-concept and self-identity surfaced as an integral part of how students interfaced with their teachers and classroom peers. Feeling valued and affirmed by teachers who are in positions of power either negatively or positively impacted how the students demonstrated their involvement, association and attitude within the environment. Internalizing feelings, exploring self, identifying emotions, perceiving reactions, feeling valued, feeling secure, believing in one's self, and responding to stimuli are all integral components of the affective learning domain (Process Education, 2014).
<b>What were the Behavioral Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?</b>	The behavioral factors affecting the classroom experience as observed by the researcher were the interpersonal interactions between students and the teacher. Students' affect changed when entering the door of the classroom. The African American males, as observed by the researcher, were reticent and displayed lethargy during the class period. Their behaviors were either boisterous, as to entertain the class and disrupt the flow of learning or disengaged to the point of not paying attention, looking out of the window, talking and fiddling and ignoring the teaching. The researcher overheard one student telling another, "She gives me attitude, so I just give her attitude back".
<b>What were the Environmental Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?</b>	The environmental factors affecting the classroom experience as observed by the researcher were the interactions between the African American students. Small, intangible insults from teacher to student can only be described as microaggressions. Microaggressions are the everyday verbal and nonverbal slights, snubs, or insults which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group. Examples of which were observed by the researcher include "a broken chair for a broken child". The teacher had a broken chair in the front of the class, which had only three legs. The chair leaned against the black board and was named appropriately, a "broken chair". However, the perceived utility of the chair by the teacher was to insult students or embarrass into cooperating. Contrarily, the act provoked hostility and rebellion between student and teacher. Other microaggressive behaviors observed by the researcher were not calling on students whose hands had been raised, ignoring, isolating and sending students to ISS (in-school suspension) for minor infractions such as going to the trash can without permission.
<b>How did Personal Agency positively affect classroom engagement, if at all?</b>	With a greater understanding of three of the four domains (cognitive, social and affective), coupled with perceptions and expectations of the students' teachers, this study attempted to discover aspects of the student-teacher dynamic and classroom atmosphere which might affect the personal agency of African American middle school boys. The researcher observed instances where male substitute teachers were leading the class during the absence of core teachers and there was a noticeable difference in the classroom atmosphere. Male students were not combative and although, there were moments where some of the students attempted to push the envelope, the manner and tone of authority rendered by the substitute teacher rendered very little dissention and retaliation from the students. The ability to connect with the students on a personal level seemed to matter to them. Ultimately, creating a willingness to take part in classroom discussions, both about the topic and about them as students.
<b>What was the observation of the Personal Agency intervention in the school setting?</b>	The researcher's observation of personal agency intervention was zero tolerance by some of the teachers and a softer more placating approach from others. The teachers who were zero tolerance were younger and were white. Which of the two factors (race or age) were the influencing factors could not be observed by the researcher. However, the ability to manage classroom behavior, as observed by the researcher was not successfully negotiated. The in-school suspension officer generally had a room full of African American boys on any given day. Reasons for them being in ISS were varied; however, of those participants observed by the researcher, the student was more willing to be sent to ISS than to remain in the classroom with their teacher.
<b>What is the teacher involvement in the Personal Agency of the student in the school setting?</b>	Major themes in Sonia Nieto's (2003; 2008) books examines how teachers shape the future of students. It is here that teacher expectations and instilling a sense of hope and self-worth is shown to have a lifelong impact on students. The observed interactions that all African American Males had with their teachers were often caustic, un-affirming, and devaluing in the unit of analysis (the classroom).

## Quantitative Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis procedures that were conducted as a part of the study using the Tri-Squared Test Statistical Analysis methodology are as follows:

1. Data was gathered from the 17 research study participants.
2. Data was analyzed via the Trichotomous-Squared Test.
3. An Effect Size was determined based upon  $n_{Tri} = 17$ .
4. Data was categorized according to  $n_{Tri} = 17$  and placed into specified Trichotomous Categorical Variables (i.e.,  $a_1$  = Personal,  $a_2$  = Behavioral, and  $a_3$  = Environmental).
5. The Standard  $3 \times 3$  Tri-Squared Test Table was presented according to the researcher's observational analysis and displays the outcomes that were based upon the qualitative research instrument data.
6. Data was analyzed trichotomously according to qualitative and quantitative results determined from the existing Trichotomous Categorical and Outcome Variables.
7. The Tri-Squared Test was used to test the mathematical hypotheses and determine the level of significance of the research findings.

## Research Hypotheses

The Research Hypotheses Used in the Study are as follows:

**H<sub>a</sub>:** [= **H<sub>1</sub>**] There will be significant differences in the contributing factors based on the observational analysis by the researcher in the environment that contribute to African American males adolescents perception of their personal agency.

**H<sub>0</sub>:** There are no significant differences in the contributing factors based on the observational analysis by the researcher in the environment that contribute to African American males adolescents perception of their personal agency.

The Mathematical Hypotheses are as follows:

$$\mathbf{H}_0: Tri^2 = 0$$

$$\mathbf{H}_1: Tri^2 \neq 0$$

## Results

Table Introduction: Reported below is sample Trichotomy–Squared Test illustrating the standard  $3 \times 3$  Tri–Squared Formula and qualitative table of outcomes reporting results using the standard Tri–Squared  $3 \times 3$  Format. Sample data analyzed using the Trichotomous Square Three by Three Table was designed to analyze the research questions from an Inventive Investigative Instrument with the following Trichotomous Categorical Variables:  $a_1$  = Behavioral Factors ;  $a_2$  = Personal Factors; and  $a_3$  = Environmental Factors. The  $3 \times 3$  Table has the following Trichotomous Outcome Variables:  $b_1$  = Positive;  $b_2$  = Negative; and  $b_3$  = Non–Existent. The Inputted Qualitative Outcomes are reported as follows:



