Making youth matter: Exclusion and its impact on the school lives of African-American students

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Making Youth Matter:
Exclusion and its Impact on the School Lives of African-American Students

by

Celeste L. Hawkins

Dissertation

Submitted to the College of Education
Eastern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Educational Studies
Urban Education

Dissertation Committee:
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May 13, 2014
Ypsilanti, Michigan
Dedication

To my husband Kevin for loving me unconditionally

To my children for being patient

To all my family and friends for being supportive

In honor of a phenomenal woman who liberates the mind, spirit and encourages us all to rise

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise.

Out of the huts of history’s shame
I rise

Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise

I’m a Black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise

Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear
I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

An excerpt from the poem by Dr. Maya Angelou (1978), “Still I Rise”
Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This qualitative dissertation study explored how exclusion and marginalization in schools impact the lives of low-income African-American students. The study focused on the perspectives of youth attending both middle and high schools in Michigan, and investigated how students who have experienced forms of exclusion in their K–12 schooling viewed their educational experiences. In addition to the voices of youth, the perspectives of parents, social workers, and coaches were presented and analyzed. Key themes that emerged from the study were lack of care, lack of belonging, disrupted education, debilitating discipline, the need for language diversity, and persistence and resilience. These themes were analyzed in relation to their intersectionality with language, culture, ethnicity, race, class, and gender.

The conceptual frameworks shaping the study included Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Critical Race Theory, Goffman’s (1963) seminal work on stigmatization, stereotyping and exclusion, and a Rights-Based Framework. A phenomenological approach was utilized to explore the emic meanings of students’ experiences, in combination with a critical ethnographic framework to analyze the findings in relation to broader macro-social issues of race, class, gender, language, and educational achievement.

The findings from the study consistently revealed the negative impact of exclusionary policies and practices on students’ experiences in terms of social well-being and academic achievement, and the pervasive deficit assumptions that harmed their potential and possibilities for success. However, the findings also revealed students’ persistence and resilience in overcoming barriers despite their circumstances. Implications highlighted students’ strengths and attributes by challenging the dominant deficit-based educational discourse and advocating for the inclusion of the missing voices of students. Recommendations targeted educational
policy and practice, social work interventions and supports, as well as alternatives to zero
tolerance disciplinary policies. Ultimately, the study aimed to inform and shape both educational
policies and practices by promoting culturally relevant pedagogical practices that engaged
African-American students in their school lives.

*Keywords*: African-American students, exclusion, zero-tolerance, Culturally Relevant
Pedagogy, Critical Race Theory, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), qualitative
research
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The history of education in the United States is intertwined with inequities that intersect with race/ethnicity, class, gender, disability, and language. Disparities in education have plagued the U.S. for decades with few reform efforts resulting in positive, sustainable change for non-dominant groups that experience marginalization and feelings of “otherness” in schools. Despite attempts to respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse population of students attending public schools today, policies and practices have fallen short of addressing the needs of those students who are most vulnerable to exclusion and marginalization. Shifting the focus from the individual to the education system reframes the discourse from “getting the child ‘ready’ for school,” to how do we get “the school ‘ready’ to serve increasingly diverse children?” (Swadener, 1995, p. 18).

Ethnic minority students, particularly African Americans, are overrepresented in special education and discipline rates, but underrepresented in gifted and talented programs and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. According to Cadrichon (2013) in the report Climate Change: Providing Equitable Access to a Rigorous and Engaging Curriculum, African-American students are less likely than their White peers to be enrolled in AP courses, to take an AP test, and to pass it. Academic disparities have been linked to specific characteristics such as race, class, disability, gender, language, and have been critical problems affecting African-American student achievement and success in schools (Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Condrington & Fairchild, 2012; Ford, 1996, 2003).

This dissertation explores the lived experiences and perceptions of low-income African-American students who have been excluded or marginalized in schools. Research consistently demonstrates that many low-income and minority students continue to be excluded from
meaningful participation in educational, social, and cultural opportunities, thus diminishing their chances of realizing their full potential (Fine, 1991; Lipman, 1998; Oakes, 1985). The impact of this exclusion is evidenced in disparities between dominant and non-dominant groups in areas of academic achievement, unintentional and intentional tracking into lower-level classes, discipline rates, lower teacher expectations for children of color, inadequate and under-resourced schools in vulnerable and oppressed communities, and a deficit-based discourse within education systems that promotes inequities (Gorski, 2013; Gutiérrez, Asato, Santos, & Gotanda, 2002; Oakes, 1985). Valencia (2011) further expounds on the adverse impact and persistence of deficit-based thinking by discussing how the deficit model places its focus on “linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior” as reasons for individual deficits, rather than systemic factors contributing to students’ failure (p. 7). Dudley-Marling and Lucas (2009) point to a language of pathology that labels and marginalizes students according to race, language, and class. They criticize “the willingness—even eagerness—of many educators and educational policy makers to accept explanations for academic failure that implicate the language and culture of poor children and their families as the cause of their academic struggles” (p. 368). Street (1995) further argues that educational researchers must critically examine the ways in which they become complicit in perpetuating stereotypes among certain groups and must challenge the dominant discourse that marginalizes students. Hence, the aim of this study is not just to shed light on the disparities impacting African-American students but rather to counter and disrupt the dominant deficit-based discourse and the misleading assumptions that attempt to frame the experiences of African-American students as a monolithic group.

It has been widely documented that African-American students in schools experience discrimination based on race, language, culture, and socioeconomic status (Delpit, 1995; Delpit
& Dowdy, 2002; Irvine, 2003; Mahiri, 1998); yet despite these documented realities, low-income African American children and their parents continue to be framed and blamed for their academic underachievement (Delpit, 1995; Noguera, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Taylor, 1997). While this may present a dire picture, it is important to highlight—as the students themselves point out in this study—that there are African-American students who consistently prove that “not all African Americans are ‘substandard,’ ‘deficient,’ or ‘challenging’ to work with in education. The reality is many African Americans are succeeding” (Milner, 2012, p. 3). Although Milner contends that educators should focus on strengths rather than perceived weaknesses, it should be noted that the descriptors “substandard” and “deficient,” are not acceptable identifiers to use in categorizing any individual or group (Milner, 2012). Several student narratives in this study revealed positive experiences when students were exposed to alternative schooling environments that were supportive and nurturing. There were some students who were supported in their educational experiences and succeeded because of them, while others demonstrated resilience and succeeded in spite of their experiences in schools. And just as there are variations in the stories and experiences of African-American students, there are also variations in the reasons and conditions leading to academic success or failure in schools.

Within the sociology of education literature, reproduction theory explores the ways in which social inequalities structured by race and class are reproduced and maintained through school practices (Apple, 1990; Fine & Weis, 2001). Lipman (2004) echoes these arguments as she aptly appraises how student access and opportunities to learn are often differentiated by race, ethnicity, disability, and class. This dissertation builds on reproduction theory by suggesting that social class is not the only dimension reproduced in schools. The issue is not just the poor academic performance of African-American students; rather, it is the way in which schools allow
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for the perpetuation and maintenance of hierarchical race relations in which Black youth are subordinated and seen as all that is negative (Monroe, 2005). As Weis (1990) notes, the reproduction of the existing social order is not simply the reproduction of wealth but also of “power and privilege” (p. 3). Moreover, as Erickson (1987) writes, “domination and alienation of the oppressed does not simply happen by the anonymous workings of social structural forces. People do it” (p. 353). Within reproduction theory, authors such as Lipman (2004) critically interrogate how school policies consciously or unconsciously reproduce and maintain educational and social inequalities; how to combat dysconscious and institutional racism that promotes and encourages the acceptance of White dominance as the norm; and how racialization maintains stereotypical assumptions about African-American students’ underachievement, language, culture, home environment, and ways of knowing the world.

According to Anderman (2002), an increased sense of belonging and inclusion for some students may lead to other students feeling greater levels of perceived social rejection, resulting in the latter having more problems in school. Inequitable practices and discrimination create conditions that further exacerbate instances of educational inequality as non-dominant groups continue to be marginalized due to exclusionary policies, practices, and pedagogies that lead to disruptions in students’ education and future life trajectories (Apple, 1990; Delpit, 1995; Kozol, 1991; Noguera, 2003). As normative expectations are constructed by the dominant culture, differences are highlighted that systematically and categorically structure various forms of inequality, thereby producing deficient identities (Gorski, 2013). Deficit-based research and educational practices often frame African American students as less capable of learning by identifying them as being “at risk.” Te Riele (2006) examines how the identification of being “at risk” through a variety of educational mechanisms may produce feelings of not being good
enough, or not belonging in school, effectively destabilizing a student’s sense of self. The academic abilities of African Americans are influenced by the unique challenges they face based on their social, historical, and economic identities. Their social identities are often devalued as they are reduced to a set of negative assumptions, judgments, stereotypes, and subjected to discriminatory policies and practices stemming from years of historical disparities and deficit-based thinking (Bell, 1992; Ford, 2003). Delpit (1995) describes a “fog” in schools that stigmatizes and marginalizes students of color; she posits, “It is a deadly fog formed when the cold mist of bias and ignorance meets the warm reality of children of color in our schools” (p. xxiii).

Framing his theory of human capabilities, Sen (2000) argues how limited access to supports and opportunities diminishes the ability of individuals to exercise their full capabilities and to live the life they desire. Sen further points out how “capability deprivation” leads to long-lasting social exclusion, resulting in “capability failures” (p. 5). While income may determine the type of life one is able to lead, thereby creating greater access to opportunities and well-being, the non-material impacts of poverty, such as isolation and exclusion, are often far more devastating. Kozol (1991) argues that schools serving low-income, minority students often have limited access to resources, which consequently diminishes their opportunity to learn. Class is explicitly discussed throughout his work as he analyzes the value of property rights and its impact on education. Kozol contends that those with “better” property are essentially the recipients of “better” schools as curriculum in schools represents a form of intellectual property that is correlated with the property values of the land where the school is located.

The United States Census Bureau (2011) reports African American children are far more likely to live in poverty than children of any other race, stating: “the poverty rate among Black
children is 38.2%, more than twice as high as the rate among Whites” (p. 4). These issues are compounded by the fact that students today are attending schools that are more segregated than they have been in years, particularly in urban areas where both “White flight” and a scarcity of African American teachers and administrators are common, largely due to desegregation policies established during the era of civil rights legislation (Crenshaw, 1988; Irvine, 1988; Taueber, 1990).

While poverty clearly restricts access to freedoms and opportunities, including educational access, it is important to point out how increased opportunities may lead to different outcomes. For example, affirming and fostering students’ academic abilities leads to increased levels of academic achievement, self-confidence, and positive identity, thus reducing the “negative ability stereotypes” that African-American students may encounter (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 127). Much of the research argues that it is imperative for educators to focus on students’ strengths, capabilities, and cultural and intellectual resources so that they do not rely on deficit assumptions as an explanation for academic failure. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) elucidate, “Language and cultural diversity, poverty, crime and drug ridden neighborhoods may determine opportunity to learn, not capacity to learn” (p. 134). How these issues are addressed in our culture calls into question assumed priorities, values, and commitments.

The conceptual framework of exclusion and marginalization serves as a contextual backdrop to understand how social exclusion discourages participation and serves as a mechanism that disengages students from school. In this qualitative research study, in-depth interviewing foregrounds the voices of students based on their experiences of schooling, followed by the perceptions of parents, coaches, and social workers. These voices and experiences are analyzed thematically in relation to the intersectionality of race, gender, class,
and language within educational settings, and related to relevant interdisciplinary literature and
critical theoretical frameworks.

**Problem Statement**

The education system in the United States is, by and large, effectively failing large
numbers of African-American youth. African Americans’ experiences in education have been
linked to educational inequality for decades, with explanations focusing on student deficiencies
obscuring a systematic critique or call to action on the part of educational institutions to address
profound disparities among dominant and non-dominant groups. There is a critical need to
address the educational needs of African-American students by teachers and educational
researchers alike. Disparities in academic achievement along the lines of race and class remain
problematic, particularly among low-income African-American students who often face
exclusion, stereotypes, and racial discrimination in U.S. schools. African-American students
experience disproportionate rates of academic failure, discipline, drop-out rates, and special
education services. These experiences stem from, and are linked to, assumptions that African-
American students are less motivated, more disruptive, and inherently less intelligent and less
capable of academic success—assumptions that impact such students’ self-esteem, identity, and
efficacy and, in turn, their success or failure. It is widely documented that self-esteem, self-
efficacy, motivation, and attitudes of resilience significantly influence students’ school outcomes
(Bandura, 1993; Ford, 2003; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003).

**Deficit perspectives.** Oakes (1985) contends that we have failed to consider that what
happens in schools might actually be contributing to “unequal educational opportunities and
outcomes” (p. xiv). Although this statement was made almost three decades ago, these pervasive
issues remain prevalent today. She further states, “We cannot have educational excellence until
we have educational equality” (p. xiv). Oakes points out how barriers to educational equality have focused mainly on the problems of poor and minority students and their families, primarily viewed as products of deteriorating communities, broken homes and family structures, and thus labeled as culturally disadvantaged and unmotivated. Subsequently many African American and low-income students have become targeted as scapegoats and identified as deficient, based on their “homes, their neighborhoods, their language, their cultures, even [in] their genes” (Oakes, 1985, p. xiv). Research during the past decade supports the claim that many African-American students living in low-income communities are not provided with a quality education (Compton-Lilly, 2007; Cushman, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2009, 2010; Delpit, 2012). However, what remains absent from the dominant discourse are the structural and environmental inequities that perpetuate and promote educational failure among African American students. Cornel West (2001) purports that in order “to engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of Black people but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes” (p. 3).

In Fine’s Framing Dropouts (1991), the majority of African-American students during the mid-1980s attended predominantly segregated schools, were over-represented in special education, and represented disproportionate numbers of suspensions, expulsions, and drop-out rates. Yet over two decades later, those same patterns are still pervasive across the nation where students who attend high poverty and segregated schools are most vulnerable. In schools today, African-American students living in low-income neighborhoods are likely to attend racially re-segregated, under-funded, under-resourced, and under-performing schools. African American student achievement has steadily declined, particularly in urban school districts where nationally drop-out rates are over 50% (Noguera, 2008), with suspension rates mirroring those same
patterns. For example, in Pontiac, Michigan 67.5% of African-American students were suspended during the 2009–2010 school year; similarly in Heidelberg, Mississippi 63.5% of African-American students were suspended (Rich, 2012).

Critical factors contributing to the academic experiences of African Americans are the stereotypical perceptions and negative assumptions that they are less capable of attaining academic success. These perceptions and assumptions are embedded in lower teacher expectations, scaled-down curriculum, and limited knowledge about the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy—all of which contribute to the ever widening academic achievement gap and inequities in school along the lines of race and class (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Landsman, 2004). Academic achievement among African-American students has seen alternating periods of progress and stagnation over the past several decades in schools, yet the pervasive systematic inequalities impacting students of color have remained constant (Kozol, 1991; Orfield, 2012). One of the greatest challenges facing schools in the U.S. is how to effectively and consistently engage and embrace those students whose histories, culture, values, and socio-economic status are different from mainstream society.

Research focusing on the academic achievement of African-American students often compares them to White students and the achievement rates between these groups consistently demonstrate that Whites outperform African Americans in numerous areas. These disparities in achievement are often linked to race, class, and cultural differences (Fine, 1981; Gutiérrez, 2005, 2006; Oakes, 1985). For example, the achievement gap is largely understood as a discourse about African Americans, Whites, and poor students, therefore the discourse is often framed in a way that speaks more profoundly to issues other than achievement, such as race and class (Noguera, 2008; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Deficit-laden approaches are a detriment to
schools as they perpetuate stereotypes and inequitable practices that marginalize poor students and students of color. Gorski (2013) argues that it is often difficult for educators to examine how their own beliefs, assumptions, judgments, and attitudes might influence their expectations for poor students and further contends that educators need to become “equity literate educators” and begin to “unlearn” many of the stereotypes that are perpetuated in mainstream media (p. ix), such as those by educational consultant Ruby Payne, whose workshops about children in poverty have been adopted widely in school districts across the country. Sato and Lensmire (2009) describe Payne’s approach as: “Grossly over-generalized and deficit laden” (p. 365). A few select examples of Payne’s deficit-based approach are documented in a list of stereotypical behaviors described in her book *A Framework of Understanding Poverty* (1998) to describe low-income students who are depicted in the following ways:

- Laugh[s] when disciplined… Make[s] inappropriate or vulgar comments… [lacks] the language or belief system to use conflict resolution skills… Cannot follow directions—little procedural memory… Extremely disorganized… a lack of respect for authority and the system; cheat[s] or steal[s]… (pp. 79-80).

As this list reveals, Payne characterizes low-income children as deficient—socially, cognitively, and emotionally, perpetuating the stereotype that low-income equates to inferior and serves as a satisfactory explanation for students’ underachievement.

**An anti-deficit framework.** The discourse related to the underachievement of African-American students often focuses heavily on the deficits rather than the strengths and assets of students and their families. This deficit paradigm is reinforced in the media, academic discourse, and through educational policies and practices resulting in stereotypic views about low-income African-American youth (Spencer, Tinsley, Dupree, & Fegley, 2012). Often absent from the
discourse are the perspectives of students, their parents/caretakers, and what has led to shaping their lived experiences both in and out of school. While it is important to focus on anti-deficit approaches to reframe the discourse on how to promote successful outcomes among African-American students, it is equally important to be intentional and explicit about identifying what the problems are, why they persist, and what can be done from a practice and policy perspective to promote changes that yield positive outcomes.

It is widely documented in research that African American children are disproportionately represented in underachievement rates, discipline rates, and special education (Delpit, 1995; Fine, 1991; Irvine, 2003; Mahiri, 1988; Noguera, 2008; US Department of Education-Office of Civil Rights, 2013; US Department of Education, 2014). African American males, in particular, present a dire picture as it relates to educational outcomes with limited solutions on how to engage and consistently promote success among these students. The growing number of low-income minority students living in urban communities has been perceived as problematic and emblematic of a throwaway subculture. More often than not, poor and minority students are perceived as not needing the necessary supports, care and access to resources that promote a transition from healthy adolescence to a healthy adulthood (Tate IV et al., 2014). While identifying the problem is important, it must also be counterbalanced by the perspectives of African-American students and their families to highlight their relative strengths, their points of resilience, as well as those factors which contributed to their success and challenges by placing a focus on what works, and what must happen on a practice and policy level to promote continued success (Harper, 2012).

Harper (2012) conducted a national qualitative research study and interviewed 219 African American male undergraduate students from a variety of public and private colleges and
universities. Of the 73.2% of students who attended and graduated from public schools and went on to college, over half of these students represented low-income and working class backgrounds. The study notably demonstrated that many of the participants who graduated from public high schools were successful in college regardless of their socio-economic status. One of the noteworthy findings, however, also revealed that many of the teachers in their K-12 schooling neglected to effectively engage all Black males in the same way, and that certain achievers were often favored in classrooms. The participants indicated that White female teachers in particular had difficulty engaging with many Black students and that only those who were favored by the teacher were identified as students worth investing in and seemed to receive positive attention. This lead one of the participants in Harper’s study to conclude that “it was serendipity, not aptitude, that largely determined which Black men succeeded” (p. 15).

Harper developed an anti-deficit achievement framework with questions using anti-deficit reframing to explore students’ perspectives in order to counteract the dominant deficit-oriented questions which often focused on the negative aspects of student experiences. The three pipeline points identified were: pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post college success. Harper’s approach has contributed to reframing the discourse by intentionally interrogating those factors that contribute to success utilizing a strengths-based perspective. The framework focuses on how families contribute to success, the impact of K-12 school forces, resources outside of school, engagement activities in and out of classroom that enrich student experiences, and how students were prepared to pursue graduate school or careers post undergraduate studies.