Table 2

*African American Males' Personal Agency Tri-Squared Test*

$n_{Tri} = 17$   
 $\alpha = 0.975$

TRICHOTOMOUS  
CATEGORICAL VARIABLES

	$a_1$	$a_2$	$a_3$
$b_1$	36	11	3
$b_2$	32	15	4
$b_3$	21	28	2

$Tri^2 d.f. = [C - 1][R - 1] = [3 - 1][3 - 1] = 4 = Tri^2_{[8]}$

The Tri-Square Test Formula for the Transformation of Trichotomous Qualitative Outcomes into Trichotomous Quantitative Outcomes to Determine the Validity of the Research Hypothesis:

$$Tri^2 = T_{Sum} [(Tri_x - Tri_y)^2 : Tri_y]$$

[**Note:**  $x$  = Trichotomous Categorical Variables and  $y$  = Trichotomous Outcome Variables]

$Tri^2$  Critical Value Table = 0.484 (with  $d.f. = 4$  at  $\alpha = 0.975$ ). For  $d.f. = 4$ , the Critical Value for  $p > 0.975$  is 0.484. The Calculated Tri-Square Value is 13.4912, thus, the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) is **rejected** by virtue of the hypothesis test which yields the following: Tri-Squared Critical Value of  $0.484 < 13.4912$  the Calculated Tri-Squared Value. This means that the Tri-Squared Critical Value of 13.4912 is outstandingly greater than the alpha level of 0.975; the alpha level in this case is indicative of the ability to precisely and safely reject the null hypotheses. Hence, the

null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) which states that there are no significant differences in the contributing factors observed by the researcher in the environment that contribute to African American males adolescents perception of their personal agency is completely negated.

### Summary of Tri-Squared Test Outcomes

Table One illustrates the qualitative transformation into quantitative data as a mathematical application of the Trichotomous-Squared (“Trichotomy-Squared”, “Tri-Squared” or “Tri-Square”) statistical analysis procedure on “African American Middle School Males’ Personal Agency”. Table One shows that participants primarily and overwhelmingly selected the “Positive” Trichotomous Categorical Variable ( $a_1b_1 = 36$ ) in terms of Personal Agency. In addition, all Trichotomous Categorical Variables were reported respectively as: Personal as “Positive” ( $a_1b_1 = 36$ ), “Negative” ( $a_1b_2 = 32$ ), and “Non-Existent” ( $a_1b_3 = 21$ ); Behavioral as “Positive” ( $a_2b_1 = 11$ ), “Negative” ( $a_2b_2 = 15$ ), and “Non-Existent” ( $a_2b_3 = 28$ ); and Environmental as “Positive” ( $a_3b_1 = 3$ ), “Negative” ( $a_3b_2 = 4$ ), and “Non-Existent” ( $a_3b_3 = 2$ ). The mathematical formula for the Tri-Squared is reported illustrating the final outcome of the research hypothesis test: the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) is rejected at  $p > 0.975$  is 0.484 (Osler, 2012). Thus, this illustrates that there is a need for a greater self-identity and self-concept within the learning environment that would allow an African American male student to self-actualize their sense of personal agency. The area of focus in which the Inventive Investigative Instrument was used was to address the existence of personal agency in terms of Trichotomous Categorical Variable [ $a_1$ ] as Self-Esteem; Self-Concept; and Self-Efficacy. This clearly demonstrates that the knowledge of self provides a dynamic platform for stimulating a creative mind; while the understanding of and identification with self is essential to the academic success and achievement of middle school African American boys.

### **Further Qualitative Data Analysis Outcomes**

According to Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism Model, the researcher conducted an in-depth observational analysis of seventeen African American 6<sup>th</sup> Grade male students' personal agency in the middle school classroom environment.

Objective: From 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> graders, very little have changed. An entire year passed. The researcher used the same data in the fall during the internship observations as was used in the 2 weeks in August of the following school year. The researcher utilized longitudinal experiences from the unit to develop the mixed methods instrument through familiarity with the research environment. The data outcomes from the research investigation were very rich in terms of personal agency. The research participants became 7<sup>th</sup> graders at the end of the summer and the beginning of the academic school year. The researcher wanted to conduct detailed observations of the participants as they interacted naturally within their school environment (which was the unit of analysis). The participants became rising 7<sup>th</sup> graders during the school year in which the research study was conducted. Sequentially, the observations allowed the researcher to formulate questions that became the investigative instrument. The second phase of the study allowed the researcher to enter the classroom and observe the behaviors that led to the trichotomous research outcomes. Given the previous accessibility to the students and the nature of the longitudinal study, two weeks were sufficient enough to validate the study.

The in-depth qualitative analysis that is the research narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to build the novel "Tri-Squared Inventive Investigative Instrument". The factors within the instrument (which were the Trichotomous Categorical and Outcome Variables) came from detailed observations of the environment conducted during the longitudinal immersion within the unit of analysis. This type of immersion over time set the scope (and subsequent trichotomous parameters) that would be used for the later more detailed research investigation. The strength of

this study is the longitudinal aspects of observing students over a year-long period. Immersion in the unit ultimately created an exhaustive observational analysis that resulted in this comprehensive and thorough research investigation.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion of Findings

*“This country simply cannot afford to write off vast swaths of human potential. Equity and morality aside, the economics alone require that we work to improve the academic performance of all groups, for the ultimate benefit of us all.”*

*~ Kurt Landgraf~  
President, CEO ETS*

### Discussion

This chapter summarizes the study’s findings, and provides discussion, limitations, and implications for future practice based upon the overall research and its relevant conclusions. The purpose of this study was to observe the perceptions of 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American males’ classroom experiences via observational analysis, to determine what factors contributed to the students’ classroom engagement and personal agency. Noguera (1997) made the observation that, research showing students as being disadvantaged, deficient, dysfunctional, or merely different tend to be given inferior educational service. This holds true for Black males at all levels of education (Noguera, 1977). Ergo, the challenges experienced by African American males in underserved, marginalized and disenfranchise communities is not monolithic. The interaction between the person and their respective behavior and the person and the environment is informed by the person’s overall sense of self (i.e., self-concept). The intersection of identity, efficacy, self-concept coupled with behavioral and environmental factors inform the experiences of African American middle school boys and their personal agency or how they choose to behave, specifically, in the classroom.