However, beyond the deficit view that must be challenged about African-American students, lies a critical perspective from youth themselves, whose counter narratives about their
schooling provide a lens from which to view their lived world and experiences. This too can challenge the dominant narrative by highlighting their experiences and juxtaposing them against an educational system that frequently marginalizes and stigmatizes African-American students through inequitable practices and policies. It is important to place an emphasis on how youth believe they are perceived, to view the world through their eyes in order to focus on what works, and to highlight their persistence, resilience, and points of pride and success, despite the odds.

In order to combat the issues of racial inequality, underrepresentation, and low expectations in schools, this dissertation focuses on student voices to understand the academic and social barriers African-American students face in classrooms and society. Counter-narratives offer a perspective on resilience, persistence and strength from a student’s point of view, therefore engaging their voices and participation is critical to informing and shaping educational policies and practices.

**Inequity in educational practices: Language, literacy and disproportionality.**

Disparities in education, both past and current, demonstrate how minority children continue to be significantly impacted by inequitable practices and policies. Examples of students adversely impacted by inequitable practices can be found in two groundbreaking legal cases that focused on language use among African Americans in schools. In 1979, a small group of parents whose children spoke African American Vernacular English (AAVE) at Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School, widely known as the Black English case, sued the Ann Arbor School District Board, claiming their children were not receiving equal educational opportunities because their home and community language was being devalued and they were being taught to use the “Standard English” language. In 1997, nearly two decades later in California, the controversial Oakland Resolution on Ebonics had the purpose of preparing teachers to teach culturally and
linguistically diverse students by using their home language as a resource to help them acquire skills in Standard English. Both cases provided insight into the use of AAVE and underlying factors that perpetuate the marginalization of students of color, particularly African Americans who speak a stigmatized dialect. Although both cases focused on language use specifically, both were also about much more than language—namely, deeply entrenched historical policies and practices rooted in racism and division that devalue the culture, history, heritage, identity, and language of African Americans. Students representing these districts were denied an appropriate education based on the unwillingness of educators to teach students using their home and community language as an asset, rather than viewing it as a deficit rendering them less capable of learning.

In these groundbreaking legal cases, what was missing was an understanding that minority community languages could be anything other than problematic. Due to the historic disadvantages faced by many African Americans, the public saw Ebonics in the Oakland Resolution as a burden that carried shame and embarrassment, not as a language with a richness tied to a culture that has legitimacy and credibility. Consequently, perpetuation of stereotypes and political posturing resulted in controversy, confusion, and limited educational progress among poor and minority students further marginalizing their identity, language, culture, and history (Oakland Resolution, 1996). A comparison of the academic performance of African American children in the Ann Arbor, Michigan case in 1978 and the Oakland, California case in 1997, reveals striking similarities, despite the different geographic regions and school districts with vastly different racial and ethnic demographics. In the liberal, affluent town of Ann Arbor in 1978, African Americans were struggling academically, overrepresented in disciplinary rates and underrepresented in honors classes. Likewise, in Oakland, the underachievement of African-
American students was astounding: though they comprised 53% of the students enrolled in the district, African-American students accounted for 80% of the suspensions, while 71% were receiving special education services, and the average GPA was a D+ (Perry, 1997).

In another legal case in July 2012, the ACLU filed a class action lawsuit against the State of Michigan on behalf of Highland Park Public School students and parents, asserting that the state and district failed to teach children how to read and further argued that this failure was a violation of their rights (Moss, 2012; Sands, 2012) and was in violation of the Michigan literacy standards as outlined in the revised school code (State of Michigan Revised School Code, Section 380.1278). The lawsuit rests on claims of state education policy violations; what may further complicate this issue, however, is the fact that there is no federal fundamental right to an education—the states are vested with that responsibility. Although the landmark case Brown v. Board of Education (1954) highlighted the significance of being afforded an equal education, there are still no legal protections to ensure that every child is guaranteed the right to a quality and equitable education (Archard, 2008). The achievement data for Highland Park School District reveals that students were failing and in many instances reading four to five grades below their expected grade level (Michigan Department of Education, 2011; Moss, 2012; Sands, 2012). The lawsuit indicated that only 10% of students in the district were “proficient” in reading despite receiving per pupil funding of $16,000 (Sands, 2012). Students were being moved from one grade to the next regardless of whether or not they had mastered the necessary skills. The precedent being set by this lawsuit can give voice and agency to other students and parents who believe the school system has ultimately failed them. The claimants in the case seek something we all consider basic and reasonable—the right for all children to receive a high quality education (Sands, 2012). Yet, for all its public discourse about valuing children and their
education, the U.S. has yet to ratify the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which guarantees that children have inherent educational, social, economic and cultural rights (CRC, 1989).

Within the disturbing data regarding academic achievement among African-American students, Noguera (2008) points specifically to the experiences of African American males who are stigmatized, excluded, and made “other” in school systems where their experiences present a particularly disturbing picture of disproportionality. African American males experience more severe punishments than other students and are less likely to be placed in academically rigorous classes or to benefit from supportive educational services and opportunities; in short, “rather than serving as a source of hope and opportunity, schools are sites where Black males are marginalized and stigmatized” (Noguera, 2008, p. 3).

Today we still grapple with an achievement and discipline gap in schools. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (2012), in the Ann Arbor school district, African-American students make up 18% of secondary students, but receive 58% of the expulsions. Although Black students comprise only 17% of the nation’s student population, they represent 34% of the students suspended and were 2.6 times more likely to be suspended than a White student in 2000 (Fancher, 2009). The disproportionate application of such harsh disciplinary measures to African-American students has limited their capacity to participate fully in their own education due to lost instructional time which contributes, in turn, to lower achievement.

Lipman (1998) has argued that “the overwhelming failure of schools to develop the talents and potentials of students of color is a national crisis” (p. 2). Racial inequalities, poverty, low standardized test scores, low graduation rates, drop-out rates, disproportionate representation in special education and discipline rates are all significant factors that contribute to the complex
issues drastically impacting academic achievement among African-American students. Our society continues to grapple with a legacy of racism, exclusion, and low expectations for African American children. The persistent and pervasive educational challenges facing our society have not produced adequate resolutions, which pose a constant threat and danger to the future of African-American students, communities, and our nation.

**Significance and Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate how exclusion and marginalization in schools intersect with race, class, gender, disability, and language, specifically as perceived and experienced by a small sample of low-income African-American students and their parents. The study also seeks to explore the impact of schooling practices that perpetuate their exclusion and marginalization, and to examine those educational practices that foster a sense of belonging and support. Youth and families of color often find themselves challenged by negative stereotypes and inequitable treatment in schools (Martin, 2006) making it difficult for them to advocate for themselves, thereby limiting their sense of agency. Although some parent beliefs and behaviors may buffer youth from the negative effects of such treatment, an awareness of how this may impact student experiences in school is important. Many research studies tend to focus on the classroom (pedagogy, instruction, and curriculum) or on students’ motivation, but such approaches decontextualize students’ locations within a complex learning system and a broader social context that includes relations with not only teachers, but also parents.

This study is significant because it highlights the perspectives of students and parents and identifies the latter as an additional, potent point of intervention. My research goals were to gain a more in-depth understanding of the schooling experiences of low-income African-American students with an additional interest in exploring marginalization and exclusion. The voices of
African-American youth are rarely heard in the education literature, and thus, commonly marginalized in larger conversations regarding how to improve their academic achievement. Parent voices are also a much-needed addition to the educational discourse.

My findings reveal that racial stereotypes and negative experiences affect not just how students perform, but also African American parents’ confidence in their own ability to advocate for their children. Importantly, however, my research also considers how parents’ positive beliefs and behaviors can impact their children, and thus identifies African American families as sources of strength, rather than dysfunction. As a result, the study yields significant information about the perceptions of African-American youth and families—a perspective that is currently lacking in the research literature.

In this study, I targeted the middle and high school years as a developmental period when parents’ racial attitudes might be particularly important in shaping youths’ academic interests and achievement. Studying parenting and academic outcomes in early adolescence is especially important because it is during this period that youth become increasingly aware of social identities such as race (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998). The information gathered from this study can be used to inform educational practices and policies, develop strategies to improve academic outcomes among African-American students, and highlight the importance of creating spaces in schools for students and parents to express themselves and feel comfortable and productive within the school environment. Historical knowledge and student-centered research helps provide us with an anchor to further understand the myriad issues impacting African-American students’ well-being, educational progress, and achievement.
Theoretical Frameworks

The work of critical theorists is important in illustrating how the exclusionary effects of educational practices in policy and pedagogy lead to marginalizing experiences in schooling among African-American students. Critical theorists such as Paulo Freire (1970) conceptualize marginalization as a process that excludes individuals from society based on various social identifiers such as race, language, ethnicity, culture or class. Freire discusses how society intentionally and strategically creates conditions that oppress others. In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire examines how inequality and discriminatory practices silence and oppress others in order to maintain the dominant power structure. He aptly characterizes the process by which the oppressed are taught that their marginalization is justified: “So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness” (p. 49). In contrast, Freire encourages individuals to see themselves as change agents who can challenge the dominant discourse by developing agency, resilience, and determination in order to speak out against acts of discrimination, oppression, injustice, and otherness.

Working from the same critical space as Freire, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides an analytic framework to understand the marginalization and stigmatization of African-American students, and to examine policies and practices that reproduce and maintain structures of inequality among students of color. A goal of CRT is to intentionally criticize how laws often systematically maintain racially based forms of social and economic oppression (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). As Derrick Bell (1992) has stated, CRT makes a valuable intervention in the academy by challenging dominant discourses, highlighting the social construction of racism, and valuing the perspectives and voices of people of color. CRT allows
for an examination of social conditions that oppress, exclude, or discriminate against others. Bell has pointed out, in particular, the failures of the legal system to enact change that eliminates educational inequality and disparities between Black and White children. He points, for example, to the historic Brown v. Board of Education case. Despite the apparent victory, Bell argues that the case’s real significance is in highlighting the subsequent inaction that has allowed the persistence of social, economic, and educational discrimination and oppression of African Americans in more covert forms. Other notable CRT scholars such as Charles Lawrence (1987), Lani Guiner (2004), Richard Delgado (1995), and Kimberle Crenshaw (1996) have similarly argued that social and economic oppression is constructed and reproduced through discriminatory practices, and that structures of power that only seem to shift when it is beneficial to the dominant culture and serves dominant interests—what Bell refers to as “interest convergence” (1980, p. 1). In short, Bell argues that White people will support racial justice only to the extent that there is something in it for them.

Critical Race Theory reminds us that, on the periphery, there are millions of marginalized voices that are shut out of the dominant narrative (Bell, 1989). These voices are rarely heard, yet they have their own stories and experiences that provide counter-narratives to the dominant discourse. Delgado (2000) highlights the importance of counter-storytelling that gives voice to “out groups, groups whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective—whose consciousness—have been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized” (Delgado, 2000, p. 60). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) define counter-storytelling as a way to tell a story that: “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (p. 144). By listening to the narratives of those who are oppressed
and underserved, counter-storytelling is a powerful tool that exposes and critiques the dominant discourse that perpetuates racial stereotypes.

These ideas occupy a central place in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy\textsuperscript{i} (CRP), the other framework informing this study. CRP is described by Ladson-Billings (1995) as a way to ensure academic excellence while also maintaining the “cultural integrity” of students (p. 476). In this approach, culturally responsive teachers build on the strengths of all students by incorporating their histories, traditions, identities, and diverse forms of self-expression into classroom teaching as a way to value their respective cultures and broaden their learning. Children need to know that they, their families, and their communities are respected and that they matter. Teachers play a critical role in helping students develop positive academic identities through inclusive pedagogical practices that embrace the rich cultural and linguistic diversity that all students bring to the classroom. For their part, teachers themselves must reflect critically on their own assumptions and biases in order to recognize and respect students’ diverse ways of knowing and learning.

Ladson-Billings (2009) and others have argued that employing CRP would help to address the disproportionate representations in special education and discipline rates among poor and minority students, by empowering students to build on their strengths and existing forms of knowledge. CRP can help to mitigate feelings of exclusion often felt by students who are making the transition from the ways of knowing in their home and community lives to the ways of knowing and practices privileged in school. By narrowing this gap, students may feel less alienated and more comfortable as they make the adjustment to school (Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In schools that embrace culturally relevant practices and foster supportive
environments, students feel empowered and self-confident, and develop positive academic identities (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

The voices that often go unheard remain at the forefront of this study. Covert forms of racism are often masked in everyday life and thus can easily be dismissed, further highlighting the importance of challenging the dominant discourse through counter-storytelling. The adaptive unconscious, defined as “mental processes that are inaccessible to consciousness but that influence judgments, feelings, or behaviors” (Wilson, 2002, p. 23) can unintentionally make others unaware of the privilege they maintain and reproduce in society, making it necessary to critically examine teaching pedagogy, school practices, policies, and their influence on student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Taking steps to critically examine assumptions, beliefs, and stereotypes as they relate to African-American students is important to combat a culture of low expectations that plagues many schools in the United States and contributes to learning environments that marginalize youth of color. Gutiérrez, Asato, Santos, and Gotanda (2002) highlight how “backlash pedagogy” places many students at greater risk of reaching their full potential as their educational trajectories are threatened by issues of inequity and discriminatory practices. “Backlash pedagogy,” they argue, has become an institutionalized response to diversity and difference, without consideration of the socio-historical context of racism and classism in this country and its manifestation in educational policies, practices, and outcomes. This poses a persistent and pervasive educational challenge.

One of the persistent challenges threatening the academic success of African-American students is a failure to recognize the importance of culture. Hegemonic views of learning and monolithic ways of speaking devalue the lived experiences, culture, and traditions that non-White students bring to school, thereby creating cultural incongruence and fostering
miscommunication between teachers and students (Heath, 1983). There are multiple pathways to learning, yet schools often promote practices that recognize and encourage only one way to learn, thereby disadvantaging all students who do not conform to that model. Here, the insights of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) are particularly informative. Noted psychologist Lev Vgotsky (1978) studied the relationships among children and adults, their communication interactions, and the influences of cultural, historical, and social settings. Vgotsky’s work played an integral role in the development of CHAT as a tool to overcome some of the most difficult challenges facing educational practices that place a focus on differences rather than deficits. CHAT illuminates how differences should be seen as assets that enhance and support collective learning among students and teachers (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003).

**Research Questions**

The dissertation examines the schooling experiences of low-income African-American students who are categorized as low-achieving, have been subjected to disciplinary action, and may receive special education and other support services. The main questions guiding the dissertation are: How do exclusion, marginalization, and language use impact the schooling experiences of African American children? How do the perceptions and past experiences of parents impact children’s schooling experiences? How do African-American students who are low-achieving, subject to disciplinary action, and/or receive support services experience their school lives? And in what ways do educational disciplinary policies serve to exclude students and how do students create their own meanings based on their lived experiences? These research questions encompass an examination of broad areas related to exclusion and marginalization, language use, culturally relevant pedagogy, equity and educational practices.
Chapter Organization

The dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides a broad overview and introduction to the research. Chapter 2 contextualizes the dissertation research within a review of relevant research and literature. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the dissertation. Chapter 4 includes an overview of the youth participants followed by seven case studies. In Chapters 5 and 6 the analysis is divided thematically: Chapter 5 focuses on the themes of lack of care, lack of belonging, and persistence and resilience, and draws on the additional perspectives of parents, social workers, and coaches; Chapter 6 examines the themes of disrupted education, debilitating discipline, and language games. And finally, Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation by discussing the implications of the research, and making recommendations for future study.
Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

In order to contextualize this study of exclusion and marginalization of African-American students, it is necessary to draw on several diverse and interdisciplinary bodies of literature about stigma, exclusion, race, social class, language, and school disciplinary policies that speak to inequities and policies and practices that have severely impacted many African-American youth and contributed to their marginalization.

The Scarlet Letters: Social Stigma and Exclusion

It is important to examine Goffman’s (1963) seminal work on stigma, social exclusion, and identity construction as it relates to African Americans as members of a racial group often subject to experiences of stigmatization, stereotyping, and exclusion (Major & O’Brien, 2005). Goffman identifies the nature of the persistent and damaging effects of social exclusion and stigma, stating: “there are those members of the lower class who quite noticeably bear the mark of their status in their speech, appearance and manner and who relative to the public institutions of our society, find they are second class citizens” (p. 145).

The term stigma originated with the Greeks, who used visual aids such as branding on a person’s body to show they were peculiar, ostracized, and to be avoided—in other words, a public outcast. The term stigma is identified as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” and reduces the individual “in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Slaves were branded by their masters to publically display their inferior status and their exclusion from the category of normal or accepted members of society. Lasting marks of difference have permeated our society through deeply embedded historical practices and policies rooted in slavery and segregation; today, these forms of division manifest in social,
economic, educational, and political inequalities that are reproduced and repackaged through institutional discrimination (Bell 1992; Noguera, 2003; Whitley, 2005). Frequently, stigmatizing labels are attached to groups and individuals in our society, absolving those in power of any accountability and responsibility to fight against discriminatory practices (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Stigmatized persons are juxtaposed against those who are considered “normal.” When we encounter people who are different from us, based on first judgments and appearance, we assign them to categories provided by the “normative expectations” of society. In short, stigma allows those who consider themselves “normal” to view those who are different as less human (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Goffman, 1963). Stigmatized groups are characterized as having different physical or social identifiers, thus categorizing and rationalizing the differences between “them” and “us” with a metaphoric line drawn in the sand not to be crossed, and creating a sense of otherness (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Urrieta & Quach, 2000).

Stigma is created through the construction of social identities often informed by stereotypes about individuals and groups that have persisted in the United States for decades. Negative attitudes and stereotypes impact behavior toward those who are diverse and not considered legitimate representatives of the dominant culture, such as minorities, physically disabled, linguistically diverse, and mentally ill persons (Crocker & Major, 1989; Goffman, 1963; Loury, 2005). Stereotypes and stigma are constructed in order to rationalize how and why certain groups are treated as inferior, greatly diminishing their identity, social capital, and sense of belonging, while also excluding them from resources, supports, and access to networks (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Social interactions in our society are facilitated and informed by institutions, organizations, media, and dominant discourses that structure “normal” expectations while
demarcating and devaluing difference (Katz, 1989). In the realm of education, deficit perspectives are constructed that attribute a lack of educational success to students, families, and communities, rather than addressing the social conditions that put children at risk of doing poorly, such as poverty, teacher quality, or inadequate school funding. This tendency to blame individuals, instead of examining structural conditions and discriminatory practices, perpetuates inequalities. In the United States educational reform efforts have largely focused on increasing students’ educational achievement, teacher quality and accountability, and comprehensive and “smarter” testing. Meanwhile, dominant educational discourse often ignores students’ voices, participation, and rights by perpetuating a silence about the toxic impacts of educational exclusion. The role of schools in maintaining and perpetuating structures of inequality marginalizes students based on intersecting strata of race, language, and social class (Bernstein, 1990, 1996; Giroux, 1997). The dominant perception is that education is the pathway for upward mobility, yet absent from this view is the fact that education is undermined by social forces that marginalize certain individuals and groups. Schools are like many other social institutions that reproduce inequities by promoting conformity and maintaining power structures that limit voice, choice, and full participation.