The researcher used the Trichotomous–Squared model mathematical formula to convert the research investigation findings from the qualitative observational analysis (that occurred within the classroom environment). The Tri–Squared Test outcome was reported in Chapter 4

and illustrated the final outcome of the research hypothesis test: the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) was rejected at  $p > 0.975$  is 0.484 (Osler, 2012). This illustrates there is a need for a greater self-identity and self-concept within the learning environment that would allow African American male students to effectively self-actualize their overall sense of personal agency. The findings clearly displayed that the knowledge of “self” provides a dynamic platform for stimulating a creative mind; while the understanding of and identification with “self” is essential to the academic success and achievement of middle school African American males. The research null hypothesis was rejected at  $\text{Tri}^2$  Critical Value Table = 0.484 (with  $d.f. = 4$  at  $\alpha = 0.975$ ). For  $d.f. = 4$ , the Critical Value for  $p > 0.975$  is 0.484. The Calculated Tri-Square Value is 13.4912, thus, the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) is *rejected* by virtue of the hypothesis test. Thus, the primary research hypothesis is validated that stated the following:

“**H<sub>a</sub>**: [= **H<sub>1</sub>**] There will be significant differences in the contributing factors based on the observational analysis by the researcher in the environment that contribute to African American males adolescents perception of their personal agency.”

Based upon these findings governed by Bandura’s Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model which has a bi-directional approach, the *self-identity* (personal) element had more of an impact on the personal agency of African American middle school boys in the classroom.

Historians and researchers in the field of education today speak fervently about the impact that Brown vs. The Board of Education had on classroom education. Although students were the impetus for the change to equalize the resources and afford students the benefits of a quality education, desegregation did more harm than good (Milner, 2004). Schools, communities and teachers were all negatively impacted by the disconnection. Black teachers, by virtue of their out-of-school interactions, community involvement, cultural connections, and their deep

understanding of the lived experiences of students they educated, often, brought an implicit level of knowledge into the classroom that was evidenced throughout the curriculum as evidenced by, “The Self-System in Reciprocal Determinism” (Bandura, 1978). In the researcher’s observation of classroom interactions, the aforementioned holds true today. There was a distinct difference in the manner by which teachers in the research environment, who were not of African American descent, interfaced with African American boys. Subsequently, there was also a distinct difference in how African American boys responded to and interfaced with teachers who were not of African American descent (in comparison to those teachers that they perceived liked them). Findings confirmed the theoretical assumptions as it applies to the theory and practice.

In addition, there was also a more clearly defined student-centered approach to educating by African American teachers (Asante, 1991). These teachers intrinsically nurtured the student as a human being—by developing a healthy sense of self; this in turn contributed to the students’ holistic development of a strong self-identity. Classroom learning is shaped by multiple factors that often occur within the framework of the academic environment, especially the reinforcements experienced by oneself and by others (Brekelmans, Wubbels & Brok, 2002). It is in deference to these factors (which were extracted from Bandura’s TDR Theoretical framework) which guided the research investigation.

Teachers are a critical part of the learning process. The research literature review reinforced how critical teachers are to the classroom environment. Teachers play an integral role in shaping student attitudes and behavior (Boser, 2011). Given the gravity of the role they play in the classroom, teachers create a classroom modular (or model) “norm”. Students have a “subjective norm”, which is a person’s belief that important others think that he/she should or should not do. Teachers can be tutors, general contractors, custodians, or referral agents (Ladson-Billings G. , 2009). Normative beliefs are the beliefs a specific referent person (teacher) thinks should

happen regarding the behavior. In the study, teachers' perceptions served to highlight aspects of the interpersonal dynamics that made a difference in the manner by which students engaged and participated in the classroom.

Understanding these dynamics between student and teacher interactions set the stage for the observational analysis of the perceived experiences of the 17 African American male students as they matriculated in class. Acknowledging teacher expectations and the subsequent realities of the dynamics between the students, afforded the researcher authentic subjective insight into the quality and level of real-time teaching techniques and practices. This was juxtaposed with the cognitive, emotional and affective skills of the student. Inherent in the current psyche of some (if not many) African American male students is the notion that they are not expected to be on time to class, pay attention in class, like class or achieve any sort of academic success. Indeed, the significance of teacher expectations on student achievement has been examined in many studies (Crano & Mellon, 1978). Research suggests that students rise to high levels of expectations when taught and nurtured to do so (Milner, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2011).

Negative perceptions of African American middle school boys impact how they view themselves in academics, in society and culturally. Most important to note is how those views of "self" inform identity: self-concept, self-esteem and self-image, thereby, impacting personal agency and academic performance. In this particular case, observations overwhelmingly revealed that these 17 African American boys experienced a "disconnect" between them and their learning environment which resulted in not listening to the teacher's instructions and failing to complete in-school assignments. These outcomes were validated in the following manner via the researcher's Tri-Squared Test:  $\mathbf{Tri}^2$  Critical Value Table = 0.484 (with  $d.f. = 4$  at  $\alpha = 0.975$ ). For  $d.f. = 4$ , the Critical Value for  $p > 0.975$  is 0.484. The Calculated Tri-Square Value is 13.4912, thus, the null hypothesis ( $\mathbf{H}_0$ ) is *rejected* [~~There are no significant differences in the~~



~~contributing factors based on the observational analysis by the researcher in the environment that contribute to African American males adolescents perception of their personal agency]~~ by virtue of the hypothesis test which yields the following: Tri-Squared Critical Value of  $0.484 < 13.4912$  the Calculated Tri-Squared Value. This gave rise to a lower level of classroom engagement parallel to higher level of classroom disruption as supported by the research of Milner (2004).

Crucial components of African American youth identity are self-image, self-concept, self-perception, and self-esteem. All of these components are supported by Bandura's TRD and account for the self-affirming process, which is a necessary part of the identity found in academically achieving African American youth. In an effort to suspend the staggering numbers of African American boys falling to the bottom, and in most cases, out of the classroom, the findings of this study suggests further examination of self-identity to reverse the phenomenon of academic decline in middle school African American males.

These findings and observations are relevant and deserve critical attention because they underscore the change that occurred in North American K-12 education during the 60's and 70's as supported by the research of (Fashola, 2005; Irvine and Irvine, 2007). The two most revealing articles that illuminated the need for a student-centered environment to achieve academic and classroom success were the articles by Guiffrida and another by Milner. These two articles shared a common theme: understanding the human being and relating to the human primacy of students in the classroom, as opposed to allowing the prescribed content material (core standards/test scores) that serve as the end goal and defining factor relative to classroom success.

"Othermothering" must also be considered in light of the areas that were under investigation in this research study. In the Othermothering research article, a study looked at the experiences of college students at a predominantly white institution. The study revealed similar experiences of black students (boys) as they navigated the public school system. Human beings respond to

stimuli that are engaging, probing and attentive to individual needs. The article clearly indicated the African American students at PWIs experienced difficulty in developing relationships with White faculty. The sample group in this article was high academic achievers and oftentimes, valedictorians in their high school class. When juxtaposed with low achieving students with oftentimes little social skills and a narrowly formulated sense of self (self-identity), one could imagine how classroom dynamics between Black students (boys in particular), would be impacted in a less than positive way. The article reinforced the observations found in the researcher's study. To further validate the significance of the findings, the article also indicated that students' (of color) "help seeking behaviors" in college were very low. The help sought was usually from friends, family, and academic counselors who were Black and who looked similar to themselves (Guiffrida, 2005). In this research study, observations revealed that when African American boys felt affirmed, validated and acknowledged, they were more engaged in the classroom process.

Just as disturbing as problems associated with a diminished sense of self-identity or self-concept, is the manner in which these challenges are continually mishandled by educators, policymakers, and concerned others. In this research study, the observations revealed a level of impatience and intolerance by teachers for minor infractions. Actions such as trimming a pencil, giggling, moving a chair, or slouching were perceived as disrespectful and oftentimes, resulted in a punitive measure. Sometimes, the punishment was as simple as being segregated from the rest of the class or as severe as telling a child to sit in a "broken chair" because he/she is broken; or going to lunch late because "we are mandated to serve you lunch, but not mandated that you finish lunch". The consequence of such actions generated a less than positive attitude in the student and appeared to diminish their self-esteem. Consequently, these students were less than amenable to the idea of learning any subject matter being taught by the teacher.

Amplifying the troubled status of African American students at all levels of education has rendered few solutions. Consequently, outcomes for this population have remained stagnant or even worsened in recent years. The need for supportive environments, culturally competent teachers, and nurturing, caring, supportive adults all serve as factors which might impact the self-concept and self-esteem of African American middle school boys. Culturally competent and culturally responsive teachers who are able to identify with the student, meeting them where they are cognitively and affectively, play an integral role in classroom academic success, achievement and personal agency.

During the observational analysis of the interactions between the teachers and the 17 African American boys, there was a distinct and obvious delineation between their interactions and associations in the classroom based upon cultural and ethnic identity. One by one, as the African American boys entered the classroom, the teacher's body language and facial expression told a story that manifested in an instantaneous reaction by the boys in terms of their overall demeanor. Both teacher and the students appeared to dread the 55 minutes that each would have to spend in the other's space. The manner in which the teacher interfaced with the students revealed that these teachers were clueless about the historical precedents that may have shaped the identity and educational reality of African American male students. In terms of cultural competency, at any given time when the teacher no longer wanted to tolerate the student, she would send the African American boys to the African American teacher next door. The inability to negotiate an affirming relationship with the students speaks loudly to the cultural incompetence, cultural irresponsiveness, and lack of diversity training that directly led to the inability to relate to African American males in general. This is critical to the development and sustainability of personal agency at this age. The developmental and self-identity matters associated with boys of this age, ultimately, will determine their future and the caliber of men they will become.

Educational institutions have the civic responsibility of training our youth in a safe, non-hostile, welcoming and affirming environment. Without a sense of belonging, this type of toxic culture is damaging and dangerous to the overall development of African American boys. Furthermore, this type of micro-aggressive behavior creates a hidden stress that can manifest in aberrant behavior and initiates a desire to leave the academic environment all together.

This lack of awareness, in the researcher's estimation has to end. The relationship held by both students and teachers are essential to the classroom experience of middle school African American boys. It is the job of leadership to instill meaning and install policies that will curb this type of behavior and empower African American boys to excel at all levels. New policies that introduce, instill, fortify and strengthen student-centered learning techniques will afford African American boys the opportunity to be partners in their own learning.

Table 3, a qualitative table of Summary of Findings follows on the next page.

Table 3

*Qualitative Summary of Findings*

<b>Summary of Findings</b>	
1.	Findings clearly displayed that the knowledge of “self” provided a dynamic platform for stimulating a creative mind;
2.	Understanding of and identification with “self” is essential to the academic success and achievement of middle school African American males;
3.	Need for a greater self–identity and self-concept within the learning environment that would allow African American male students to effectively self–actualize their overall sense of personal agency;
4.	There was a distinct difference in the manner that the research environment teachers, who were not of African American descent had when they interfaced with African American boys.
5.	Subsequently a distinct difference in how African American boys responded to and interfaced with teachers who were not of African American descent (in comparison to those teachers that they perceived liked them).
6.	“ <b>Ha:</b> [= <b>H<sub>1</sub></b> ] There will be significant differences in the contributing factors based on the observational analysis by the researcher in the environment that contribute to African American males adolescents perception of their personal agency”
7.	Based upon these findings governed by Bandura’s Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model which has a bi-directional approach, the <i>self-identity</i> (personal) element had <i>significantly</i> greater impact on the personal agency of African American middle school boys in the classroom.
8.	Observations overwhelmingly revealed that these 17 African American boys experienced a “disconnect” between them and their learning environment, and that there was a lower level of classroom engagement parallel to higher level of classroom disruption as supported by the research of Milner (2004).
9.	Student responded to teachers who were affirming and conveyed a sense of “mattering” and a sense of “belongedness”. Relating to the human primacy of students in the classroom and not just the prescribed classroom content material as supported by articles of Guiffrida and Milner were critical to gaining the respect and attention of the student.
10.	Understanding the student as a human being and relating to the human primacy of students in the classroom and not just the prescribed classroom content material proved critical to gaining respect and engaging the student as supported by articles (Guiffrida, 2005 and Milner, 2004).