To frame this analysis, key theoretical constructs will be explored that examine ways in which social exclusion discourages participation among stigmatized groups by devaluing social identities. Media influence, along with prejudice and discrimination, contribute to the complex range of what shapes stigma. The powerful forces of stigma and social exclusion influence how people perceive themselves and are perceived by others in society. Perceptions impact how people respond, are treated and then interact in their environment, thus leading to behaviors that are often denounced and become negative self-perpetuating cycles in society (Whitley, 2005).
Certain individuals and groups are systematically excluded from accessing opportunities and supports based on social identifiers of race and class (Bourdieu, 1985; Whitley, 2005). Minorities and those in poverty, in particular, often have limited access to social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1981; Fine, 1994; Noguera, 2003) and they experience overt and covert instances of racism (Delpit, 1995) and the designation of “other” stigmatizes and marginalizes those who do not fit into hegemonic structures (Bourdieu, 1981; Urrieta & Quach, 2000). The limitations on accessing critical supports and access to various forms of social and educational capital can adversely impact the ability of individuals and groups to improve their life opportunities and chances, thus leading to feelings of isolation, alienation, and self-blame.

Social networks, friendships, and access to supports and resources are important predictors that can influence outcomes and well-being in the areas of economics, health, and education (Loury, 2005).

The media also influences our attitudes and behaviors, frequently de-sensitizing us to critical societal issues. Instances of disrupted education and family life are often clear indicators of broken and fragile communities lacking access to available supports and resources. The reinforcement of these images can be seen throughout society in media and institutions that often place blame on individual for their conditions, rather than assuming a collective responsibility to address the larger societal problems (Crocker & Major, 1989). The media plays a key role in highlighting differences and reproducing inequalities. Dominant views of minority youth in schools and public discourses echo media portrayals of Black people as synonymous with images of poor, shiftless, lazy, and dangerous criminals who do not value education or possess a work ethic (Lipman, 2004; Loury, 2005; Whitley, 2005).
Media distortion of these issues obscures the fact that racial disparities are a national problem plaguing our country (Whitley, 2005). Stereotypical images and words used to describe marginalized groups often confirm the existence of biased attitudes by maintaining a steady line of disconnect that points to faults of the individual rather than a societal obligation or responsibility to speak out against acts of ignorance and discrimination (Crocker & Major, 1989). As Loury (2005) states: “In the minds of many Americans, the tacit association of Blackness with ‘unworthiness’ distorts cognitive processes and makes it difficult to identify with the plight of people whom they see, mistakenly, as ‘simply reaping what they have sown’” (p. 4). This illustrates how racial stigma is reproduced through distorted portrayals in media and society that spread misinformation and urban myths.

**The History of Racial Stigma in Education**

The historical structures of power and privilege among dominant groups have limited the space for opposing viewpoints or opinions, frequently leading to a silencing of problematic issues related to race. Noguera (2003) discusses how society has failed to consider the “deeply embedded racially biased beliefs that historically have permeated American society-beliefs that have rationalized the differential treatment accorded to Black people and other racial minorities on the basis of their presumed inferiority” (p. 46).

The groundbreaking 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (No. 1, 347 U.S. 483), which found that segregation was “inherently unequal” and therefore unconstitutional, was an unprecedented attempt to challenge a profoundly unequal education system and deeply ingrained racial discrimination. Despite the legal victory in this case over six decades ago, however, pervasive and persistent instances of social, economic and educational discrimination and oppression among African Americans remain (Bell, 1992). This
landmark court case sought to eliminate racial stigma and create conditions in which racial equity in education could be realized. Yet, racial stigma remains a powerful phenomenon in U.S. society and continues to impede academic performance, shape classroom climates, and impact student–teacher relationships. Stigma also influences identity development and shapes how students feel about and view themselves, thus impacting their success in schools. Research points to the negative impacts of racial stigma, including feelings of self-hatred, alienation, exclusion, defeatist attitudes, and lowered expectations (Martin, 1998; Miller & Major, 2000). Zirkel (2005) argues that although the legal sanction to end racial segregation in public schools served as a first step, it did not end racial and ethnic stigma, as evidenced by the disparities still prevalent in schools today.

It is also important to note Siddle Walker’s (1996) groundbreaking study of education in a segregated, rural African American community during the 1930’s in North Carolina. The findings revealed that teachers and students had developed relationships that promoted and encouraged students to reach their highest potential despite their limited economic resources. Conversely, in schools today there is often a culture of low expectations, particularly in schools with high concentrations of minority and low-income students which contribute to lower academic achievement and decreased levels of self-esteem and identity among students (Delpit and Perry, 1998; Oakes, 1985). It is also essential to examine the ways in which the ethic of care was lost during the period of desegregation. Walker’s research pushed the education community to critically examine how integration and the forced separation of teachers and students disrupted shared community experiences, values, and traditions (Walker, 1996). During the time of segregation, African-American youth in particular found themselves “moving from spaces where they were surrounded by a safety net of loving, caring teachers who knew and understood them,
their families, and their values to a hostile environment, where their intellect and humanity were consistently questioned and challenged” (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011, p. 159). Schools took a stance that appeared to be equitable, but really just shifted emphasis onto roles as opposed to relationships. In particular, many scholars have challenged educators to ensure that the groundbreaking ruling of Brown v. Board of Education does not lead to another fifty years passing in vain (Bell, 1992).

One of the most devastating effects of slavery was the denial of freedom, rights, and education; as well as the dehumanizing measures taken by Whites against Blacks through slavery, the enactment and resurrection of Jim Crow laws, and decades-long segregation that regulated every aspect of Black life (Wilkerson, 2010). Wilkerson covers a span of six decades, and tells the story of the great migration of roughly six million African Americans from the south to the north. She discusses how Blacks were viewed as being unworthy of receiving an education and points to education policies established by the White ruling class related to “colored” education stating: “colored people needed no education to fulfill their God-given role in the South” (Wilkerson, 2010, p. 86). However, it is important to acknowledge the resilience, strength, and determination among African Americans to overcome the legacy of slavery and the effects of oppression, despite all the odds stacked against them. Wilkerson’s research further highlights the important contributions, self-determination, and difficult journey of African Americans in search of a sense of place and belonging, as their identities were often compromised, defined, and devalued by others.

African American history has not often been taught from a critical perspective, so many students do not fully understand the time period of slavery, oppression, and its connection to current power structures and inequalities. Embracing this history and educating children about it
could enable them to take pride in their culture and heritage. This is especially important for children who may internalize negative messages that lead to feelings of oppression. Children are often developmentally incapable of understanding or challenging injustices in society, but they do understand broader instances of right and wrong. Children need a framework that helps them understand oppression so they are protected from its negative effects. According to Elrich (1994), some ways to help children understand oppression is to provide them with examples and experiences to which they can relate, thus enabling them to make sense of the forms of mistreatment they may themselves experience or witness. Agency, social capital, and voice are important tools with which to equip children to challenge existing structures laden with stereotypes and inequities. Instilling a sense of self-respect, awareness, and a strong sense of positive identity can help to combat feelings of stigmatization. School cultures and environments that value and celebrate the culture and rich histories of students is a key component in embracing diversity. Teachers can play a critical role in integrating the history and culture students bring to the classrooms. Pedagogy that is rooted in a diverse cultural orientation can encourage counter-narratives that challenge injustice, social stigma, and exclusionary practices.

The ways in which minority students view their ethnic and racial identity are important in developing healthy self-identities and self-protective strategies to deal with discrimination, prejudice, and stigmatization (Blackmon & Vera, 2008). The racial and cultural identities of students are often markers and identifiers that shape how students are assessed and treated by teachers and peers (Giroux, 2006). Most often Black students tend to be assessed negatively while White students are perceived positively. Academic achievement frequently demonstrates
the same patterns where access to resources and opportunities are also allocated along the lines of race and class (Gregory & Sanjek, 1994).

By virtue of our mere existing and being, on a very basic human level, everyone wants to know that they matter, are seen, heard, and valued. Americans are acutely aware of the self-evident truth that states: “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” as outlined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence (Declaration of Independence, 1776), yet the pervasive inequalities in our society are apparent, persistent, and in constant conflict with the experiences of marginalized individuals and groups.

**Social Exclusion and its Impacts**

The groundbreaking work on Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977) offers further insight into how social exclusion can dramatically affect a person’s sense of self. In this respect, the idea of a “self-fulfilling prophecy,” as coined by Merten (1948) tells us you are likely to become what others expect you to become. In many cases, a negative belief one has about self can predict a negative behavior. This leads us back to the earlier discussion of how labeling can affect the way others view you and subsequently affect your self-concept, thus leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy that produces the expected behavior (Loury, 2005; Merten, 1948). The intersections between self-perception, environment, and behavior are cyclical. Self-perception influences how you interact in your environment and your environment contributes to how you respond and react. If you feel rejected, your behavior may show up in the form of self-hatred and your environment reinforces this rejection and the cycle continues. Stereotypes can adversely affect self-esteem, confidence, and behavior (Link & Phelan, 2001). Discourses, the ways words are used, and how language is interpreted can often evoke certain meanings that
maintain structures of inequality. In our everyday interactions we may intentionally or unknowingly exclude and place limitations on others through our actions and beliefs about what they can or cannot achieve, resulting in limitations being placed on the life chances and opportunities of certain groups.

Exclusion can be manifested in social, political, or economic forms. Social exclusion, for instance, often leads to poverty and health issues due to limited access and availability of resources. Economic exclusion maintains class structures and income inequality among oppressed groups. Political exclusion limits access and full participation in our democracy, as seen in areas such as voter discrimination or intimidation in other political processes (Loury, 2005; Whitley, 2005). A recent example of political exclusion was illustrated on billboard displays during the 2012 election season in Ohio. The billboards, which threatened fines and jail time for anyone guilty of voter fraud, read: “Voter Fraud is a felony—up to 3 and 1/2 years and a 10,000 fine” (Palmer, 2012). These billboards were strategically placed in low-income neighborhoods with a high concentration of minorities in an attempt to intimidate minority voters. Examples such as this can dramatically affect how individuals and groups are able to fully participate and exercise a voice in our society. Consider also the survey results cited in Sniderman and Piazza’s (1993) study of racial stereotyping, The Scar of Race. According to Loury (2005), the survey results revealed that during a “mere mention” experiment, when the words “affirmative action” and “Black” were used, White respondents were more likely to associate the affirmative action policy, according to Loury, with “negative racial generalizations,” such as “most Blacks are lazy” (p. 3).

The status and legitimacy of stigmatized persons and groups are often unjustly called into question, implicitly granting others permission to violate their rights and deny them access to
services and resources and, in turn, opportunities (Bourdieu, 1985). Stigma can also create a discrepancy between one’s actual and constructed identity, which can dramatically impact the development of positive social identities (Goffman, 1963). There is a broad range of social identifiers associated with stigma that target certain individuals and groups resulting in limitations being placed on a person’s ability to gain acceptance and access in mainstream society. The struggle among African Americans to have a respected identity and sense of belonging in a society which sees their differences as a deficit is further illustrated in Bell (1992). The author exposes how during slavery in the wake of being exiled based on difference, there was an internal struggle among Blacks to become more like the dominant culture in order to be accepted. Bell speaks about the lasting marks of slavery carried in the wounds of shame: “It burdened Black people with an indelible mark of difference as we struggled to be like Whites” (p. 1). This “push and pull” syndrome is described by W. E. B. Dubois (1903) as an issue facing many African Americans. Dubois called this a form of “double-consciousness” in his most famous work, The Souls of Black Folk. Smitherman (2004) offers a precise description of this phenomenon:

Having thus resigned themselves to a future in the New World, many slaves began to take on what Langston Hughes has termed the “ways of White folks” their religion, culture, customs, and, of course, language. At the same time, though, there were strong resistance movements against enslavement and the oppressive ways of White folks. Thus, from the very beginning, we have the “push-pull” syndrome in Black America, that is, pushing toward White American culture while simultaneously pulling away from it. (pp. 10–11)

The lasting marks of difference have permeated our society through deeply embedded historical practices and policies rooted in racism and division manifested in social, economic, and political
exclusion and forms of inequities, which have often been repackaged in the form of institutional racism. In the United States, individuals and groups are stratified according to race, ethnicity, culture, class, language, behaviors and identity. People in society have diverse attitudes about their sense of identity as it relates to belonging to a particular group. Subsequently individuals and groups are sometimes made to feel uncomfortable based on stereotyping and negative perceptions and attitudes that may be associated with labeling of others by mainstream society (Loury, 2005; Saville-Troike, 1977).

**Language, Power, and Exclusion**

It is also important to highlight how stigmatized language may create exclusion in schools based on how students speak. The hierarchy in schools creates an imbalance and reproduces inequities and feelings of otherness among students whose language and identities are devalued. If teachers are not equipped with knowledge and understanding of stigmatized dialects and how to use the cultural resources that students bring with them, miscommunication between teachers and students, and teachers and parents can set in and may negatively impact student outcomes. Conversely, if language differences and dialects are understood and positively reflected in classroom practices, this can positively impact student outcomes (Delpit, 1995).

The language spoken by many African Americans in sociolinguistic terms is identified as AAVE. Outside of academia, the term is commonly referred to as Ebonics. It should be noted that not all African Americans speak AAVE, and not all people who use AAVE are African American. There are many African Americans who speak Standard English, and some non-African Americans who may choose to incorporate the AAVE dialect into their speech (MacNeil & Crane, 2005). The term AAVE is more commonly used in linguistics and appears to have been used first by author Robert Williams (1975) in his book, *Ebonics: The true language of*
Black folks, which explored the relation between perceived academic ability and ways of speaking. AAVE is “widely stigmatized—across racial lines—as ‘broken English,’ ‘street slang,’ and ‘ghetto talk’ (Stuart, 2006, p. 238). Labov (1970) is one of several researchers who has studied AAVE and completed extensive studies that reveal how educators often correct and try to change the language used by many African Americans. Labov’s research reveals cultural misunderstandings among teachers and students that point to “a cultural conflict between the vernacular culture and the schoolroom” (p. 11).

AAVE is a rule-governed language system with patterns different from those of Standard English. Rickford (1996) states: “The single biggest mistake people make about AAVE is dismissing it as careless, or lazy speech, where anything goes. As with all spoken languages, AAVE is extremely regular, rule-governed, and systematic” (p. 1). Rickford (2000) further asserts that there is a huge disparity in education that adversely impacts African-American students and a failure on the part of schools across the country to educate these students. A greater understanding of the history and development of Ebonics could positively impact students, and produce more diverse and culturally inclusive pedagogy practices on the part of educators. Smitherman (2006) states:

…Despite language eradication efforts in the schools, despite White America’s ambivalence toward the language (borrowing and castigating it at the same time), “speaking Negro” has persisted over generations and decades. The language is bound up with and symbolic of identity, camaraderie, culture, and home. And it ain goin nowhere. (p. 19)

Words have tremendous power and influence in our lives. Language is a part of everyday life and often shapes our identity, while language itself is often heavily influenced by culture and
region. Language helps us to negotiate and construct meanings and is a pathway for how we convey thoughts, think critically, solve problems, and communicate. Children are socialized to use language based on their culture and how their families and those in their communities communicate. The marginalization and disengagement of certain groups of students often result when there is a mismatch between the language expectations and culture of teachers and students. Diminished social and cultural capital in U.S. schools among minority students is another area identified by researchers that contributes to power relationships and disengagement among students (Bourdieu, 1981; Fine, 1991). Language is intrinsically tied to the identity and culture of students, so if a student’s language is diminished; their culture, heritage, and traditions are also diminished.

Given the aforementioned arguments, it is not difficult to understand how frustration among children can set in when they need to master Standard English which in many respects is unfamiliar to them, at the same time that their abilities, identity, and culture are called into question. For many students, disengagement and doubts may set in when teachers encourage conformity and overcorrect the language of students whose speech patterns do not reflect that of Standard English; this, in turn, can have a negative impact on a student’s relationship and attitude toward teachers (Perry and Delpit, 1998; Wheeler & Swords, 2006). Self-identity is also called into question as students may not only doubt their abilities, but the legitimacy of their established culture, heritage, and traditions as well.

A deeper understanding of the links between power and language requires an exploration of the preconceived notions and biases that impact those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. In schools, Sorace (1998) encourages: “Humane and non-damaging ways to enable children from outside the mainstream to develop the language skills and strategies appropriate to
a wide range of situations so as to have choice” (p. 75). Wheeler and Swords (2006) show how differences in culture among teachers and students could help to explain why the latter sometimes experience challenges in school. The authors state: “Beyond linguistic structure, cultural conflict lies at the heart of why schools fail African Americans” (p. 472). Subsequently, based on cultural and linguistic expectations that mirror dominant members of mainstream society, teacher attitudes may be influenced and can lead to lower expectations of students (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Wheeler & Swords, 2006).

Power dynamics in the classroom among teachers and students also perpetuate feelings of inclusion or exclusion based on how children are socialized through ways of thinking, speaking, and feeling (Heath, 1983). In education and society alike, language is powerful and can be inclusive or exclusive and teachers play a critical role in this process. Heath (1983) views language as power and believes there is unequal power among students in school based on their language socialization. Alim and Smitherman (2012) echo these sentiments, stating: “In American public discourse, language is often overlooked as one of the most important cultural tools that we have for distinguishing ourselves from others. Language, no doubt, is a significant form of ‘symbolic power’” (p. 3).

The nature of symbolic power influences inclusionary or exclusionary practices in classrooms, particularly when there are cultural misunderstandings among teachers and students that relate to language. Participation in social interactions may impact how students experience school in positive ways when they are affirmed, valued, feel a sense of belonging, and believe they can contribute in meaningful ways. Schools are socially and culturally organized structures and serve as pathways for children to begin making meaning about their worlds, with language being the primary means of communication and socialization (Labov, 1970). Words are
powerful. Words can hide or illuminate. Words can create perceptions that either unite or separate.

Students’ diverse literacy and learning styles are often not reflected in teacher pedagogy and school practices (Apple, 1990; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Perry and Delpit, 1998). Many educators have a limited understanding about language development and often end up taking a position in relation to the topic based on public opinion and their own beliefs and value systems, none of which are grounded in an accurate and thorough understanding of language development (Whitley, 2005). Subsequently, many biased beliefs may translate into teacher pedagogy and practices. There is a pervasive belief, for example, that uniformity must exist in ways of speaking and writing, which further exacerbates issues related to power, exclusivity, and lack of space for diversity. While it is important to ensure students master the skills of Standard English, it is also important to incorporate their cultural and linguistic strengths in the classroom as a supplement to learning. According to Christian (1997), negative stereotypes toward students often cause them to have low self-esteem and they tend to be less successful in school. If students sense a difference in how teachers treat them simply because of differences in how they, the students, speak, then their very motivation to succeed might be diminished. Christian further notes that: “In some cases, students are “tracked with lower achievers or even placed in special education classes because of their vernacular speech patterns” (p. 1). This disturbing trend has also been illustrated in research by Oakes (1985), who reveals disproportionate rates of poor and minority students being tracked in lower academic groups based on perceived ability. These patterns point to racial bias and discrimination further stigmatizing and marginalizing students based on race and class.
All of these issues raise concerns about the equity of student achievement as it intersects with linguistic and cultural diversity of students in schools. According to Godly, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, and Carpenter (2006) many stigmatized dialects have been deemed inferior and devalued in schools and society. On the other hand, the authors contend that the term “Standard English” is often used to describe forms of Standard English that are valued in schools and society. “Vernacular dialect” is a term used only when describing various types of English associated with certain groups of people. The authors state: “Linguistic research defines a dialect, or language variety, as a variety of language that is associated with a particular regional or social group” (Godly et al., 2006, p. 30). Negative attitudes about speech often start with a belief that certain dialects are linguistically inferior to standard forms of English. Standard English is often associated with particular social classes and education levels. Godly et al. argue that the “standard” form of English that is socially preferred enjoys this status simply because it is the language used by those who are most powerful and affluent in society. In various settings, people pay attention to how others speak and tend to make negative judgments and assessments about them either consciously or subconsciously.

Educators who are committed to diversity argue that teachers must be prepared to embrace the knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Banks, 2006; Craig and Washington, 2004; Cummins, 1997). Alim and Smitherman (2012) offer their insight on the necessity of examining the relationship between language use, racism, power and its impact on student achievement, stating: “A critical approach teaches students that we must do more than study the relationships between language, racism, and power—we must do what we can to alter them” (p. 189).
In early schooling and beyond, a label of not speaking or writing well can lead to long-term negative consequences that can impact student experiences, self-identity, and academic achievement. Over a century ago Dewey (1916) argued that schools must make a concerted effort to bridge the gap between home and school in order to value the knowledge, culture and language practices that students bring to the classroom. Kersten (2007) points out how “the disconnect between schooling and children, predominantly those considered marginalized or without access to the dominant culture, has become a chasm” (p. 134). Kersten further argues that this disconnect is due to unimaginative curriculum, standardized testing, and the failure of schools to foster connections between the home and school lives of children.

Although we live in a linguistically and culturally pluralistic society, the United States has perpetuated and promoted a hegemonic view of language that frequently encourages abandonment of one’s own culture, values, and traditions (Banks, 2006). Despite extensive research in the areas of literacy nationally and globally, which highlights how literacy is best achieved by becoming literate first in one’s native language and then using those skills to acquire the competencies necessary to read and write in Standard English (Cummins, 1996), this knowledge is not readily embraced in K–12 schools, and monolithic views on language have often led to exclusion (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997; Wheeler & Swords, 2006).

It is often assumed by educators that in order to be academically successful, African-American students need to be “bilingual,” knowing how to speak both “Standard English” and their home language, which is very much aligned with theories of culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, many educators fail to assume the responsibility in ensuring that all students have access to the language of power. Instead educators may become frustrated that Black students do not come to school with
these tools in place and information already in hand in order to navigate between the two language systems. As a result, when many Black students walk into the school building they are often seen as “an intrinsically ‘problematic’ population” (Pollock, 2004, p. 16). Perry and Delpit (1998) further contend that most teachers have limited accurate knowledge of Black English and are likely to have negative attitudes about it and those who speak it, particularly due to their “socio-political location and understanding also the relationship of literacy skills to school achievement” (p. 3).

**Code-switching.** Many African Americans in their everyday speech engage in some form of code-switching based on situation, context, and circumstance. When parents talk to their children about using different language in different settings, they are referring to code-switching—a process of shifting between two different linguistic variations, grammatically or socio-linguistically, in order to distinguish between ethnic identities in the same conversation or within different contexts (Myers-Scotten & Ury, 1977). Richardson (2003) provides context as to why code-switching is an important practice among many African Americans. The double-consciousness discussed earlier is one factor contributing to how African Americans negotiate identities based on judgments, assumptions, and stereotypes among the dominant culture about the cognitive abilities and culture of African Americans (Richardson, 2003). Many students remain acutely aware of the stereotypes surrounding AAVE and are extremely conscious of switching between language styles and this is also evidenced in the stories of the student participants of this study. Code-switching is a sophisticated skill set that allows you to move between different ways of knowing that impact your knowledge, views and attitudes about various language systems (Richardson, 2003). Dominant power structures in mainstream society often undervalue the literacy practices of African Americans who have developed various ways
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of negotiating their identities. Richardson refers to various discourses that bring awareness to the plight, struggle, and rich histories of African Americans, such as Civil Rights, Harlem Renaissance, and Hip Hop movements. Richardson argues that an examination of discourse practices would benefit from “broader analysis and application in American Rhetorical and literacy tradition” (p. 33). Honoring students’ cultural and linguistic diversity in schools and classrooms can be a valuable and effective tool in mitigating feelings of isolation and alienation from mainstream culture just by virtue of the fact that it gives children the freedom to choose between their home and community language and the language used at school.

The Intersectionality of Language, Culture, Race, Class, and Gender

As demographic trends shift across the country, the response to these growing trends must address the patterns of linguistic and cultural pluralism in the U.S. Changing demographics highlight the growing need for educational spaces that account for and support the educational outcomes of an increasing culturally and linguistically diverse student body in K–12 schools (U.S. Census, 2011). Our cultural melting pot is overflowing, so the need to reduce inequality and improve academic outcomes, particularly among African-American students is critical. Long gone are the days when classrooms reflected a more homogeneous body of students. Classrooms today are heterogeneous, yet many educators in K–12 schools continue to teach as if classrooms were still homogeneous. Culturally relevant approaches, educational equity, and access for these diverse students are important factors to consider if we are to develop a responsible and inclusive approach to meet these changes (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

On behalf of the Brookings Institution, Frey (2011) performed an analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the American Community Survey. The data revealed dramatic trends in minority-majority relations in eight states across the U.S. where in many of these states minority-
majority status has already been reached (Frey 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2009). The data shows a declining trend among White children nationally. Frey’s analysis further reveals that by the year 2023, the U.S. will have a national minority-majority child population if the immigration and minority growth continue at the current rate—in short, the minority will become the majority if growth patterns stay the same. The U.S. Census Special Report (2002) states: “In general, Blacks, Asians, Pacific Islanders, American Indians and Alaska Natives and Hispanics have represented increasing shares of the national population and each of the region’s population” (p. 71). This exponential growth of culturally and linguistically diverse students in our schools means proactive approaches in education must be developed and implemented in order to meaningfully engage and support the education of children in ways that respect, value, and encourage their cultural and linguistic identities and histories in classrooms. The learning styles and cultural differences need not pose a barrier to learning, but instead an opportunity for shared learning (Apple, 1990; Banks, 2012; Poplin & Phillips, 1993).

Class and student achievement. Social class and level of education among families plays a significant role in the academic outcomes of students. Socio-economic indicators demonstrate that poverty and race ethnicity continue to overlap in the United States. For example, in 2007, 9% of non-Hispanic Whites were below the poverty level, while 24.7% of African-Americans, 25.3% of American Indian and Alaskan Native, and 20.7% of Hispanics represented that category. The disparities of wealth and poverty are alarming and require further critique and examination of how policies continue to reproduce patterns of inequality that negatively impact minorities. The overlap between poverty and race in the US creates systemic and structural inequities that appear to go far beyond patterns of income. Rather, it interacts with a number of mutually reinforcing factors and self-fulfilling prophecies that result in poor
educational attainment, low-paying wages and inadequate housing, which create a vicious cycle of marginalization and exclusion of minorities and the poor.

Geographic isolation among those living in poverty means that access and opportunity are often limited, contributing to exclusion among minority children. Over the past three decades, a number of scholars have also documented the critical role that social class plays in schooling (Anyon, 1981; Apple, 1990; Bernstein, 1996; Giroux, 2005; Knapp & Wolverton, 2005). The seminal work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) previously documented the ways educational outcomes subsequently reproduce the social and economic position of students’ parents, a phenomenon the authors termed “intergenerational inequality” (p. 3). Parents with access to power and influence are able to access the necessary supports and resources for their children. For example, if parents are equipped with the skills to “do school,” as described by Carter-Andrews (2008), are well-educated and possess the social capital and system knowledge to challenge and advocate for their children, research indicates that those children will most likely only be minimally impacted by marginalizing experiences and will likely emerge as high achievers (Carter-Andrews, 2008). On the other hand, for poor children, children of color, and children with disabilities who may not possess these skills to navigate and challenge the education system, their schooling experiences may be wrought with disengagement as their experiences are often especially disruptive and disturbing. Excluding minorities and children who live in poverty-ridden communities from school has devastating and long lasting social and educational consequences.

Apple (1990) examined and critiqued how curriculum in school is based on a hegemonic ideology that all students should conform in schools, thereby diminishing opportunities and possibilities for diverse ways of learning. Apple contends that the educational debate rests in
determining “Whose knowledge is of most worth?” (p. vii). Educators are in a unique, yet powerful position and with that power is a responsibility to ensure that students are engaged in learning opportunities that value their knowledge, their culture and ways of knowing. The role of power is important to examine as it determines what gets reproduced on the educational landscape. The “hidden curriculum” also raises awareness about dominant society norms, values, and beliefs that are often transmitted in classrooms and the social environment where social inequities are promoted and reproduced (Anyon, 2005). Apple (1990), Bernstein (1996), and Bourdieu (1985) in their work on school knowledge, have pointed to how the distribution of knowledge and skills are often differentiated by social class. They further argue that those social groups with more advantages have access to curriculum in schools that prepare students for careers in medicine, law, and administration while that same curriculum is often withheld from working class groups to prepare them for careers where they only need manual skills and clerical knowledge. Anyon’s (1980) ethnographic research in analyzing social class took place in classrooms across five elementary schools in different social class communities, and supports the arguments above. Her findings illustrated stark differences in how classrooms lessons were taught and how students were engaged in the classroom which suggested that there is a “hidden curriculum” in schools dictated by class level. More rigorous and engaging curriculum was associated with higher income schools, whereas less challenging school work, and rote memorization were often the focus in lower income schools. There is not only an unequal dispersal of cultural capital, but also an unequal distribution of knowledge among students (Apple, 1990; Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977; Giroux, 1997, 2006).

The diminished social and cultural capital of poor children and children of color (Kozol, 1991; Maeroff, 1998; Noguera, 2003) and the impact of both overt and subtle racism in the
classroom results in a discourse that “invidiously highlights the social construction of difference” and otherness (Katz, 1989, p.5) and leads to an educational discourse that stigmatizes children and youth who do not “fit” as deficient, at-risk, and impaired (Swadener, 1995). A structural and systemic critique is frequently absent, as the source of educational failure is problematized as an individual, family, or cultural pathology.

Schools tend to favor those families with the forms of social capital valued by educators, while on the other hand devaluing those students who are perceived as lacking social capital (Bourdieu, 1985; Noguera, 2003; Weis, 2008). The research clearly demonstrates and speaks volumes to the importance of fostering a sense of agency and social capital among African-American students and families to ensure their voices are heard, access is granted, and educational outcomes are improved. The disparity that exists among minority and non-minority students continues to leave children and families feeling powerless with limited options and little hope things will change.

When successful interventions that support children in poverty are implemented, one might expect achievement levels to improve and the performance gap between students in similar social classes to decrease (Anyon, 1980, 1997; Knapp & Wolverton, 2005). However, when social class is held constant, an analysis of school achievement data still reveals a disturbing picture for African-American students. For example, African-American students attending more affluent, middle-class schools still lag behind their White peers (Jenks & Phillips, 1998; NCES, 2003, 2011, 2013). The reasons behind these disparities remain unclear. One prevailing argument contends that issue of race and racism remain viable explanations in understanding this reality.
It is important to point out how the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation further contributed to the problems in distressed communities and school districts that were more likely to be harshly sanctioned and punitively penalized for not meeting the required federal standards. The NCLB Act of 2001 emphasized the use of standardized test measures to assess and improve student performance and held schools accountable for making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) with respect to meeting the standards which was linked to incentives and disincentives for schools. The legislation was heavily criticized for not providing struggling districts with the necessary support to improve failing schools (Acre, Luna, Borjian, & Conrad, 2005). Left unexamined was the reality of deeply ingrained structural inequalities in the education system that ensured that low-income students and students of color were more likely to attend to those schools with lower resources and less experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Additionally, the legislation did not take into account how cultural and social class differences and racial bias played a significant role in shaping the experiences and outcomes of those students. Government officials assumed that taking a stance to punish and close failing schools for not meeting federal requirements would ultimately improve the education system as a whole, but this band-aid approach failed to address the systemic issues that caused the failures in the first place (Gay, 1997). The one “positive” unintended consequence of NCLB legislation, however, was that it prompted and provided an opportunity to think and talk about race and class in schools, because districts were mandated to disaggregate their test scores by race and income level in an effort to close the “achievement gap”—something prior education legislation initiatives had not mandated (Rebell & Wolff, 2009).

Previously, due to flawed reporting and a failure to examine data that had been collected and reported to the state and federal government, many school district staff were in the dark
about how students from different racial and economic backgrounds were actually doing, making it difficult to address issues locally and in schools specifically. For over a decade, school reform efforts in the United States have been centered on market-based approaches (Saltman & Giroux, 2009) to address educational issues. Those who favor competition among schools, restructuring and transforming failing schools, and expanding school of choice options for parents and students believe that these measures will improve educational access and outcomes among marginalized students. However, this approach does not adequately address the very real pressing issues of race, poverty, culture, bias, and discrimination in schools that undoubtedly impact the outcomes and experiences of students. When access to such data is not readily available to teachers, it is unrealistic to expect them to take race and class disparities in achievement and discipline into account in their practice (Jordan & Cooper, 2003).

Several ethnographic studies have provided more complex analyses of race and class in schools. These studies have explored the different educational experiences of White and Black students. They conclude that even when students are from similar class backgrounds, race mediates their schooling experiences in ways that reproduce the U.S. racial hierarchy (Heath, 1983; Lewis, 2003; MacLeod, 1995). It is important to note, that most ethnographic studies of schools tend to focus on the interactions of students and teachers, overlooking how the culture in schools in terms of navigating issues of race and class is a stage that is set and develops from the top-down. School administrators play a significant role in setting the tone and culture of the school.

In a recent article by Tough (2014) entitled “Who gets to Graduate?” the stark reality of otherness is prevalent as the story of a high-achieving, low-income African American student, Vanessa, who was determined to succeed and was accepted to the University of Texas. It was
after her first semester that she began to question her sense of belonging on the predominantly White campus. Throughout secondary schooling messages that she was smart and good enough and could become anything she set her mind to were now replaced with questions of: “Am I supposed to be here? Am I good enough?” (p. 1). Getting accepted into college and enrolling in college courses seems to be the easier part, the tough part is access to supports and resources to remain enrolled and graduate. Tough (2014) points out that retention and graduation rates are dismal, where over 40% of students attending four-year colleges have not earned a degree after six years and factoring in the retention rates of those students attending community-colleges the dropout rate increases by more than half. The only other industrialized Western country that has retention and graduation rates that are worse is Hungary. Tough argues that there are two factors at play that determine the success of students in post-secondary institutions. The level of access to social, emotional, academic, and financial supports that are available to ensure success and the most prevalent trend that determines success points to the income level of parents. Tough states:

To put it in blunt terms: Rich kids graduate; poor and working-class kids don’t . . . About a quarter of college freshmen born into the bottom half of the income distribution will manage to collect a bachelor’s degree by age 24, while almost 90% of freshmen born into families in the top income quartile will go on to finish their degree. (p. 1)

These statistics contradict previous beliefs that ability equates to success. Educational outcomes are more closely aligned and reflective of parental income, which highlights the significance of how race and class indicators greatly influence the outcomes of school success (Tough, 2014). Another notable factor was not just a focus on the academic and financial need, but a concerted effort to focus on students’ sense of belonging once they enter college to help mitigate fears, negative thoughts, and self-doubts. Steele (1997) identifies this as the stereotype threat that often
faces minority students. In the case of the student, Vanessa, profiled by Tough, we see how her situation was paradoxical in the sense that academically she had the wherewithal to succeed on a competitive level at an elite college; however based on her demographics—a low-income background—she was at risk for failure. Why does this phenomenon exist? Quite simply the author states: “If you want to help low-income students succeed, it’s not enough to deal with their academic and financial obstacles. You also need to address their doubts and misconceptions and fears” (p. 2).

One educator’s response in Tough’s article addresses this issue through an intervention program developed to increase students’ sense of belonging among students who faced the fears, anxieties, and experiences of exclusion that minority students feel either by race or class. For many minority students who experience a temporary setback, often times this equates into a belief that they “can’t succeed or don’t belong” (Tough, 2014, p. 3). The intervention program was designed for these students to help them overcome self-doubt and develop a stronger sense of resilience and persistence in order to combat “the germs of self-doubt [that] try to infect them, the lingering effect of the intervention allows them to shrug off those doubts exactly the way the advantaged students do” (p. 3).

Reproduction of racial inequality. Marable (1983) argued that African Americans continue to be disadvantaged based on the fundamental inequalities that exist in the U.S. capitalist system. Ten years later, Massey and Denton’s (1993) American Apartheid similarly argued that racial segregation was reproduced through overt and covert acts of racism, which continue to perpetuate inequalities in societies and schools. Anyon (2005) reminds us that urban school reform cannot transcend “macroeconomic policies like those regulating minimum wage, job availability, tax rates, federal transportation, and affordable housing…” (p. 2). Ortner (2006)
also encapsulates these aforementioned perspectives when she writes, “…there is no class in America that is not always racialized and ethnicized, or to turn the point around, racial and ethnic categories are always already class categories” (p. 73).

In schools, students and teachers may bring biases, stereotypes, assumptions, and prejudices into schools which have not been interrupted; therefore, structural inequalities and institutional racism are prevalent, sustained, reproduced and reinforced. Scholars across disciplines have documented the ways in which schools largely serve as sites of reproduction by maintaining the existing social structure by valuing the social and cultural norms or “capital” (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Giroux, 1997) that the most advantaged students already possess. Subsequently, low-income students and students from racially marginalized backgrounds who are not privy to what Delpit (1988) describes as the “culture of power” or who are unable to adopt this culture when necessary (Carter, 2005) are likely to remain marginalized adults; and students from racially and economically privileged backgrounds are likely to maintain their social status. In other words, those who already possess power retain it, and those who do not, never get access to it.

Considering the research on reproduction theory, which has often used class-indicators and societal-level outcome measures as evidence that schools are reproductive of inequality (Lipman, 2004), it is important to note the critical ethnographic texts Learning to Labor by Paul Willis (1977) and Ain’t No Makin’ It by Jay MacLeod (1995), both of which found that low-income young men who were caught in cycles of poverty were often unable to transcend their class positions. As MacLeod found, race contributes to factors leading to these outcomes making it even more difficult for students of color to attain higher status positions than those of their parents. Other researchers have considered the ways in which schools reproduce racial
status through the disproportionate suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates of Black and Latino students (Dance, 2002; Ferguson, 2000; Fine, 1991; Noguera, 2008; Robbins, 2008). Generally, however, most studies rely heavily on class reproduction in order to explain the role race plays in schools (Foley, 1990).

In Race in the Schoolyard, Lewis (2003) focuses on “how race (in terms of meaning and identity) and racial inequality (in terms of access to resources) are reproduced in day-to-day life in schools” (p. 4). The author contends that schools reinforce race as a social category. Subsequently, in addition to reproducing disparities in academic outcomes, schools also reinforce what it means to be Black or White. As she writes, “Race is not merely a fixed characteristic of children that they bring to school and then take away intact, but something they learn about through school lessons and through interactions with peers and teachers” (p. 188).

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court handed down its decision to declare that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall led the legal team during this landmark education reform decision. The 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision established that “separate but equal” actually created conditions that led to unequal access to education opportunities. These court rulings helped to develop a national awareness to the fact that the U.S. Constitution and our democracy took a position that did not tolerate the notion of second-class citizens. Although the landmark Civil Rights Legislation in 1954 ended legal racial segregation in U.S. schools sixty years ago, overt and covert forms of racism remain thereby reproducing racial hierarchies and racist ideologies that are linked to underachievement among many low-income students and students of color. Our school systems today still reinforce a curriculum that defines the doctrine of “separate but equal” by implicitly promoting segregation in schools through academic tracking which places and traps
students into categories that define their abilities and skill level (Oakes, 1985). Over twenty years have passed since the school accountability and standards movement began and yet the archaic practice of separating students by “ability” which still contributes to the poor academic performance of low-income and minority students remains a barrier that deny these students an equal opportunity to reach high standards. While there have been some gains in education, there are far too many improvements yet to be actualized since the ruling of *Brown vs. Board of Education* sixty years ago. Education critics (Giroux, 2006; Goldberg, 2009; Lipman, 2004) agree that minimal gains have been made and the improvement in the educational equalities for African Americans are so deeply entrenched that these inequities have transcended primary education through college, resulting in persistent and pervasive economic inequalities in U.S. society.