## Limitations

This study attempted to examine the perceptions of African American middle school boys from one researcher's personal observations and through one set of lenses. Possible limitations to this study were that students from this small magnet middle school located in the Southeastern region of the United States, were not traditionally randomly selected. The sampling method used was a convenient sampling because it best met the needs of the qualitative portion of the research design. Convenient sampling (as detailed in Chapter 3 of the study) ideally fitted the research design and provided a sample that was readily available and accessible. The range of the study was narrow because it was qualitatively measured and explored the personal agency of a set number of students ( $n_{Tri} = 17$ ) in a particular school system; hence, the research scope was narrowly defined to provide a more in-depth approach to glean information from an observational perspective. As a result, the findings of the study may not be broadly generalizable from a more traditional quantitative statistical approach to other middle school African American male students. However, the findings confirmed theories and concepts that may be generalizable in addressing the aspects that were the focus of the study regarding African American male students who continue to be studied more than other groups of students in the American school system with limited effective solutions as far as education reform is concerned as supported by the research of (Irvine and Irvine, 2007; Johnson & McDaniel, 2011; Barton & Coley, 2009; Barton & Coley, 2010).

In order to more fully explore additional factors that could potentially serve as significant interventions to improve the quality of classroom experiences and academic success among African American males, a larger more quantitative comparison group design would be necessary. However, in terms of qualitative analysis the study could be replicated with a larger number of researchers conducting more qualitative observational analysis in several schools with

more African American male students. A larger group would add more credibility to research conducted in this area. Also, gaining access, earning trust, and getting cooperation of school personnel proved to be challenging initially.

Other potential limitations to this study included looking solely at personal agency as a determining factor for academic success. Further exploration and research into how self-identity configures into the psyche and self-image of African American middle school boys is critical in defining the impact personal agency has on the academic success of African American middle school boys.

### **Future Implications & Recommendations**

The researcher makes the following recommendations:

- 1) Further research could be done by analyzing a larger sample size of African American boys. Comparison to a similar population may yield a more valid outcome.
- 2) The mixed methods Trichotomous–Squared instrument is cutting edge and blazing new paths. Using a quantitative tool to convert qualitative data makes the research data more statistically sound and allows for less doubt within the research community. Putting science to education is a paradigm shift.
- 3) The current educational paradigm within our school system is not conducive to the efficacy of black boys in the classroom. Carving out a niche to address a problem in the body of knowledge in the educational paradigm is critical to effect change in today’s climate of educational demise and diminishing academic returns for African American males. Paulo Freire looked at the community, classroom, ethnicity, and parental involvement as the thread to weave critical constructs of the pedagogical process into a unit that addresses the personal, behavioral and environmental needs of the student. As such, this research could add value to policy development, curriculum design, and the

instructional training of teachers who are the front line ambassadors for educating and inspiring critical thought and analysis in African American boys. Thereby creating social change in the learning environment that is conducive to the classroom success of African American middle school males.

- 4) There is a dire need for researchers of historically marginalized and disenfranchised communities to continue to critically analyze and probe for a deeper level of truth and understanding. Only then can interventions be developed to adequately address and reconcile the phenomenon of low academic achievement with African American middle school males.
- 5) There is a massive need to conduct research studies such as this in K–5 (elementary) schools, High Schools (above middle school), and colleges (higher education) to indicate the colossal and substantial need for education reform in the arena of teaching Cultural Competency to meet the needs of an underserved African American male population.
- 6) There needs to be a repository for school suspensions and expulsions. To collect and report this data offers more information on the shocking discrepancies which exist. Requirements about reporting data should be more universal.
- 7) Two other significant areas that deserve attention and should be considered for future research are fostering a sense of belonging for African American boys in middle school environments and reversing the negative stereotypical images in social media.
- 8) New regulations and policies need to be instituted in institutions that protect the effective learning domain of African American boys by leadership.
- 9) Leadership needs to take a proactive and vital role in shaping the destiny of African American boys; this takes place by instituting culturally competent professional development and training by faculty and staff in all educational institutions



- 10) State agencies, such as NCDPI must take an active leadership role in protecting and nurturing African American boys through policy and advocacy.
- 11) National and State accrediting bodies (teacher licensure and national board certification) need to add strong, sustainable, and verifiable cultural awareness and competence in their licensure requirements.
- 12) Parents, as advocates of their children, particularly African American boys in their schooling, need to take an active and proactive role in protecting their children's mental, physical and emotional/affective/dispositional health.

Some promising strategies that address positive self-esteem, self-awareness, racial identity and self-concept are culturally responsive counseling, culturally aligned curricula, culturally competent teachers and culturally attuned mentoring (Wynn, 1992). In fact, while self-identity does impact the academic success of African American middle school boys and is an integral correlate of academic achievement, personal resources such as self- concept, self-identity and self-esteem alone, cannot, serve as substitutions for academic success. The need for supportive environments, culturally competent, nurturing, caring adults and “*othermothering*”, all serve as elements to consider which may impact the self-concept and perception of African American middle school boys. Research found that students working together in heterogenous ability groups are particularly effective for Black students (Slavin, 1981). Students tend to encourage and support each other, thereby, strengthening self-confidence. The researcher observed the consistency in which students requested to work in groups in the classroom. Ultimately, teachers serve as catalyst and change agents in creating an environment necessary to achieve optimal classroom engagement and quality classroom experiences.