When deficiencies among low-income students and student of color are emphasized, this perpetuates the perception that there is little that schools can do to close the achievement gap. According to Gorski (2013) much of the discourse about the achievement gap can be more accurately articulated as an “opportunity gap.” There is a belief that those who have less are entitled to less because they did not work hard enough to access the opportunities and somehow their poverty is due to their own deficiencies and lack of will to do and want more, because of the misleading image leading many to believe that “America is a land of opportunity for all.” While it is true there are many opportunities in America, we cannot overlook the fact that the lion’s share of poverty is shared by many, while the wealth is only being shared by a few. Kushnick & Jennings (1999) state, “We must examine how those with power and political influence use it to maintain the distribution patterns of wealth at the same time that millions of individuals and families continue in poverty” (p. 2). The unequal dispersal of resources in our
schools and communities create social conditions that further exacerbate issues impacting low-income students and students of color (Rank, 2004).

The idea that if you just work hard and do well in school you can become anything you want is a pie in the sky image that according to Gorski (2013) is simply not true. Missing from the discourse are the structural and environmental conditions that create and allow conditions of poverty to exist in the first place, limiting access to equal educational opportunities. Poor and minority children are disproportionately concentrated in school districts that are inadequately funded, lack resources, and employ teachers at lower salary rates (Strange, 2011). Conversely, it should not come as a surprise that those schools with access to more resources, such as designated school nurses, well-stocked libraries, unlimited access to technology, and engaging curriculums tend to do better academically than those students who lack these same resources.

The ideology that low-income children in schools are entitled to less and expected to do less is problematic at best, as it often translates into how policies and practices in schools are applied to students as teacher attitudes and beliefs may be associated with a “deficit conception” rather than a “resilient conception” (Banks, 2013, p. x). When educators are challenged to examine if their pedagogy and practices are conducive to a more equitable learning environment, the outcomes for all students may improve. However, when schools create a culture of low expectations largely due to misconceptions and stereotypes about low-income students, all children suffer (Gorski, 2013). The ideology that children just cannot learn because they grow in the poorest neighborhoods is a widespread assumption. Blaming the victim ideologies (Ryan, 1971) historically have always shifted the blame to individuals and away from systemic accountability. There are few policies or practices in place that examine and ensure accountability to interrupt teacher racial bias and inequitable school practices that lead to
patterns of discipline that disproportionately impact poor students and students of color. These issues all contribute to gaps in student achievement that intersect along lines of race and class.

**Race and gender identity.** The confluence of identity and its interconnectedness to race and gender largely shapes the intersectionality of the lived experiences of African Americans (Crenshaw, 1996). African-American students in middle and high school, in particular, are negotiating their own development as adolescents in addition to understanding and identifying their place in the world, while in some cases simultaneously encountering instances of discrimination, stereotyping, and bias. When students are faced with bias, prejudice, and stereotyping it often results in feelings of rejection and exclusion. Further contributing to identity formation among students are interactions with their families, adults who are entrusted to care for them in schools, and societal influences which promote conformity through assimilation and acculturation to dominant norms. When there is an expectation to conform to cultural and behavioral norms incongruent with one’s own culture, it raises fundamental questions about why one’s existing cultural or gendered identity may not be good enough which may lead to compromised development of healthy self-confidence and identity formation. Conversely, developing a strong sense of cultural and gendered identity often translates into higher levels of confidence in academic abilities in order to mitigate the effects of what Claude Steele (1997, 2010) describes as stereotype threat. Race and ethnicity intersect with disproportionate rates of academic failure, discipline and special education rates in schools. When social identifiers are used, subsequently the blame is often placed on the individual as the cause for the shortcomings rather than pointing out how the power imbalances in K-12 schools foster and perpetuate structural inequalities and oppression (Fine, 1991; Harper, 2012; Noguera, 2008). Schools in
many respects are a microcosm of the larger society and subsequently reinforce racially insensitive practices among underrepresented and underserved groups.

Identity formation based on gender is shaped by dominant cultural norms and expectations, leaving little to no space for diverse forms of expression. For example, within a deficit paradigm Black masculinity is often constructed in White patriarchal terms and narrowly defined using identifiers such as aggressive, angry, dangerous, and lazy (hooks, 2004). Like Black male masculinity, Black female identity has been racialized in demeaning and stigmatizing ways in both media and public policy discourses. Black women on welfare have been constructed as bad mothers, as welfare parasites, and lacking any educational aspirations for their children. Further, structural inequalities that have contributed to the feminization of poverty go unrecognized (Mink, 1998; Polakow, 1993, 2013; Strayhorn, 2010).

**Racial microaggressions.** The term microaggressions was coined by Pierce in 1970 and is described as “subtle, stunning, often automating, and non-verbal exchanges which are put downs” that happen in everyday occurrences (Pierce, Carew, Piece-Gonzalex, & Willis, 1978, p. 66). Microaggressions are also described as “subtle insults directed towards people of color, often automatically or unconsciously (Soloranzo, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; also see Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin, 2007). Further, Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solorzano (2009) elucidate how encounters of microaggressions in the daily lives of minorities can ultimately lead to “an erosion of self-confidence and self-image” (p. 660). The mere fact that microaggressions are masked in more covert ways makes it difficult to point out blatant acts of discrimination. Deeply ingrained racial inequalities remain prevalent, yet nearly invisible based on unconscious attitudes and acts that normalize these behaviors. White Americans are often unaware or unwilling to acknowledge how their White privilege is linked to their beliefs,
attitudes, action and inaction which may unintentionally perpetuate discriminatory practices among minorities that in turn impact policies and practices (Sue et. al, 2007). Further examination and research on the threats that microagressions pose on the lived experiences of minorities is necessary and critical to eliminate racial microagressions and its detrimental consequences.

**Suspensions, Expulsions and Exclusion**

Student disengagement and marginalization in the classroom based on the mismatch of language and culture among teachers and students have also been linked to disproportionate suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to special education (Fine, 1991; Noguera, 2003; Orfield, 2012). All too often, it is the voice of the dominant and powerful members of society who control the political climate, agenda and enactment of laws, legislation and reinforcement of inequitable education policies that influence the educational rights or lack thereof of students (Archard, 2004; Noguera, 2003). The dominant group often sets the tone, frames the argument, and controls the discourse regarding how best to address social and educational problems resulting in far too many voices being left unheard. The discussion usually ends up being one about how to improve or fix them in order to make them more like us (Nybell, Shook, & Finn, 2009).

In 1994, the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) became national policy, mandating public schools across the nation to expel any student caught with a weapon or drugs. Over time, however, many districts and individual schools have broadened their zero-tolerance policies to include minor infractions, such as disruptive behavior and chronic tardiness. Many of these minor infractions fall under the vague label of “willful defiance,” which includes offenses such as failing to complete homework, dress code violations, or failing to follow directions in class.
An overwhelming number of students who are subject to disciplinary action are punished for these nonviolent, minor offenses. Zero-tolerance policies also undermine due process, as these policies effectively silence the voice of students by punishing them without hearing their side of the story, or assessing the intent and circumstances surrounding the offense.

There are also gross inconsistencies in how zero-tolerance policies are applied from school to school, further exacerbating their impact. The disproportionate application among African-American students paints a dire picture. Losen & Gillespie (2012) point out the bias in enforcement, noting that African-American students are more than three times as likely as their White peers to be suspended or expelled, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education (US Department of Education, 2012). In response to these longstanding disparities, the Department of Education recently issued new guidelines in January 2014 designed to assist public school teachers and administrators in disciplining students in a manner that does not discriminate based on race and disability (US Department of Education, 2014).

McGrew (2007) argues that youth living and attending schools in poor urban districts are considered to be “education’s prisoners” as the author’s work highlights how structures in society contribute to school failure and increasing incarceration rates among poor youth and youth of color. In essence, zero-tolerance policies enable school authorities to discipline students for minor infractions (Advancement Project, 2000) and often focus more on discipline and control rather than education. Duncan (2000) refers to such policies as “urban pedagogies.” According to Duncan, urban pedagogies “work through and upon adolescents of color” by focusing on “discipline and control” as opposed to “intellectual rigor and the development of meaningful skills” (p. 30). What is still lacking in schools are measures to ensure that students
develop the skills they need to be self-disciplined, instead of being disciplined (Bear, 2010; Yang, 2009).

The widespread increase in zero-tolerance policies as a means of controlling youth has been named a public assault on American children (Polakow, 2000). This assault can be linked to the ideology that Black and Brown bodies are in need of surveillance and control in underserved urban public schools (Robbins, 2008). Noguera (2008) critiques such measures of social control by identifying them as ineffective and forcefully argues that little has been done to engage the voices of youth about their attitudes on violence and the impact of disciplinary policies on their school lives. Noguera’s own action research revealed how schools that are successful in creating positive school cultures and climates are also schools that denounce intimidation and coercion, and foster positive relationships between students and school staff (Noguera, 2008). Meiners (2007) argues that the mere presence of police in schools “illustrates that a failure to control oneself, to keep that anger in check, to act and learn appropriately, in particular for those in any way marginalized, might mean school expulsion, criminalization, or pathologization” (p. 30). Robbins (2008) forcefully points out that when zero-tolerance policies are enforced in schools and students are under increased surveillance and subject to extreme and unnecessary security measures, these policies erode student rights, their educational opportunities and, ultimately, their life chances. Zero-tolerance policies and practices in schools are implicated in creating what many have termed the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Civil Rights Project, 2000; NAACP, 2005).

Further contributing to this widespread trend are the extreme pressures on educators and administrators to raise test scores and comply with federal regulations in order to maintain school funding. Consequently, those students who have been labeled as distractions and “throwaways”
are being funneled through the education system to the juvenile justice system, in many instances setting the stage for eventual incarceration in prisons (Orfield, 2012). Youth are keenly aware of this “throwaway” label, and once they become disinvested in their education, they become targets for policies and practices that push them out of schools and into detention centers and jails (Fisher, 2008; Winn, 2010). Fine and Ruglis (2008) refer to such ideologies and practices as “circuits of dispossession”—that is, a systematic funneling of public education funding to private enterprises. “With moves toward privatization,” argue Fine and Ruglis, “state responsibility for the provision of adequate education falls off the hook, testing companies’, private vendors’, and publishers’ profits swell; police-in-school and military recruitment budgets grow and youth of color slowly disappear” (p. 21). The priority in schools often shifts to a stance that is reactive rather than proactive for the management of Black and Brown students. Zero-tolerance policies have resulted in far too many students being pushed out and an “overrepresentation” of African Americans in school suspension rates is well-documented (Insley, 2001; NAACP, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Orfield, 2012).

Expulsions and suspensions from school significantly increase the likelihood for repeated disciplinary action leading to eventual incarceration. Many children and youth in urban school districts are greeted, scanned, and metal detector “wanded” by security guards or police officers at schools long before they are greeted by teachers, counselors, or administrators. This culture of surveillance and policing diminishes the likelihood that children will view school as a place where they can be safe, a place where they can learn without distractions, and an environment where teachers and school staff are seen as advocates and not adversaries. Faced with their own pressures, teachers are less likely to take the time necessary to deal with student and classroom issues within the school, rather than referring students to the office and out of the classroom for
disciplinary action. When students have been subject to criminalization through zero-tolerance policies, their “developmental needs” are compromised “by not allowing students to form strong and trusting relationships with key adults and by creating negative attitudes toward fairness and justice” (Advancement Project, 2000, p. 33).

Zero-tolerance policies have been introduced under the guise that they are race neutral, however, the reality is that Black and Latino students are entering the school-to-prison pipeline in disproportionate numbers in comparison to their White and Asian peers. While the impact of zero-tolerance policies has profound consequences for poor youth of color (Meiners, 2007), it also has implications for parents and educators. Alternative options to harsh punishments are often not sought out or limited access to resources makes it difficult to ensure that youth experience the least amount of disruption to their schooling. When detention centers and jails are considered a viable option, school administrators and educators often fail to think critically about strategies and solutions. When students are expelled from school, they are particularly vulnerable to their learning being disrupted with limited and sometimes non-existent alternative education services. Michigan school districts do not have to provide educational programs for expelled students—parents do. Tuition, transportation, and time pose barriers to alternative education, and hit low-income and minority families the hardest (Fancher, 2009; Polakow, 2000; Robbins, 2008).

**Summary: Marginalized Youth**

Students of color and low-income students have been marginalized by an education system that silences their voices, shapes their experiences, limits their academic ability, and excludes them from full participation through inequitable policies and practices. The intersectionality of race and class has been examined in relation to the social reproduction of
school policies and practices (Fine, 1991; Gorski, 2013; Lipman, 2004; Noguera, 2008). Various factors reproduce inequalities such as disparities found among African Americans who are represented in disproportionate rates in the areas of special education, rates of academic failure, drop-out, and discipline. Socio-economic factors have also often been identified as having a negative impact on student achievement as students of lower socio-economic status are more likely to drop out of school, or lag behind their peers academically (Fine, 1991; Kohn, 1996; Noguera, 2008). Te Riele (2006) reminds us that:

An individual student may be marginalized by some aspects of schooling but not others, may like some teachers, peers, subjects, but not others, and may behave differently in response to marginalization from other students. For each student a different combination of school factors, interacting with out-of-school factors, is responsible for their marginalization. (p. 135)

The reproduction of inequalities in schools influence stereotypical assumptions and points to the language, culture, and home environment of African-American students as reasons for their underachievement. Further perpetuating these pervasive stereotypes and racial biases are the media, politics, and a deficit-based discourse which paints a picture of Black people as poor, shiftless, lazy individuals who are not entitled to anything better (Lipman, 2004; Noguera, 2003; Oakes, 1985). Yet, all students need to feel they belong, are noticed, and matter. bell hooks (1994) poignantly shares that teaching is:

…not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (p. 13)
Many factors contribute to students’ underachievement, academic failure, and school drop-out. Educators often blame students’ lack of engagement and achievement on a long list of factors such as psychological problems, emotional problems, poor study habits, low self-esteem, withdrawal, aggression, social isolation, conflicts at home, low parental expectations, class differences, lack of academic readiness and preparation, learning disabilities, unsupportive and uninvolved parents, poverty, and low self-confidence. Many youth are inappropriately labeled as “at-risk,” learning disabled, underachieving, or simply “trouble.” As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) point out “a theme of ‘naming one’s own reality’ or ‘voice’ (p. 57) is critical in order to reshape reality where African-American students are concerned, and is threaded throughout the work of critical race theorists. Listening to students may help inform and equip teachers with the tools they need to engage those students on the margins in order to lead all students to higher levels of academic achievement. Empowering and encouraging African-American students to tell stories that are different than those that have been told in the past may produce counter-narratives that challenge the dominant deficit-based perspectives.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to explore the experiences of students I used a qualitative approach—embodying both phenomenology and critical ethnography as primary modes. My aim was to understand the perceptions and experiences of African-American students and parents by examining how exclusion and marginalization impact schooling experiences among students—essentially, what helps and what harms. I have attempted to illuminate the narratives of students and highlight the complexities of their stories, while also placing the focus on the importance of conveying their voices from a strength-based rather than a deficit-based perspective.

I conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with twenty-three students, parents, coaches, and social workers in Southeast Michigan. Participants were recruited through the use of informal, out-of-school community networks outside of the students’ original school settings. Open-ended and semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow the participants an opportunity to share their experiences and perceptions in a manner that was not leading, but exploratory (Seidman, 2006).

Interviews were my primary method of data collection as they allowed me to explore the *emic* which Seidman (2006) describes as “understanding the experiences of other people and the meaning they make from that experience” (p. 9). Highlighted in Seidman’s work is a focus on the three step interview process: life history, details of the participant’s experiences, and reflection on meaning. The life history is a matter of gathering life history information in an open-ended interview. The second interview is a follow-up which is semi-structured. The third interview is semi-structured and involves a reflection on meaning which is designed to ask the participants to reflect on the meaning and understanding of their own experiences. Many researchers embody this three-step process in one long descriptive interview that involves both
life history gathering and descriptions of experiences, followed by a second interview that probes meaning (Polakow, 2007). In this study, student participants were interviewed initially, and follow-interviews were conducted to gather additional information, perspectives, and to probe meanings. All of the interviews took place at the participants’ homes or at a location that was most convenient for the participant. I also visited social workers and coaches at their respective work locations for interviews. The interviews were conducted in Southeast Michigan between June and October of 2013 and focused on the experiences and perceptions of schooling among students. A total of thirty-two interviews were conducted for this study, including twenty-three initial interviews and nine follow-up interviews with students. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The sample consisted of five female and four male students in middle and high school (see Appendix A: Student Profiles; Table 1). A total of ten parents were also interviewed. Eight of the student participants were from single-headed households and one was from a two-parent household. Additional perspectives were gathered from two social workers and two coaches.

As a phenomenological approach is anchored in life world perspectives, it was used to probe the lived experiences of the research participants and to probe the meanings they constructed about schooling and what mattered to them. But phenomenology does not necessarily require a critical theoretical framework to juxtapose life world experiences against the system world (Habermas, 1971). Hence, a critical ethnographic approach was also chosen to analyze student experiences and juxtapose them against the policies and practices embedded in the broader system of educational inequality (Zou & Trueba, 2002). In order to honor and highlight the lived experiences of the research participants, I explored, analyzed, and described the experiences of the participants in their lived worlds from their perspectives. The life worlds
of the participants are always framed by their social, emotional, intellectual, and cultural contexts, thus shaping how they relate to others in the world. An understanding of how meanings are formed based on the experiences of the participants provides the researcher with an in-depth understanding of what matters. These emic themes can then be analyzed in the context of broader societal issues.

It is also important to engage in thoughtful reflection on how discourse is framed around marginalized groups so as to best represent their voices and collaborate with them in creating a representation that is empowering; this is the role of critical ethnographic research so that the researcher participates in and observes participants’ social contexts (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2008). Glesne (2006) has stated that, “Learning to do qualitative research is like learning to paint” (p. 3). In qualitative research, one provides detailed descriptions of the participants and their experiences. The researcher is not only describing the top layer, but also what lies underneath. To this end, descriptions must be deeply textured, layered and unpacked, which means context becomes very important.

Phenomenology pushes researchers to look beyond the surface to uncover meaning on a deeper level in order to truly understand the experiences of others from their perspective. From a phenomenological point of view, you are respecting the lived world of the participants by allowing the stories and understanding of people’s experiences to teach you about who they are and what has led to shaping their lives. When conducting research with participants, the researcher’s role is not one of an expert, but as a learner with an open mind willing to learn and allow the participants to tell their stories. In this way, phenomenology pushes researchers to view the lived world through the perspectives of the participants (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1983; Munhall, 2007). In doing so, you suspend your own beliefs and biases and allow
the participants’ stories to be shared in a way that is authentic and representative of who they are—recognizing that is the participants who write their narratives to guide the research as they share detailed descriptions, stories, and examples about their lives. The words of the participants must come through in your narration as you ‘translate’ their perceived experiences into a language that honors their stories.

Critical educational ethnography examines structures of power using a critical lens to uncover how power relations intersect with education more broadly, and more specifically how students experience school (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2002; Zou & Trueba, 2002). Ball (1994) states that critical ethnography “provides access to ‘situated’ discourses and ‘specific tactics’ and ‘precise and tenuous’ power relations operating in local settings” (p. 2). Critical ethnography in this research study served as a conduit that allowed me to consider the diverse voices of currently marginalized students through in-depth interviews by translating their knowledge to examine broader structures of inequality. Students resisted structures of power that were working against them as they questioned, critiqued, and even realized in many instances how the policies in school were adversely impacting and undermining their schooling experiences. They confronted the dominant discourses, and their narratives help to raise awareness in order to perhaps change the inequitable situations impacting marginalized groups.

Roche (1973) discusses the importance of approaching research by knowing yourself and the way your own experiences are lived. An ontological approach is threaded through phenomenology and involves a focus on the existential modes of being. When one begins to unpack meaning it leads to a deeper ontological understanding of the participants’ lived worlds. The use of phenomenology allowed me to foreground the voices of the participants in my research, and borrowing from interpretive anthropology, to use thick descriptions that created a
detailed situational description of context for my participants (Geertz, 1973). Geertz discusses the importance of documenting not only what gets said, but also what goes unsaid in order to better understand the surrounding forces that help to create meaning of one’s experience by capturing words and meanings in observations, research journals, field notes, and interviews, stating, “The ethnographer inscribes social discourse; he writes it down. In doing so, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted” (p. 19). For this reason, capturing thick descriptions in field notes and documenting impressions, thoughts, and ideas in a research diary to capture both verbal and nonverbal language is critical in shaping the researcher’s own understanding of participants and their environment.

Throughout this research study, the role of intentionality was considered. Intentionality is a forerunner philosophically of the construct of agency and in its early incarnation is described as having three main dimensions, which are representation, judgment, and affectivity (Brentano, 1890). Representational intentionality is described as having a sense of awareness of the other. Judgment intentionality is based on an attitude that can either be accepted as true or false by the subject being studied. Affective intentionality is described as the attitude expressed by the person being studied, e.g., different forms of emotion expressed by the participant such as love or hate.

Brentano was an early forerunner of phenomenology. He argued that human beings have a consciousness that is directed and intentional, unlike that of animals. He emphasized the importance of studying human experience in the natural setting, not in a laboratory (Roche, 1973). Husserl, Brentano’s successor, developed the concepts of the life world, natural attitudes, and understanding human experiences and activities. In Husserl’s work (1901), the idea of
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bracketing evolved. From this work, we begin to understand the idea of the “epoche,” as described by Roche (1973) which is a disciplined subjectivity that allows the researcher to suspend judgments and consciously shelve preconceived notions about the participants (p. 12).

Sartre’s notion of reification (1956) focuses on self-alienation. Reification refers to being defined by others and what others want you to be. Countering reification involves confronting the given reality and pushing beyond the surface to see and overcome that which creates a limit situation in order to overcome it. This reflects the idea of conscious choice and intention. Sartre claimed that “one must be conscious in order to choose, and one must choose in order to be conscious. Choice and consciousness are one and the same thing” (Sartre quoted in Roche, 1966, p. 73).

As the students in this study demonstrated, their choices were often limited by their circumstances. All of the students in this study were low-income, low-achieving students who faced barriers in school. Exacerbating these issues was the fact that they viewed school as places that did not serve as sources of opportunity, but rather as obstacles to their success. They reported educators and administrators alike who were unsupportive in schooling and made assumptions about their abilities, reducing their life chances. The students however demonstrated instances of resilience as they were negotiating their place in the world and developing their own sense of agency, despite what their circumstances might have predicted. They were determined to succeed despite what others said, and they were determined to beat the odds, although the cards seemed stacked against them.

As a researcher, one must understand experienced realities on the ground in order to generate analyses that capture the local contexts that shape the lives of students within their schools and communities. Listening to student voices and affirming what they say matters, and
their perspectives are important to hear as we explore how they construct their consciousness of their lived realities, and use choice and agency.

**Disciplined Subjectivity**

Peshkin (1998) describes subjectivity as: “A garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and the nonresearch aspects of our lives” (p. 17). Although subjectivity remains ever present, it is essential that one develop and practice a disciplined subjectivity in order to remain critically reflexive throughout the research process which can be accomplished by maintaining a research journal to document thoughts, insights, impressions, and feelings (Behar, 1996; Schram, 2006). It is important to examine our own role in the research process and recognize that subjectivity is the lens through which we view ourselves and how we make meaning in our own worlds.

As a researcher, my role was to collect, interpret, and reconstruct meanings from the life stories of the participants, with an emphasis on highlighting their experiences and authentically representing those experiences as themes were developed. The importance of remaining in the background in order to foreground the experiences of the participants during the research process was critical; for the research is about the experience of the person being studied and one must always assert a “tamed” subjectivity (Peshkin, 1998, p. 20) in order to avoid over-insertion of the self. Suspending my assumptions and judgments was an important factor that allowed the participant narratives to be written authentically. Disciplined subjectivity and critical reflexivity were used throughout the research process to critically interrogate my own biases and preconceived notions.

Another key factor in qualitative research is passion for one’s topic while also remaining dispassionate. For example, the reason you may be conducting research on a particular topic is
because of your passion and commitment to the field. It is appropriate to remain passionate, but not to impose your ideology and own agenda on a particular topic. The researcher must be dispassionate and maintain a level of separation from the issues so as not to impose judgment on the participants. I am passionate about giving voice to the participants in this study in order to foreground their experiences. This passion can be linked to my professional background and experience in the fields of education and social work. I have affectionately termed my relationship with these two disciplines “my professional marriage,” as I am deeply passionate about both fields. They have provided me with a foundation that is grounded in understandings of people's real life experiences as members of oppressed, vulnerable, and underserved groups. Professionally, I have witnessed first-hand how minorities and those in poverty are often alienated, stigmatized and marginalized in schools because of judgments, assumptions, perceptions based on how people look and how they speak.

For this reason, it was critical for me to maintain a disciplined subjectivity, acknowledging and setting aside my biases so that I did not infuse the research with any preconceived notions, but instead I approached each interview with an open mind in order to accurately represent and foreground the voices of the participants in the study (Peshkin, 1998; Seidman, 2006). The researcher role is a balancing act that must be approached carefully. When conducting research with participants, the researcher’s role is not one of an expert, but a learner with an open mind, willing to learn and allow the participants to tell their stories (Behar, 1996; Glesne, 2006). The researcher has a responsibility and ethical obligation to uphold the integrity of the research process and honor the stories and voices of those participating in the research.
Positionality and Critical Reflexivity

In my role as researcher, it was also important that I told a story about the experiences of African-American students that was balanced, contextualized, and guided by a clear sense of integrity. As the researcher, it was equally important to acknowledge and properly balance the multiple roles I brought to the research. Professionally, I serve as a local school board member in a local school district and on two county-wide school board committees. Personally, I am a mother of three school-age children and as a parent myself, I have raised concerns about gaps in school curricula and teacher pedagogy at various points during my children’s schooling. As an actively involved African American parent, I have also witnessed how some children are subject to judgments about their abilities based on class-based assumptions and teachers’ devaluation of AAVE; I have also seen certain students targeted for various forms of pull-out programs and tracking. My research was also influenced by my own childhood experiences as my parents helped me understand the importance of maintaining a strong sense of pride about my heritage and placing an emphasis on valuing the language we spoke at home, which was AAVE along with Standard English. It was, therefore, important that I remained critically reflexive and avoided inserting my own perceptions, experiences, and beliefs into the research. I brought to the project my particular interest in developing culturally relevant approaches, so it was important to separate my roles as researcher, school board member, and parent. The intersections of these roles are evident, yet they needed to be balanced and put in the proper perspective in relation to this research. Critical reflexivity was honored by maintaining a research journal to document the impressions, feelings, and thoughts of the researcher in order to remain conscious of my own subjectivities that may have surfaced while conducting the research (Glesne, 2006; Behar, 1996). Through the journal, I was able to document presumptions and
assumptions linked to my previous experiences. Untamed subjectivity can easily creep into consciousness, therefore engaging in self-reflection and self-disclosure helps you remain in tune with the natural world and the world of interpretation (Glesne, 2006). Throughout the research process, I asked myself about the meaning of the experiences that were shared with me and how they related to the broader context of the study. I also paid close attention to moments that appeared to evoke certain responses or emotions, such as anger that inspired me to delve more into the research. For me, this served as a point of attention to reflect on what was happening at a particular moment or time. Likewise, when there were times when a specific topic that was discussed during the interviews and it seemed to particularly resonate with me, it was important that I documented those thoughts and impressions in my research journal and not allow them to impose on the participants’ narratives (Behar, 1996; Glesne, 2006; Peshkin, 1998). As the researcher, I maintained an awareness of the role I played in the research process. Recognizing and understanding one’s role as the researcher influences the type of questions that are asked, how the research is conducted, and how the research itself is written up.

**Rapport**

Developing good rapport with participants is an essential component in qualitative research, particularly research with youth. Glesne (2006) describes how rapport is negotiated as “a conscious attunement to the emerging needs of a relationship” (p. 115). Maintaining an ongoing awareness of the social interactions was critical throughout this process as rapport was established and trust was gained. When participants feel their role in the process is one that is valued, respected, and appreciated, the research process is much more effective (Glesne, 2006). I worked very hard to ensure that I acknowledged the value of participants’ contribution to the research. Although the participant and researcher roles are different, there is a responsibility to
make sure trust is established and that connections are maintained in the process (Schram, 2006). There is a delicate and artful balance in the research process to maintain appropriate boundaries, yet extend oneself in ways that engage the participant, acknowledge feelings and emotions that may arise, while maintaining clear lines of professionalism, so as not to allow one’s own feelings to interfere with the process (Glesne, 2006; Peshkin, 1988; Schram, 2006).

I also made a point of reflecting on Judt’s On Words (2010), which reminds us of the importance of words and how their meanings are reconstructed—something critical to bear in mind when doing qualitative research. The role of the researcher is complex, challenging, and often requires a fair amount of balancing in order to place the participants in one’s research at center stage, negotiate appropriate boundaries, maintain professionalism, and show respect and humility as one interviews and reconstructs stories of the participants in a way that values their participation and honors their lived experiences.

**Authenticating the Research**

A goal of this research was to authentically represent the voices of the participants bearing in mind that there are many truths that contribute to the stories of the participants. In qualitative research achieving consensual validity, structural corroboration, and referential adequacy provides evidence of a research project’s authenticity and trustworthiness (Eisner, 1991). Structural corroboration deals with the whole—and is achieved when all the pieces of the research puzzle fit together and whether the thematic analysis is grounded in the use of thick descriptions to illuminate the lived experiences. Eisner (1991) points out that structural corroboration is achieved when patterns observed in the data are interpreted to illustrate a situation, which in turn creates a degree of confidence in the findings. In this dissertation study, consensual validity was achieved when the data analysis revealed that a comparison of the
recurring patterns led to the same thematic conclusions. Consensual validity was supported by the fact that although the students represented in this study represented four different districts in Southeast Michigan, they shared similar experiences.

Referential adequacy requires the use of relevant research to demonstrate coherence between the data, theories, and existing literature on the subject to support the research study. For example, some of the themes emerging in this study, specifically a lack of belonging, lack of care, debilitating discipline, and disrupted education in schools have been documented in other research studies (Goldberg, 2009; Meier, 2002; Noddings, 1984; Polakow, 2002; Robbins, 2008; Toldson, McGhee, & Lemons, 2013). A variety of literature sources were reviewed in order to analyze my research findings and present a critical discussion that both supports and critiques those findings (see Chapters 5 and 6).

**Study Design and Study Type**

In addition to the use of phenomenology to explore the students’ meanings (as well as those of the adults) I also utilized a critical ethnographic approach to analyze student experiences and juxtapose them against the policies and practices embedded in the broader system of educational inequality. The voices of youth are integral to this task of analyzing educational policies that directly affect students’ lives, identities, and possibilities. The use of critical ethnography led me to focus on youth agency and by exploring youth and parental perspectives, served as a mechanism to examine educational policies, practices, and to challenge the dominant deficit-based discourse. Critical Race Theory was used as an analytic framework to identify conditions that contribute to the reinforcement of institutional racism, and to critique school policies and practices that oppress, exclude, and marginalize students of color.
While youth serve as the main focus of this study, parental perceptions were also explored with regard to their children and how, as parents, they found themselves acutely aware of the possible effects their own negative experiences of schooling may have had on their children. Coaches and social workers were also interviewed to gather additional perspectives. In addition, the ways in which students develop a sense of agency and oppositional standpoints as part of self-identity were juxtaposed against deficit-based perspectives.

Study Population and Sample

Interviews with students and their parents were conducted in Southeast Michigan between June and October 2013. The total sample consisted of twenty-three participants, including student, parents, coaches, and social workers. Of the twenty-three participants, there were nine students, ten parents, two coaches, and two social workers who participated in the study. The students were comprised of middle and high school students with an age range of 13-18 years. Follow-up interviews were completed to seek additional information or gain clarification. A total of thirty-two interviews including initial interviews and follow-ups were included in this study. Purposive snowball sampling techniques were used and participants were recruited through personal and professional contacts, community networks, and advocacy agencies outside of the students’ original school settings.

Low-income, low-achieving African-American students were identified and recruited based on their own (or parental) reports of low GPA (1.9 or below/4.0 scale), whether they were receiving special education services, and whether they had experienced any disciplinary actions involving suspensions and/or expulsions or were attending alternative programs as a result of exclusion (see Appendix A: Student Profiles; Table 1). All of the students attended public schools, and were from low-income African American households. The household income
levels were gathered through self-reports, which revealed that all of the households met criteria of living below the federal poverty line. It should be noted that students participating in the study may be represented in one or more of the aforementioned categories of exclusion. For example, students could be receiving support services and receive disciplinary action in schools. It was not necessary for students to meet all of the criteria identified to participate in the study; they could occupy at least one or all three of the identified categories. Additionally, demographic data was gathered to identify the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch within their respective school districts (see Table 2). Open-ended and semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006) were conducted with participants (see Appendix A: Student Profiles). Participants were asked to describe their experiences and to reflect on their perspectives about their schooling experiences as African-American youth.

**Data Gathering and Analysis**

As the researcher, I served as the primary research instrument. I maintained a research journal (Glesne, 2006; Peshkin, 1988) to record my thoughts, impressions, and perceptions, and in order to address critical reflexivity and subjectivity throughout the research process. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. No more than two to three interviews were conducted with any one participant—the initial interview and follow-up interviews as needed. Follow-up interviews were completed to gain clarification or seek additional information. Each initial interview lasted approximately one hour, while follow up interviews were shorter, averaging 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted at an agreed upon location between the researcher and participant. Interviews were audio recorded and as researcher, I transcribed them. Transcripts were analyzed and coded for themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews.
Thematic coding is a useful technique to establish structural corroboration in qualitative research (Eisner, 1991). Thematic coding helps to organize the data according to patterns that emerge from the research. Each audio-recording was listened to after the interview in order to accurately capture important elements from the interview process. The transcripts were read multiple times to determine possible themes. Field notes and a research journal were also used to develop a greater understanding of the participants’ experiences. Themes were then coded to identify patterns among the participants and to create a thematic framework (Glesne, 2006).

Important elements from the transcriptions were highlighted with a marker and by using a color-coded labeling system to organize the emerging themes. Notes were also written in the margins of the transcription to be sure to capture all of the important details. For example, many of the participants used the recurring words and phrases of mattering; being seen and noticed; not feeling supported which later translated into an overarching theme of Lack of Care or Lack of Belonging. In order to create an organizational framework for the themes, I sorted the themes into like/similar categories and gave them preliminary headings. Many overlapping themes were then strategically examined to see which category was the best fit in order to accurately capture the perspectives of the participants.

Organizing the data helped to establish coherence in sorting and examining the data in order to reconstruct the stories of the participants (Glesne, 2006). This process was reminiscent of putting together a puzzle. It was necessary to consider the parts and whole and in order to visualize and then actualize how to deconstruct the data by pulling out key elements and then examining where to best place particular elements in order to then reconstruct the narrative, paying attention to the order of the chronology in situating the narratives. Relying on field notes
and the research journal was critical in recreating this framework. The narratives, thereby served as the most crucial element in qualitative research by grounding the study.

A case study approach was chosen to write up and represent the students’ experiences in order to add depth to their lived worlds. The case studies allowed me to analyze individual experiences and situate them in a broader context. Meanings, perspectives, and experiences are important to examine when using case studies. The case studies were developed by using contextual background information on the life experiences of the participants to expose what led to shaping their experiences in school. Triangulation was achieved by exploring multiple perspectives. Parents, coaches, and social workers helped to establish and support the patterns that emerged from the research, thereby establishing triangulation (Stake, 1978). According to Baxter and Jack (2008), “case study research is more than simply conducting research on a single individual or situation. This approach has the potential to deal with simple through complex situations” (p. 556).

The data analysis revealed the impact of exclusionary schooling practices through the stories of the participants. The themes that emerged were the following: (a) Lack of Belonging; (b) Lack of Care; (c) Persistence and Resilience; (d) Disrupted Education, (e) Debilitating Disciplining, and (f) Language Games. These themes are taken up and explored in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

**Measures to Ensure Safety, Confidentiality, and Anonymity of Participants**

Each participant was provided with a consent form along with an explanation of the study that outlined it purpose, how the data would be used, and whom to contact if questions or concerns arose. The informed consent form outlined potential risks and benefits related to participating in the study. In order to protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were
assigned to the participants and any identifying school or organization names that were used. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study both verbally and through written consent and assent forms, signed by both the participant and their parent or guardian. It was important for the students in this study to feel empowered and not to feel intimidated by authority. For this reason, as the researcher, I made the decision to ensure the youth participants were able to give assent for their participation in the study, in addition to their parents giving consent for their participation. All the youth in this study were under 18 years old; therefore legally their parents or guardians must give consent. However youth participants are also able to give assent when participating in research. The assent form was written in developmentally appropriate language and the participants were asked explicitly in child-friendly terms to raise any questions or concerns they had about the research study (see Appendix E). For example, an excerpt from the assent form reads: “Participation in the study is completely your choice and you will be assured of complete confidentiality and privacy (no one will know your real name).”

It was made clear that participation was completely voluntary and that individuals were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Completed transcriptions and audio recordings were stored on a flash drive by the researcher for the sole purpose of this research study. Assent and Consent forms were stored separately in a locked file box and data was stored on a password protected computer, also accessed only by the researcher. All data including signed consent forms were stored and labeled in a locked file cabinet at the researcher’s home.

**Ethical Considerations in Conducting Research with Children and Youth**

In this study, it was my aim to understand the perspectives of African-American youth and how their lived worlds in and out of school impact their schooling experiences. The stories of marginalization about the school landscape are necessarily embedded in broader relationships
and places of community. In studying and understanding experience narratively, we recognize
the centrality of relationships, as participants relate and live through stories that speak of their
experiences (Christensen, 2004). Throughout this process, I remained attentive to ethical
tensions, obligations, and responsibilities in my relationships with those who shared their stories
with me. I sought to address questions of how larger social, institutional, and political narratives
inform our understanding and shape youths’ stories (Christensen, 2004; Christensen & James,
2008; Christensen & Prout 2002). Paying attention to these larger narratives enables us to
further understand the complexity of the living and telling of stories, to understand the role of
both context and relationships. By listening to stories of youth, it is a reminder of becoming, that
is, students are developing beings, with possibilities of a future of becoming. As we listen to
participants tell and retell their stories, we continuously recognize that their lives matter, and the
experience of listening brings forth a response and a possibility and a responsibility as author to
shift, shape and counter common and dominant narratives that marginalize and stigmatize them.

The data collection methods used in completing investigative work with youth were
carefully considered in this research. Engaging youth by establishing rapport and trust and using
active listening skills as a researcher gives youth voice and a right to express their viewpoints,
which affirms their involvement in the research process (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Harcourt,
2011; Marrow & Richards, 1996). Open-ended, semi-structured questions were designed to
meet the developmental needs of youth to encourage their engagement, voice, and understanding
of the topic. Research with youth must be conducted in a way that ensures children feel
respected, that their voices matter, and that they are an important part of the process
(Christensen, 2004; Christensen & James, 2008). Adults often times fail to consider the voices
of youth as decisions are often made for, about, but rarely with, them. A goal of this research
was to empower youth, giving them the voice to tell their stories and share their experiences in their own way. Highlighting their experience and voice through responsible research is one way to demonstrate that children matter and adults care about who they are and respect what they say.