## Conclusion

Insight, understanding, passion, and creativity are required to frame effective solutions for the formidable task of addressing the academic and classroom engagement of African American middle school boys. There is an abundance of research associated with addressing the achievement gap and high school drop-out rate for Black males. However, there is a dearth of research on the specific concerns which influence the classroom experiences and personal agency of African American boys. In particular, when middle school boys feel that there is seemingly, a disconnect between them and their environment, there is a lower level of academic achievement. This is illustrated in the following model (Figure 3.):

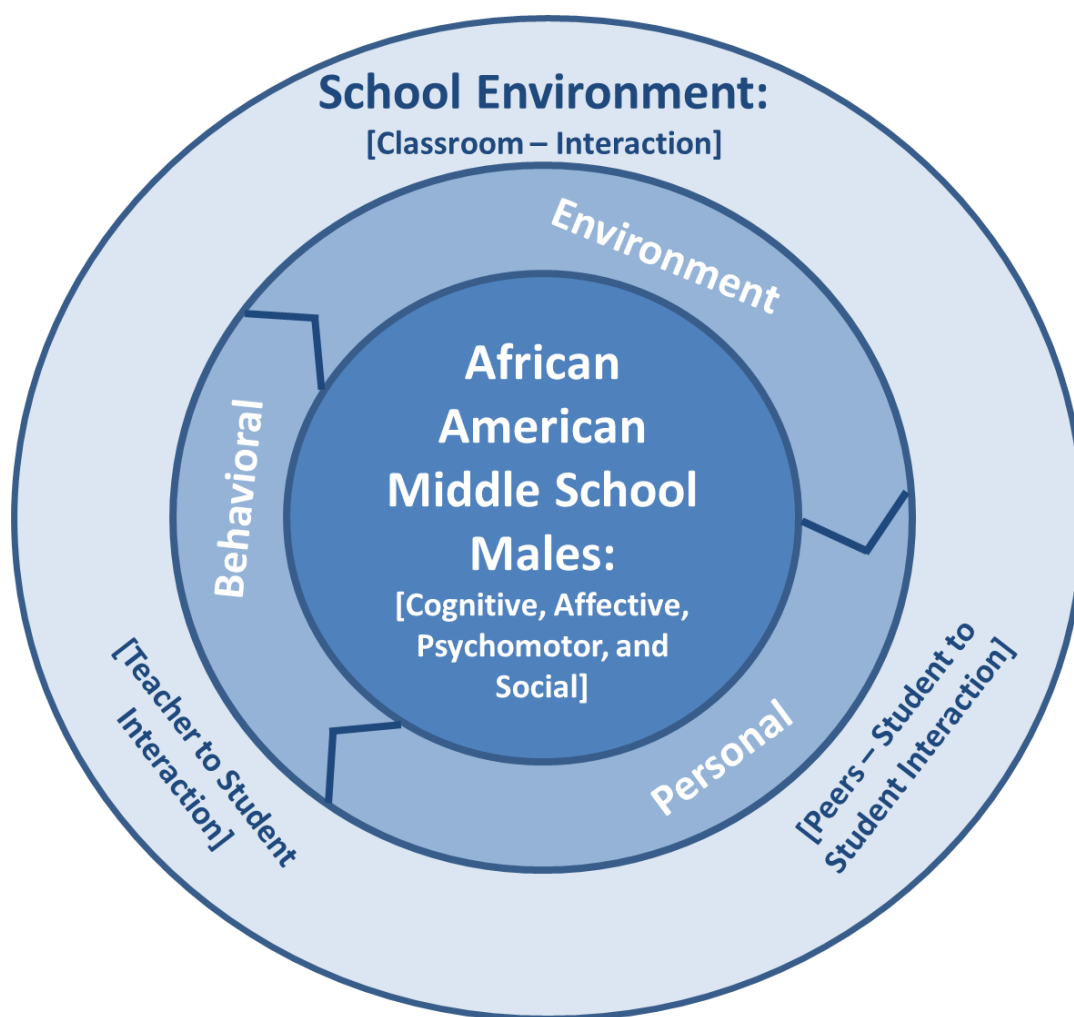


Figure 3. The Holman-Nash Compass of Personal Agency ©.

Conversely, when there is a sense of value and belonging accompanied by a healthy sense of self and self-identity, behavior proved conducive to learning and students participated more willingly in classroom activities. While there is a pervasive need to provide opportunities for students in reading, writing, arithmetic, collaborative assignments, and other critical learning skills, oftentimes the culture of the classroom is not conducive to the implementation of classroom pedagogies and engagement. The in-depth observational analysis of 17 African American middle school boys and their personal agency afforded significant insight into the knowledge of how self provides a dynamic platform for stimulating a creative mind. The understanding *of* and identification *with* self is essential to the governance of personal behavior, which informs the academic achievement of middle school African American boys. Ultimately, these analytical observations will have an enormous impact upon the actions taken to undergird the personal agency of the next generations of Black/African American male students.

Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism Model demonstrated a confluence of variables that grounded this research. This study afforded the researcher an opportunity to investigate categorical variables highlighted in this study. The in-depth observational analysis of the seventeen African American middle school male students is what informed the Holman-Nash Compass of Personal Agency. The extrapolation and identification of significant factors, as observed by the researcher, is integral to the positive trajectory of our African American middle school males in the classroom.

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*Appendix A*

## Institutional Research Board (IRB) Waiver

**IRB for DeVetta Holman Nash**

June 30, 2014

2:17 PM

To: DeVetta Holman Nash

From: Behavioral IRB

Date: 6/30/2014

**RE: Determination that Research or Research-Like Activity does not require IRB Approval**

**Study #: 14-0181**

**Study Title: Perception Analytics of an In-Depth Observational Analysis of 6th Grade African American Male Students' Personal Agency**

This submission was reviewed by the above-referenced IRB. The IRB has determined that this submission does not constitute human subjects research as defined under federal regulations [45 CFR 46.102 (d or f) and 21 CFR 56.102(c)(e)(l)] and does not require IRB approval.

**Study Description:**

This study aims to explore, through an observational study, the perception analytics of classroom experiences of African American 6th grade middle school boys.



If your study protocol changes in such a way that this determination will no longer apply, you should contact the above **IRB** before making the changes.

**CC: Edward Fort, Human Development And Services Department**

*Appendix B*

Institutional Research Board (IRB) Agency Consent Form



**Shepard Magnet Middle School**  
International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme

## **SHEPARD IB MAGNET MIDDLE SCHOOL**

May 20, 2014

Institutional Review Board  
North Carolina A&T State University  
1601 East Market Street  
Greensboro, NC 27411

To the Institutional Review Board:

DeVetta Holman Nash has the permission of Shepard IB Magnet Middle School to conduct research for her study, Perception Analytics of an In-depth Observational Analysis of 6<sup>th</sup> Grade African American Male Students' Personal Agency, through this school. The details of this study have been explained to us, and we support this research.

Please contact me for any further questions at 919.560-3938 or ericka.boone@dpnc.net.