It was important for both youth and their parents or guardians who were giving consent, to understand the purpose and goal of the research and for me as the researcher not to implicitly or explicitly assert power in asking for their consent. The way the research questions and consent forms are written is crucial, given the ethical dilemmas that might arise in research. According to Harcourt (2011), children and youth often view themselves as being in a subordinate position in relation to adults. Therefore, everything was carefully worded in order to ensure the young participants understood the study and were freely choosing to talk to me. Engaging children in research from their perspective demonstrates that their opinions and experiences are important and valued (Lundy & McVoy, 2011). It is important for children to be active participants rather than passive observers in their lives. Harcourt (1989) references Article 13 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child as it relates to rights and research with children stating: “a child has the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice” (p. 822).

Youth perceptions of how their language is perceived adds depth to scholarly discourse on stigmatized dialects and how student interactions with adults and peers influence their academic achievement. With this in mind, it was crucial to develop an attentive, youth-centered analysis of the data to capture youth voices and their sense of human agency, thereby demonstrating respect and value for their perspectives and how their experiences have shaped their ways of knowing. Children and youth are considered to be a vulnerable group in research.
and it is critical for the researcher to bear the responsibility in ensuring proper measures are taken to ensure protect their involvement in the research process. Denzin (1989) provides insight about this responsibility:

…our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline. The lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us. (p. 83)

Denzin further highlights the exchange of information that occurs during the research process which can help to serve as an ethical anchor in order to ensure participants are well-informed, feel valued, are respected, and understand the purpose and intent of the research. Being careful, cautious, and thoughtful in attending to issues and consequences that may arise unintentionally can help to minimize any harm that could result from participating in the research study. Keeping all participants in the study informed of all possible outcomes through the dissemination of results in the study is a responsibility of the researcher. Parents must be clear about their children’s right to participate in the research by assuring them that there is no consequence associated with declining to participate if they so choose. Parents were informed in a letter as to the purpose, duration, and topic of research allowing time to reflect on whether or not they were interested in participating. Being proactive by listening and respecting the views and wishes of the participants is helpful in developing rapport, building relationships, and gaining trust which may help to balance the unequal power that often exists between the researcher and participants (Denzin, 1989; Magolda and Weems, 2002).

The ethical considerations of research with children are in some respects the same as those of adult participants; however as the researcher, I remained very conscious of the differences when conducting research with children by taking into account their rights, safety,
emotional and developmental needs, and special vulnerabilities (Cocks, 2007; Eder & Fingerson, 2003). Alderson and Morrow (2004) point out how one of the main purposes of being ethically responsible is balancing the potential risks of research against the benefits. Yet, there can be many unintended consequences in research with children, even when making all efforts to minimize harm. The youth were reminded throughout that they could choose not to participate at any point during the study, that their confidentiality would be protected, and that their participation in the study would in no way be shared with their school nor would any identifying information that could potentially be connected to them in the study.

In the following chapter, the youth participants in this study share how instances of inclusion and exclusion impacted their school lives, thereby shaping their social and academic experiences.
Chapter 4: Voices of Students

This chapter will highlight the narratives of seven youth participants in middle and high school. The stories of Ruth, Esther, Mark, Luke, Elisabeth, Isaiah, and Sarah constitute the main cases while the additional narratives of Samuel and Mary are included to support the thematic analysis (See Appendix A: Student Profiles).

The cases that follow are not meant to provide an exhaustive picture of these young people’s lives; instead, they provide a glimpse into their lives and some of their school experiences at particular moments or times. The cases are organized by first providing contextual background information and then using narrative evidence to illustrate how schooling experiences are shaped by interactions with teachers, administrators, parents, coaches, and social workers. Chapter 5 focuses on the themes: Lack of Care, Lack of Belonging, and Persistence and Resilience.

Ruth: “I just basically ignored it and kinda sat there and didn’t say anything.”

Ruth is a vibrant, energetic sixteen-year-old 11th grade student. She is a bi-racial female who identifies as African American. Her youthful features are matched by her obvious passion for music as she bobs her head back in forth and hums to an imaginary rhythm in her head. As she sits down at the table in front of me, she intently writes some notes down in a floral notebook. She gets up and walks to the nearby playpen in the living area to pick up her beautiful baby girl. Her daughter has a mocha complexion and wavy Black hair pulled into two ponytails; she sits attentively in her mother’s arms. Ruth hums a tune as she looks into her daughter’s eyes and then looks up at me to tell her story.
Ruth grew up in a rural community in Northern Michigan. Her biological father died when she was young. Her mother has since remarried and Ruth does not have a close relationship with her stepfather. She has one older brother who is currently living at home. Her mother suffers from a physical ailment and is receiving disability payments as her sole source of income. Ruth’s biological father was Black and her mother is White. She reflects that although she has little memory of her biological father, she longs for the relationship they never had:

Like, I see pictures and stuff and talk to my grandparents about how he was and I just wish I had the chance to know him and talk to him, like my whole life I just think about being able to talk to him about things.

She reports that she has a very close relationship with her paternal uncle and values this relationship as it “keeps me close to my other side of the family and connected to my father in some way... he is someone I feel I can talk to when I need to.” Ruth does not spend time with her paternal uncle and grandparents on a consistent basis, but maintains a relationship with them by calling frequently. As a young child, however, she remembers visiting them for extended periods of time during the summer months at their home in the city of Delany, where her grandparents live in a predominantly Black neighborhood where there appears to be a strong sense of community. She reflects on those memories, sharing:

My grandmother is the best, she always would tell the best stories and cook the best food and I learned so much from her... I loved being over there, it’s so different from home… just spending time together doing simple things, it was so much fun.

Ruth further reflects on childhood memories at her grandparents, sharing how the kids had so much fun playing together and the adults would sit on their porches watching the kids as they played outside, commenting:
Those days hanging over there was so fun, it was like everyone was your family, we would play all kinda made up games and just make our own fun... and my grandma knew everybody in the neighborhood and would sell dinners from her house... that food was so good and everybody was always so nice to me.

Ruth describes her current segregated neighborhood and surrounding community:

It’s mostly White up there and there are only a few Black families who mostly live in the same area on the other side of town... it is a really quiet town where everybody knows everybody, but mostly all the White people live together and all the Black people live together.

Ruth reflects on her neighborhood dynamics, commenting, “It was weird cause it was like we were so separate and people just stayed to themselves, like you never saw the Black kids in our neighborhood and the White kids never went over there really, except me.” Ruth attended school with predominantly White students and teachers, and reported that “only a few Black students attended the school.” The neighborhood demographics described by Ruth point to a cultural divide in a racially segregated community. She describes the view of the teachers:

They treated the Black kids differently. The Black kids talked different than the White kids, and since they all mostly live in the same areas, it seemed like the teachers just thought they was poor or stupid or like didn’t talk right, at least that’s what I think.

Ruth describes her upbringing as “very strict” and goes on to share how her mother was very overprotective and always stressed the importance of doing well in school. She pauses and remembers her mother always saying, “Getting an education means you will always have options in life, don’t ever forget that.” Ruth’s mother, Rebekah, provides additional insight that demonstrates how her own upbringing deeply influences how she parent Ruth and reflects on
her own schooling experiences recalling, “I went to an elementary school that was very well-
resourced and very well connected to the community” and describes herself as a good student
who grew up in a supportive household. She says that her own mother “just instilled in me that it
was very important to get a good education so I would have choices in life, and she always made
sure I did my homework so that’s how I raise my children.” Although Ruth faced academic
challenges, Rebekah consistently stressed the importance of doing well in school even in the face
of adversity.

Ruth identifies singing, writing, and reading poetry as some of her hobbies. She has
aspirations of one day becoming a famous singer and songwriter. In her spare time, she writes
lyrics to songs and practices them. She shares that people have always told her “you have a
beautiful voice and that’s a gift.” She recognizes this gift as an attribute that also gives her
options; as she puts it, “My voice is gonna be my ticket out for me and my family.”

Ruth is currently living in a residential treatment facility approximately three hours away
from her home and receives support services in a program for parenting teens in an environment
that is supportive and nurturing. The voluntary program is in a “home-like” cooperative living
environment designed for pregnant and parenting mothers who choose to live in this alternative
environment—in other words, they are not mandated by the court to be placed here. As parents
have given consent for their children to reside there, they sign a release of information allowing
the staff to sign school and medical forms in the event the parent is unable to sign the necessary
documents. The staff communicates frequently with the parents to provide updates on their
children’s progress in the program. The employees who work at the facility are comprised of
trained social workers who work with the girls to establish agreed upon goals developed between
the parenting teen and the staff. The goals are designed to provide the parenting teens with the
skills necessary to become effective parents and productive adults. The girls residing in the facility meet with their case manager weekly to meet about progress they have made on educational, financial, and parenting goals. Additionally, each parenting teen is assigned a family worker who assists with parenting, pre-natal, and child development education. The goal is to equip the parenting teens with essential skills that will prepare them for life beyond the program. The teens can reside in the facility for up to two years. Many of the teens stay up to one year, and either return home, live independently, or transition to a supervised independent living program.

Ruth’s mother made the difficult decision to seek an alternative school and living environment for her daughter due to Ruth’s tumultuous experience in her hometown school; however, she lives about three hours away and they often do not have consistent weekend visits. Prior to attending the alternative school, Ruth experienced many barriers and challenges in her hometown school and did not feel she belonged, reporting:

I never wanted to be there ‘cause I wasn’t really accepted for me. I hated the way they looked at me, talked down to me... they just treated us [Black students] like we was stupid or something. I don’t think they thought we really wanted to learn, but that wasn’t it at all, we just didn’t feel like we fit into that school.

Ruth’s struggles at school were compounded by receiving disciplinary action for offenses such as insubordination and disrespecting teachers. These issues were further exacerbated by her unplanned pregnancy and the fact that her boyfriend’s father was a teacher at the high school in her hometown. Ruth describes the experience at her previous school as “awful and humiliating.” She felt exiled from the community due to her mixed race, and this was exacerbated when she
discovered she was pregnant by her former boyfriend, who was also an African American student at her high school. She explains:

Things were the worse for me when I found out I was pregnant. It was bad for me because my baby’s father is one of the teacher’s sons and they were telling everyone I got pregnant on purpose because he is this big time athlete.

Rebekah also expresses feelings of sadness because of what her daughter had to endure and shares how hurtful the people were in her hometown,

It was so sad because her (biological) father is Black and the father of the child is Black and to see my daughter cry daily from the things people would say to her was just awful…even worse most of the comments came from adults rather than the kids.

Ruth’s sense of self was compromised due to a disrupted adolescence compounded by the burden and challenge of being a teenage parent and not having consistent support or contact from her child’s father. Describing their relationship, she states, “He just left for college on a scholarship for football and we don’t get along, but he tries I guess to be there for our daughter... it’s just not enough and so I am just like whatever.” On the other hand, Ruth points out that her daughter’s paternal grandparents help her financially and visit her occasionally, stating, “His parents help me out with money and buying things... they are more supportive now than they were before.”

During the interviews, she talks about how she was stigmatized and ostracized from this school and community and mostly “felt uncomfortable” in the predominantly White school she attended and felt the “few Black students who were there were always treated differently.” She further goes on to describe racist treatment, notwithstanding her identity of biracialism:

To be honest with you, there are a lot of racist folks up there. The school I went to had all the Black kids from across town who went there and most of the teachers treated them
differently and because I hung out with them, I got treated the same way. Sometimes, I feel like it was worse for me because my baby’s daddy is Black. The funny thing about that is his family has money and is one of the only accepted Black families in my town.

Ruth’s mother echoes these experiences of racism, stating:

When people found out that she was pregnant by a Black boy, they would call her horrible names like “n-lover” and “tramp,” I mean it was so sad... this all around wasn’t a good place for her once she got pregnant.

Ruth’s awareness of difference due to race also extends to feeling judged in school based on the way she spoke as she goes on to share, “I think they was judging me because I talk Black... they had a problem with me and my crew and the way I talk... they treated me different ‘cause I hang with all Black people and they hated that.” When Ruth is asked to explain what she means by “talking Black,” she provides the following explanation:

I use like slang and stuff, it’s just me and that’s how I grew up... my grandparents [maternal] and aunts don’t like it though. I think the way I talk would be called slang, it’s really how all the kids talk now, we kinda have our own language.

Her mother also encountered instances of others being treated differently. She describes herself as a “White, college-educated woman who speaks proper English” and offers her candid beliefs about what this perception means in the broader context of society:

I believe that I am probably treated better than other parents solely because of my education and skin color, I’m sure there are parents who are not treated as well as I am even with all of the problems we went through with Ruth.

Rebekah strongly believes schools can serve as places where students “get excited or turned off by learning.” Having grown up experiencing school positively herself in a well-
resourced school and community, she feels she has both the social and cultural capital to effectively advocate for her child to ensure she is afforded the best education possible. Additionally, she believes people tend to respect a person if they “sound educated,” which is illustrated in a troubling encounter she remembers observing between a Black parent and a White teacher at Ruth’s former school:

Now, I know this teacher and he would never talk to me like that if I had a question about any of my children. Honestly, I don’t know if she was treated that way because she was Black or because the teacher didn’t like her daughter, either way it wasn’t right... like I can tell the teachers look at you funny when you say things a certain way... I didn’t say anything to them about it, but based on what that teacher said I knew they were being treated differently.

As Ruth further reflects on her experiences, she recalls a teacher telling her mother, “The way I talk is a fad and I would probably grow out of it.” Finding humor in their judgments and discounting it as ignorance, she laughs and shakes her head at their seemingly unfounded assessment of her language as devalued and a temporary phase that would pass, like a crush on a pop star.

As mentioned previously, Ruth identifies as African American, but is bi-racial. She has very fair skin so at first glance one might not know what her race is. Based on intonation and patterns in her speech, her preferred mode of speech can be identified as African American Vernacular English. This chosen language is widely stigmatized and often contributes to negative perception, assumptions, and beliefs. She describes feeling judged by teachers who assume she should speak a certain way based solely on her light skin color:
When you look at me you really don’t think I’m gonna sound the way I do, so at first I think a few of them (teachers) might of thought I was playing or acting, but realized pretty quick that this is how I speak... I talk slang like a lot of Black people and it throws people off.

In addition to feeling stigmatized due to her race and language use, Ruth shares how her academic struggles in school led to feelings of exclusion. She describes hating school as she provides an example about a White teacher who was demeaning and made her feel she did not belong: “If you answered the question wrong, he [teacher] would make you feel stupid.” As a result, her coping mechanism was to keep to herself and remain disengaged for fear of being shamed by her teacher, sharing “I just basically ignored it and kinda sat there and didn’t say anything... we hated being in that class.” Another example is evidenced in how this teacher sarcastically spoke to another Black student, as reported by Ruth:

The teacher said in front of the class “see that’s what happens when you don’t do your homework, glad to see your priorities are in order”... I know he had to feel some kinda way, it was so embarrassing... even the whole class was all looking like why did he even say that to him... he was just a bad teacher.

Negative teacher interactions can alter youths’ perceptions of themselves causing students to question their sense of self, their abilities, and they may begin to view themselves as inferior to others.

Ruth now attends a new alternative school in a liberal, affluent, and diverse community where she is thriving and feels like the teachers really care about her and her academic success. The school she attends has a diverse student and teacher population and the principal is an African American male. These demographics are in stark contrast to her previous school and
hometown community, which was mostly White, lacked diversity, and appeared to be intolerant of racial differences within both the school and the community.

Ruth describes the residential treatment facility where she now lives as supportive and caring, allowing her to attend to her roles as student, parent and adolescent. As she emphatically states, “I still can be a kid and enjoy school!” She describes it as “a place that allows me to focus on being a parent and go to school at the same time.” She goes on to contrast her previous schooling experience: “Being here is so different, leaving all that stress and people making you feel bad is way better. I have a lot of support so that makes me feel better about my situation.”

Ruth emphasizes the significance of a supportive, caring and validating teacher-student relationship, offering an example of what her current principal recently told her,

He said he thinks I’m one of the smartest kids in the school. No one has ever told me that before. I know they [principal and teachers] really care ‘cause he didn’t have to say nothing like that to me!

The exchange between Ruth and her current teacher helps us understand how a student’s perception of her ability and the influence of significant individuals in her life also affects academic aspirations. One of Ruth’s self-proclaimed goals is to earn as many high school credits as possible so that she can graduate on time, with a secondary goal of earning a spot on the popular television show *American Idol* in order to capitalize on her vocal talent.

The contrasting schooling experiences shared by Ruth provide us with powerful examples of how students experience a sense of belonging or lack of belonging in school and how it may impact their academic, social, and emotional adjustments. Although Ruth’s earlier schooling experiences elicited feelings of distress, a sense of relief was also felt by both Ruth and her mother due to the fact that she is now thriving in a much more supportive environment.
that works hard at making sure students feel they belong. Ruth’s mother offered strong support and appreciation for the alternative program that Rush is enrolled in, sharing:

The school Ruth is currently attending is great at helping kids who are left out or…

maybe some of the larger, traditional high schools can learn a thing or two from an alternative school... this school is giving her an opportunity and I’m grateful for that!

Learning environments that cater to the individual needs of students by ensuring they have the necessary academic, social and emotional supports to be successful have implications for what traditional schools may do to improve outcomes among students, particularly those students who may feel excluded and marginalized.

**Esther: “I’m gonna finish school, you better believe that!”**

Esther is a bright, talkative, self-assured, and ambitious young woman with a keen sense of awareness about her circumstances and what she needs to accomplish to succeed not only for herself, but also for her son. She is assertive and bold, as evidenced in her carefully chosen ensemble and uniquely braided hairstyle that adorns her pear-shaped face. I offer a compliment about her hairstyle, and she graciously thanks me and concurs “I love my hair, it’s like a part of what makes me who I am, I am proud of it... you know your hair is like part of who you are.”

Esther discloses that she braids hair in her spare time and is using the money to save for college. Her entrepreneurial spirit is matched by her strong desire to finish school so that she can further her education are clear signs that she is determined and ambitious young woman.

Esther’s eyes light up when a bright-eyed, one-year old little boy with a chestnut brown complexion gently taps on her leg saying “Mommy puffs.” Esther gets up swiftly to retrieve a bag of Gerber puffed fruit snacks from the kitchen area. She attentively helps her son grab the snacks she pours out on the napkin as he joins us for our discussion at the table.
Esther is a seventeen-year-old high school student in the twelfth grade who currently attends the same alternative school as Ruth, where there is a diverse student and teacher population in a suburban community. She is an only child and her permanent home is with her mother, who is a single parent. Like Ruth, Esther is also living temporarily outside of the home in a residential treatment facility for parenting teens in an environment that offers academic, social, and emotional support. Her mother lives nearby and participates in family visits on the weekend and Esther describes her mother as “her biggest supporter.” She goes on to say “I don’t know where I would be if it weren’t for my mother.”

Esther describes early memories of her schooling experiences as positive and shares that it was not until high school that her grades started to go downhill. Prior to attending an alternative school, Esther attended a traditional high school with “predominantly Black students and mostly all White teachers.” During this time, she reports that she began hanging around friends who she believes “were really not good for me to hang around... like they were a bad influence.” This retrospective insight provides context for understanding certain choices that she made then, but now regrets; as she explains, “I really am not proud of how I let other people influence me like that back then ‘cause I’m better than that, I have my own mind.”