Sincerely,

---

**Name**

---

**Title**

*Appendix C*

Osler-Holman-Nash Personal Agency Assessment Instrument

**The Osler-Holman-Nash Observable African American Male Personal Agency Assessment Instrument ©**

What are the Personal Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?

**A. What are the Personal Factors affecting the African American male student:**

	Positive	Negative	Non-Existent
1. Esteem?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Self-Concept?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Efficacy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What are the Behavioral Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?

**B. What are the Behavior Factors affecting the African American male student:**

	Positive	Negative	Non-Existent
4. Verbal Expression?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Physical Expression?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Non-Verbal Expression?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What are the Environmental Factors affecting the classroom experiences of the African American male 6<sup>th</sup> Grade middle school student?

**C. What are the Environmental Factors affecting the African American male student:**

	Positive	Negative	Non-Existent
7. Gym?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. School?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Classroom?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

How has the Personal Agency positively affected testing, if at all?

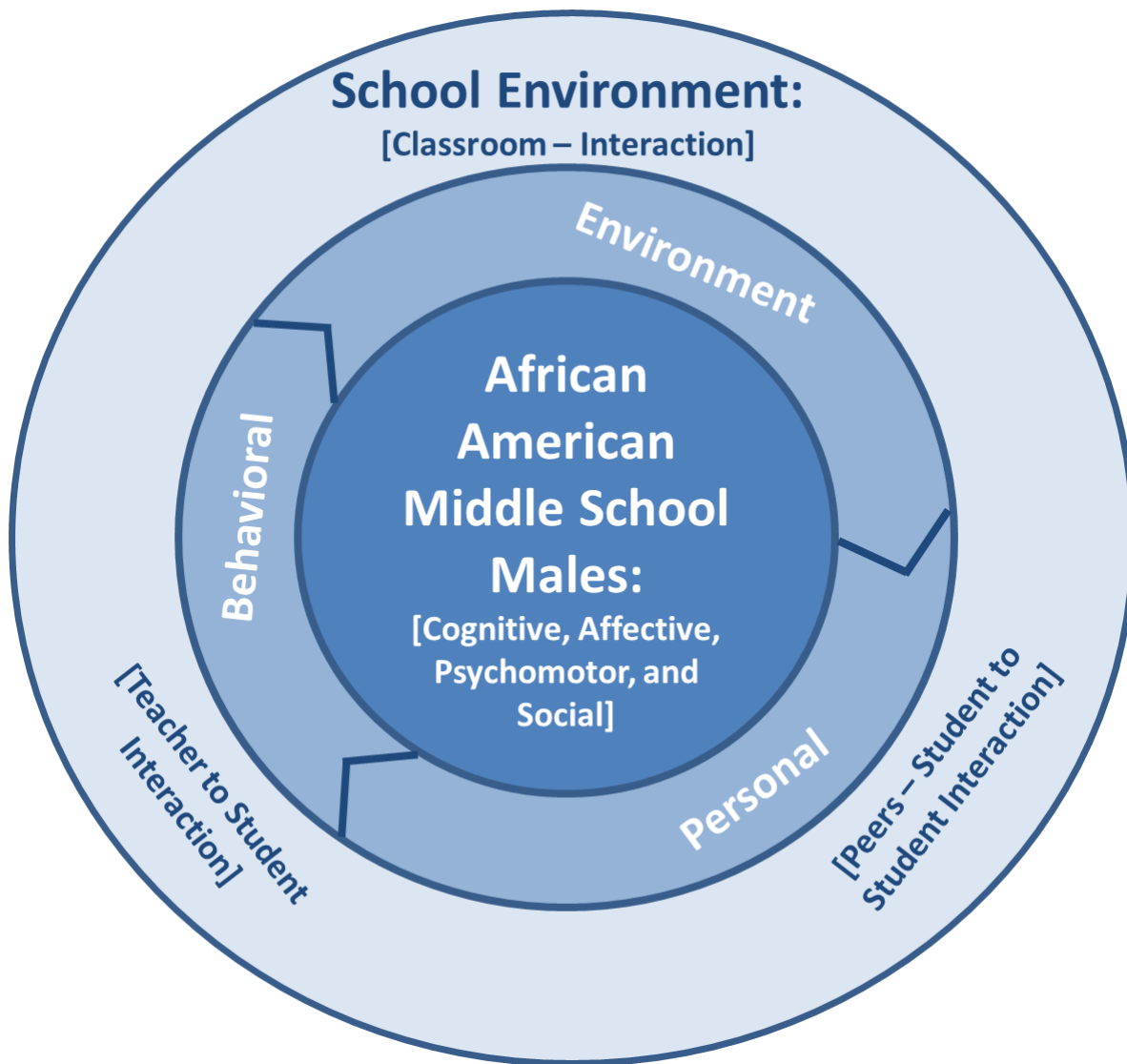
What is the observation of the Personal Agency intervention in the school setting?

What is the teacher involvement in the Personal Agency of the student in the school setting?

How does the student interact in the environment based on the Personal Agency intervention?

Appendix D

The Nash Compass of Personal Agency ©



*Appendix E*

## Monograph

***“A Voice for the Voiceless”***

The shrill sound of the bell rang as soon as I opened of the doors of the school building.....brrrrrrrrrg!! A cacophony of giggles, laughter and loud voices filled the hallways. The smell of floor wax took me to a place and time when my grandmother used to shine the floors of Ms. Adcock. I used to help Gancy carry the laundry to Ms. Adcock’s big white house. The shine was so brilliant; you could see yourself in the hardwood floors of Ms. Adcock’s parlor. Oh, by the way, Ms. Adcock was the rich white elderly lady my grandmother worked for; I used to accompany Gancy (my grandma) and sit in the kitchen, waiting patiently, watching her as she mopped the floors with that *same* wax I smelled today in the hallway..... I will never forget that smell!

Abruptly, I was pulled back into reality as a student quickly brushed passed me, and yelled over her shoulder, “Oh! ‘scuse me!” But on this particular morning, I could not see the floors because at least 200 students were bustling in the hallway, moving at jet paced speed, papers rustling, lockers clanging shut, greeting each other with high fives, and “Hey girl, did you hear about Kanye and Jay Z?” I watched in fascination as the second bell sounded.....brrrrrrrrrg!! Just as loud as the hustle and bustle had been before.....in a moment’s time, those sounds dissipated. Students scattered and made their way into the classrooms. It was then and *only then* that I could see the hallway floors and yes, yes, they had that same shine as the shine my grandmother left on Ms. Adcock’s parlor floors as she scrubbed on all fours.

As I made my way to the principal’s office, I smiled at the visual images on the school walls.....Sojourner Truth; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; President Barack Obama; George Washington Carver; President Nelson Mandela; Fannie Lou Hamer; Rosa Parks.....all real life people whose shoulders we stand on so that we can rise....rise....and rise some more. I felt a sense of pride seeing so many historical and present day visual images illuminated in a way that served as a reminder to each student, the endless possibilities of what each of them could become. It was a visual history lesson of to

serve as reminder that you too, can achieve. Each one of you can do hard things. It was the pride that filled my spirit that made me hope these same images would touch the spirits of the students who traversed the hallways of this school each day. *Or*, did these visual images, these powerful replications of giants in our history mean anything at all to the students?

As I waited for Ms. Boone, the office was a quiet respite from the hustle and bustle of the hallway. Finally, Principal Boone walked out and greeted me, as I was beckoned into her office. Wow!...now, I could see why the halls were so filled with historical images. Ms. Boone's office displayed Paul Robeson, Thurgood Marshall, Barbara Jordan, Shirley Chisholm, and the list goes on. She made it a point to tell me, with great pride, that any student, who found themselves sitting in her office, *knew* who these individuals were before they left her office. As we began to discuss the reason for my visit, all of a sudden, the nice tranquil sounds of jazz radio was interrupted by, "You are blaming me! Why are you blaming me? It wasn't just me!! I didn't do it!! It was a sound of desperation, fear and sadness. The voice sounded eerily familiar, as I looked at the principal and she looked at me, bewildered. Again, the quivery voice persisted with, "You're blaming me! Why are you blaming me?!! Why won't you believe me?" The curt response was, "What is your parents' number? We're going to call them right now!" The adult voice, of course, was that of the Assistant Principal .... extremely frustrated and impatient. Finally, Ms. Boone leaned back to peer into the corridor. Her chair squeaked and tilted so far that I thought, surely, her frame would hit the floor. The exchange between the student and the administrator continued until the student finally caught sight of Ms. Boone's eye.

Immediately, the student quieted down and all I could hear were heaves of tears....sobbing, the sucking up of air, mucous, and more tears. The cries of this child sounded too familiar. By this time, blood was thumping in my ears and my stomach felt queasy. I felt ill at ease. Something in my gut knew that I had heard this voice before. As the child was being guided to the principal's office, I held my breath waiting to see the face of the young boy who rounded the corner. My heart was in my mouth and my heart was racing twice the normal heartbeat. Surely, I knew that voice.....

Then entered, the student who was so upset.....Tayvion Haaq. When Tay, as we call him, saw me, he broke into tears again. It was Tayvion, from my son's Sunday school class. Of *course*, I knew this voice; he is the young boy whose Grandmama attends our church. You see, he lives with his Grandma now. His mother just left him there. He has been in my home on so many occasions. Tayvion wore black tattered jeans, a white tee shirt and brand new black, red and white Lebron James' high top sneakers. What in the world could Tayvion have done? I immediately rose from my chair and consoled him. Why? Well, because I know Tayvion. His Grandma is on a fixed income. She encouraged Tayvion to mow grass during the summer to earn "spending change" for the school year. I know that Tayvion is a child who tries to fit in. I also know that Tayvion's home circumstances are *not* the best. I can also see the look on Tayvion's face; it is one of embarrassment, hurt and desperation. Tayvion looks at the floor with humiliation. His face is wet with tears and his nose is still running. Tayvion takes his arm to wipe the mucous away, but continues to whimper as he tries to control his emotions.

Ms. Madison, the Assistant Principal then proceeds to tell the principal about the "incident" in the hallway. Before she could proceed any further, Ms. Boone held her hand up and asked her to give Tayvion time to calm down. Tayvion sat beside me and I gave him tissues to clean his face, wipe his hands and wipe his arms. I looked at him; however, he averted his gaze and instead, looked at his new Lebron sneakers. Finally, after several minutes....which seemed to be eons, the principal asked Tayvion what happened in the hallway. At first, he remained silent with his head still bowed. After some gentle coaxing, the flood gates lowered. Tayvion was accustomed to being bullied; it seemed his brand new pair of Lebron James sneakers were "knock offs" and the kids in the hallway let him know it, in no uncertain terms. The taunts, and laughter in the hallway reduced him to tears and ultimately....to retaliation. He knew that this was no way to begin his school year but he felt so ashamed that the shoes he had worked so hard for were not "real". Just as the Assistant Principal came around from Hall A, she saw Tayvion slamming his locker and heard him spewing a few choice words at the bullying hecklers. Yelling in the hallway (and using a few choice words) is not acceptable on school grounds. Hence, Tayvion was escorted to the main office without having a chance to explain. Ms. Boone and I talked to him about how

to respond in situations of difficulty by exercising emotional control, self-regulation, problem-solving skills and notifying adults to handle injustices in school. Tayvion finally looked up with a long, sad face and said quietly, “*Yes, Ma’am*”. He was by that time, deflated and exhausted. I had tears in my eyes.

Instead of being given ISS (in-school suspension), Tayvion was afforded the opportunity to have a “voice”. His voice was heard by the principal and by me. He was then allowed to go back to class. On that one particular day, Tayvion needed an advocate....a *voice for the voiceless*. I, unequivocally, could speak to the character of Tayvion. He is a good kid...struggling against the odds. I thought to myself, how many Tayvions are there in school today whose parents (or grandparents) cannot come to school, cannot take the time off from work, or may not even have transportation to come to school to investigate disciplinary matters? This is just a rhetorical question. But, a genuine and necessary question to consider, just the same. All I know is this: I would want someone to do the same for my son.

*In fact*, Tayvion’s desk is right beside my son’s.