During her sophomore year she dated a young man whom she was very fond of as she explains, “I really loved him, I mean you know I thought he was everything and I thought we would be together forever... he was just so nice and made me feel like I was the best thing ever.” Feeling very close to her boyfriend at that time, she remembers, “We were together all the time, it was crazy... I would skip school and go to his house and it was just too much.” She reflects on this time as a period in which, “I did not have my mind on school, it was all about him.” Later that school year, she became pregnant and describes finding out and telling her mother:
[It] was like totally devastating, like my whole world came crashing down... I feel like I did not have an excuse, my mom talked to me about this stuff and it was just not good judgment on my part... I was so scared and didn’t know what to do.

Esther’s unplanned pregnancy intensified issues at school as she was already lagging behind academically and had failed several classes. To worsen matters, she describes an unstable relationship with the child’s father since her pregnancy. She later learned that he had fathered several other children, stating:

He wasn’t even there when the baby was born and like financially he has not helped out that much and only comes around every now and then... I know I can’t depend on him at all, he has all these other baby mommas and drama so I just don’t even count on him… my son [is] my blessing, my responsibility and I can’t worry about nothing else.

Esther’s experiences in the traditional high school were filled with negative memories. As she thinks back to those earlier schooling experience, she remarks, “I was never really focused. I didn’t realize how important it was then, and I don’t know if I would have made it with all the distractions of a regular high school.” Esther was suspended twice from the school for truancy, stating that during that time “I was happy not to be in school... I was mostly bored.” In retrospect, she wishes her teachers would have taken the time to show that they cared and offered to help her more. She contends that teachers should take the time to understand what students need and are going through in their lives, stating, “Sometimes kids need help and don’t know how to ask for it, they just need to be with people they can relate to and kicking kids out of school is crazy ‘cause they ain’t learning nothing from that.” Esther is critical of teachers who do not really care about students and comments that larger school environments are often not conducive to a more intimate, caring, and supportive student teacher relationships. She did not
feel supported by her teachers and thinks her privacy was violated as she felt stigmatized during her pregnancy, claiming:

When I was in regular high school it was just too many students. I felt like all the teachers and staff knew your business and would call you out about it in front of other kids. That was one of the main reasons I didn’t want to be there... like when my baby[’s] daddy and I first started talking, my friend overheard another teacher talking about we were having sex and calling me fast for being with him... then I got pregnant and a few of my friends said teachers were talking about it.

Feeling stigmatized and excluded from traditional school, Esther made the decision to leave that setting and enroll in an alternative education program. Esther felt she was being treated differently and was not getting the help she needed once she found out she was pregnant: “When I found out I was pregnant they didn’t really want to help me out or make it a little easier for me, it seemed like they were judging me.” She further adds how her principal had sealed her educational fate: “The assistant principal told me that I messed up my future by getting pregnant so by me that is judging me.”

It is evident that Esther’s disrupted adolescence due to an unplanned pregnancy and lack of support from teachers and staff had a significant impact on her, yet she has a determination to complete school in spite of the setbacks and stigma she encountered, asserting, “I’m gonna finish school, you better believe that!” The resilience Esther demonstrates can be attributed to support within her current alternative school environment. Contributing to Esther’s determination is the unwavering support she receives from her mother, Martha, during this difficult time. Martha’s desire and belief that her daughter can do well is evidenced in the encouragement and support she offers:
I just really want my daughter to do well in school, and she is [a] bright girl, she just got caught up with the wrong boy. She is still going to make it though, she really wants to do well at the school she’s at now and she’s determined to be a good mother to my grandson. Martha also discusses the importance of having strong educational advocates, as she reflects on her own schooling experience as a child growing up in the segregated south. She believes building relationships with children is critical in fostering a positive self-identity and argues that the way Black children are engaged in schools is paramount, as she shares:

You can shape a child’s view of themselves by what we say to them. Because they are so impressionable, we can either convince them they are brilliant and can do anything they set their mind to or we can teach them to be like us, pessimistic, marred by disappointment and controlled by fear of trying. Children are not only impacted by our words but also they have a tendency to turn into their parents unless they see there is more they can achieve. We can teach them that school is great and that learning is fun and we can reinforce that by being active in helping make learning fun and that will build confidence in most children.

Although strong family support was present, Martha reflects on not being immune to the judgment she faced when her daughter found out she was pregnant. As a parent very involved in her child’s schooling, she noticed things seemed different and also felt others were making assumptions about her:

I was on the PTA and only started to feel disconnected after Esther got pregnant because people were talking and of course they had things to say about me... I had to pull my baby out of there because she didn’t feel like she was being supported and unfortunately, sometime gossip can overpower education in school.
Although Esther’s schooling experience in a traditional school was fraught with stigma, judgment, and lack of support from school staff, her mother feels encouraged that Esther is now attending the alternative school, where she receives the academic, social, and emotional support she needs. Martha states:

I do feel that the alternative program helps all the kids believe that they can succeed and do well. I’m very pleased that there are other options for students that won’t or can’t do well in a traditional high school program.

Esther did not receive special education services at the traditional school she attended, but now she receives support services in school and her mother reports she has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in place, which provides her with additional education support in school.

Esther provides an example of how her teachers demonstrate support:

Like when I get frustrated, my teacher will let me stay after and she will work with me just one-on-one. There are some days when my teacher will stay behind a few hours just to make sure I’ve done all my work for that day. I really like her, she tells us all the time “no one is going to fail in my class” and I believe her too!

It was clear during the interview that Esther was very motivated to do well and complete school, as she responsibly asserts why she believes it is important for her to finish school, stating, “I know I need to do well for my son... so completing school now it’s a must so I can take care of my son.” Esther shares aspirations of being successful so that she can offer her son a better life, and envisions her life as a fashion designer after completing college. She eagerly talks about completing her final class before earning her GED and enrolling in community college, then transferring to a local university. Completing her GED is especially important to Esther, as she is determined to secure a better life for both herself and her son. Her contrasting
schooling experiences in traditional versus an alternative school environment provide additional insight on school practices that work for students who may be facing challenges.

Mark: “I think that kids mess up every now and then and that doesn’t make ‘em bad kids, and it doesn’t mean that we don’t want to learn.”

Mark rushes in the door from football camp full of energy and enthusiasm, yelling “Man coach worked us today and it’s hot as fish grease outside, but I killed them on the field!” Clearly hungry, his next question is, “What we got to eat?” He sits down at the table as his grandmother is putting finishing touches on a plate she has prepared for him. He offers a hand to introduce himself to me then gets up quickly and says he’ll be right back after he changes his clothes.

Being invited to their home for the interview felt warm and welcoming and reminiscent of my own grandmother’s way of making visitors feel like family. Graciously accepting a cool drink, I wait for Mark to finish his meal before hearing his story.

Mark is a sixteen-year-old high school student in the eleventh grade who attends an urban school with predominantly Black students and White teachers. He describes his community and neighborhood as “mostly all Black.” He plays sports and reports having a supportive, caring relationship with his coach. He lives with his mother, grandmother, and two younger siblings. His father is not a consistent figure in his life; as Mark puts it, “I don’t really see my dad much, he is mostly doing his own thing, like he is in and out with drugs and only comes around when he needs something.” Mark further reflects on this relationship, adding:

You know there are times when I want my dad around to help me through things and to be there so I can just talk to him... he has his own issues though so I get it... my mom and grandma are there for me, but I know they can only do so much... having a dad you can go to means something.
Mark describes his overall childhood experience as positive, but discloses how a family tragedy involving his older brother, who is now deceased, had a significant impact on him. He shares:

My brother was like seventeen years old and he was hanging with some of his boys not far from our house and some guys rode past and just started shooting, he caught a bullet in his chest and face... I remember it like it was yesterday and I still have nightmares about it... everybody in the neighborhood was just in shock... I think about it a lot and just wish he was still here.

As Mark describes this experience, an overwhelming sadness seems to come over him as he pauses for a few minutes before speaking again. As the interview continues, he changes the subject and pokes fun at his grandmother, saying, “One day I’m gonna make it to the pros (NFL) and buy you anything you want and get you a cook and maid and all that.” His grandmother smiles and lovingly says “I know baby, I know.”

Mark mostly thinks school is uninteresting. He has struggled academically to stay eligible for sports, which is the one thing that has kept him motivated in school. He notes that his grandmother is always stressing that “I need a back-up plan cause football may or may not work out... doing good in school no matter what has to be the main priority.” He is aware that in order to do well in school he needs extra help, but reports feeling frustrated because he is not receiving the support he needs. Consequently, he disengages and tunes out saying, “Most of the time I just sit there waiting for class to be over.” He has internalized that he is not as good as the other kids, because he struggles academically and is separated from the other students. Mark feels isolated and excluded because he is in what he calls “the slow kids’ class,” which he reports is a class he attends with other struggling students to do additional schoolwork and further describes how “most of the time I don’t think I belong because I’m in with the slow kids...I
don’t even like to go because I don’t want my peoples [friends] to see me going to that dumb class.” Mark expresses his feelings about the class he attends and offers the following detailed explanation:

The slow kids’ class is a class where the kids who don’t learn good go to during the day to get homework or class work help. I have the class one period during the day, but some of the kids have it two periods a day and it’s like all Black kids who go. I don’t like having to explain to my friends what that class is, and I don’t feel like I need it. Don’t none of my friends or the White kids have to go to that class so why should I? Honestly, I think they [teachers] do it just to make us feel dumb.

For Mark, attending this class has led to feelings of embarrassment and shame. In his view, teachers should “just put everybody together and then give the kids the help they need right in the classroom with everyone else,” otherwise it feels “like we all are apart from everyone and then you’re always looked at different.” Further exacerbating these issues are feelings that he had been labeled as a criminal or troublemaker because he has served numerous suspensions and spent time in the county juvenile detention center. He has been suspended from school for tardiness, loitering in the hall, fighting, and disrespecting teachers. Mark often feels the teachers expect that he will always do something wrong and describes an encounter with the principal to illustrate his point:

I mean we all hang together and how we look and dress they always think we up to no good and like he [the principal] is always saying stuff to us like you headed to detention or jail if you keep it up... and this one time we were in the hall and all we was doing is kicking it and talking junk with each other you know doing our thing, like we ain’t doing nothing bad, I think he just assume stuff so he try to scare us I guess.
Mark believes that consequences in school often do not match the punishment and that overall discipline policies are not fair and “don’t make sense.” The school he was attending tried to expel him for a history of repeated suspensions, but his mother and grandmother intervened and advocated to keep him in school. Mark’s mother wrote a letter to the principal and requested a meeting with the superintendent to discuss her son’s suspensions and the role of the school in intervening to mitigate her son’s behavior. According to his mother, Salome, “They had no good record keeping of what they did to intervene with these behaviors they claim Mark had and I wanted to see proof of how they tried to help and they didn’t have any.” Based on the school’s inadequate documentation of interventions, the school agreed to cancel the expulsion hearing and allow him to attend classes with an action plan that was agreed upon between Mark, his mother, and the school.

Salome is a strong advocate for Mark who believes the school has made assumptions about her son’s ability and purposely “gave him a hard time when really they just wanted him out.” Based on her own schooling experiences, Salome reflects on feeling and treated unfairly when she was in school. Mark’s current schooling experiences have led her to think back on a similar experience she encountered when she was in school, which she believes resulted in her own academic growth being hindered based on lowered expectations. She shares how these experiences have impacted her own parenting and awareness, as she states: “I do believe when a child walks through the door and they are a certain color and where they live there are certain assumptions made about their abilities, and then no time gets invested and the problem gets worse.” When Salome was in school, she also remembers being treated differently:

They treated me a certain way based off of how I looked, I would never ever send my kids to a place where they would be subjected to that... to know that the only reason you
are treating me this way is because of how I look, you have no other reason to base how you are treating me except for that.

She distinctly recalls an experience that she states is “ingrained in [her] memory.” She remembers how teachers would constantly use the word *if* when speaking to students, effectively demonstrating that teachers had low expectations for students:

I remember they would always say “if,” they say “if you finish high school,” what do you mean if I finish, what do you mean, I’m here!... It would make a big difference if they just said all of you are going to have a successful high school experience and all of you will graduate.

Salome also points out that all the teachers, even the Black teachers, will often end up assimilating into the dominant [White] school culture by making assumptions about certain students based on their socio-economic status. Witnessing this first-hand with her own nieces and nephews, she shares:

If you have a student who is not doing well off and they live with a single parent, low wages, not a lot of resources, he may come to you and not know how to read, but that does not mean he is not intelligent, and all they are saying is he can’t even read, he don’t behave, he don’t do this, he don’t do that, what are we supposed to do... that means you as a teacher need to figure out how to get them there, instead of looking at the weaknesses they need to look at the abilities.

Mark does not believe the teachers want the “bad students” in school and shares how alternatives to out of school suspensions might work better in order to keep kids in school and aid in solving problems. He states:
Like let kids do in-school suspension maybe and talk about the problem with each other or the teachers. Sometimes things get way out of hand for no reason and kids just need somebody to talk to so they solve things the right way.

Mark reflects on his experiences being excluded from school and wishes more alternatives were available allowing teachers to think more creatively about “how they can help kids learn from making mistakes... I think that kids mess up every now and then and that doesn’t make ‘em bad kids, and it doesn’t mean that we don’t want to learn.” Mark is critical of discipline policies being used as a form of punishment because educational time is lost. As he puts it: “Being kicked out of school for dumb stuff don’t make sense and then you are not learning anything, so I don’t really know how that helps.” He goes on to add, “Kicking kids out of school is crazy ‘cause they (students) ain’t learning nothing from that.” For Mark, an education disrupted by repeated suspensions and lost hours of school time and missed schoolwork has increased his feelings of rejection and exclusion. He expresses feelings of regret as he reflects, “I just wish somebody would have been there for me ‘cause all that stuff I was in didn’t do nothing but hurt me in the long run... being out of school means all I did was fall behind.”

Mark points out yet another example illustrating how schooling experiences can cause students to question their sense of self, belonging, and acceptance in a world that makes assumptions about the abilities of Black students based on social identifiers such as language and race. Adding to feelings of being excluded in school are instances of feeling judged based on how one speaks, what Mark describes as “slang.” Mark shares how he feels the need to talk differently around friends and at home versus in school around teachers and staff:

I talk different around my friends ‘cause we just have our own way we talk to each other, my grandma is really big on making sure that I speak properly... while I’m in school or
talking to adults I talk like regular ‘cause the school want kids to talk right and use proper words instead of slang words.

Mark’s awareness of the need to speak differently based on situation, context, and circumstance demonstrates his understanding that such things affect how others view or perceive you. He appears to understand that, in order to avoid judgment, the best option is to navigate between his home and school language based on mainstream expectations.

In Mark’s case, his experience of being excluded from school based on numerous factors demonstrates how exclusion can often make a bad situation worse. Vulnerable students are often given minimal support, if any, while serving out-of-school suspensions leading to lost hours of instructional time. As a result, these marginalized students fall behind academically and are more subject to negative influences. Further, as Mark’s story illustrates, experiences of feeling that you do not belong in the same classroom with other students, and that you are different based on the way you learn, can lead students to question their own identities and academic abilities. These issues are compounded when you also feel judged based on the way you speak, which exacerbates feelings of otherness and inferiority in schools.

Elisabeth: “I never asked for help because I just didn’t think I could do the work no way.”

Elisabeth is one of four children living in a single-headed household. Elisabeth has attended multiple schools due to transient living conditions and has been suspended for offenses ranging from truancy to fighting. Elisabeth’s mother has faced struggles in raising all of her children and was particularly challenged with Elisabeth, who has served multiple suspensions and exhibited numerous behavioral issues in school that have resulted in disciplinary action. Her mother lives on a fixed income from social security benefits and often finds it difficult to meet
financial obligations. The family has experienced periods of homelessness due to multiple evictions that led to them living in a homeless shelter for a short period of time.

Elisabeth attended a traditional high school before transferring to an alternative high school. She has been receiving special education services since middle school and reports that she has an Individualized Education Plan in place which provides her with additional academic support in the classroom through a teacher consultant who works with her one-on-one. The traditional school she attended had a predominantly White student and teacher population. Elisabeth made the decision to leave the traditional school because she was failing numerous classes, as she was unable to complete missed assignments and lost hours of instructional time while serving suspensions. When she faced disciplinary action and was excluded from school, she viewed it as further validation that teachers did not care about her as a student or a person and could not “care less” whether she was there or not. Elisabeth reports that she is very behind academically and has limited family support; she also shows signs of having low self-esteem. As she states: “I never asked for help ‘cause I just didn’t think I could do the work no way.” She described the traditional high school she attended as “too big and unless you really wanted to be there, the teachers wouldn’t really pay attention to you.” Elisabeth did not feel she belonged in the larger school environment and only felt that the teachers paid attention to the “good students.” She further elaborated on these “good students,” saying:

It seemed like the good students were able to get after school help or I would always see the teacher pulling them [White students] aside to talk to them about different things.

You could just tell they were being treated better by the adults.

As she reflects on those earlier schooling experiences she is reminded of her own disrupted childhood and education and being involved in high school activities:
I really wish I would have done better at my old school, because I missed out on a lot of things like sports, I love to play basketball and going to prom, homecoming and other stuff like that. My friends be going to that stuff and they look like they are having so much fun. That’s the down side to the GED program and the alternative high school, they don’t have that stuff.

When reflecting on her academic experience in the traditional high school, she recalls feeling disconnected, having a low self-concept, and not perceiving herself as being as smart as the other students due to her learning disability, sharing “They say I have a learning disability and I learn differently than the other kids.” It is clear that her low-self-concept has impacted her self-efficacy. Elisabeth has struggled to believe she could achieve something, as she points out, “It just seems because I struggled so much that’s what it means that I can’t learn stuff easy and teachers never told me I was smart all I heard was how hard of a time I was having, you know?”

Further contributing to her feelings of disengagement in school were a lack of caring by her teachers, her difficulty in understanding school lessons, and not being noticed by her teachers:

I mean like I said before if you weren’t a smart kid or “good student” they really didn’t pay much attention to you... the smart kids were given better opportunities than we were; it just seemed like they were all apart of groups and school activities us other kids were never offered... there were teachers who never cared if I came to school or not. I guess those teachers didn’t really care about me.

Elisabeth’s low self-concept seems to have led to feelings of being resigned to a fate of not doing well. She goes on to add how a lack of support from teachers only made her situation worse:
I was struggling a lot... with school work and all, they didn’t help me and when I was asking for help they said I had a bad attitude or didn’t take the help when it was offered, at least that’s what they told my mom... they really didn’t tell me nothing or do anything while I was there, other than just ignoring me in my opinion.

Elisabeth’s struggles in school were compounded by a broken relationship with her mother, who kicked her out of the house when she discovered that Elisabeth was skipping school, forcing Elisabeth to go live with an aunt. Elisabeth’s disturbed home environment appears to be a factor that carried over to her continued disruptions at school, as she was often angry, describing how her “mother never really listened to what she had to say,” which may have led to expressing her feelings inappropriately by fighting and being disruptive in class. These feelings of exclusion, isolation, and perception that no one cares undoubtedly impacted and contributed to her harsh school experience. Elisabeth aptly sums up her overall feelings about school: “Like I said I didn’t wanna be there and I know they ain’t want me there.”

In 2012, at the traditional high school Elisabeth attended, she was suspended four times for skipping, disrespecting teachers, and being disruptive in class. A lack of care and concern for her academic, social, and emotional well-being, coupled with a disrupted home environment during a tumultuous time in her life, led to increased problems in school, feelings of hopelessness, a sense of invisibility, and a lack of belonging. As she points out:

It was like I wasn’t there... so like you are just there kinda lost... teachers are supposed to be there to teach students, but they not most of the time... I think it was probably a lot of kids like me that didn’t feel like they were smart enough to finish school.
Elisabeth is currently working towards GED completion and is looking forward to completing her classes. Due to her academic struggles in the traditional school, Elisabeth made the decision to move to an alternative education program, saying:

They [counselors] were suggesting I go to a different school because I wasn’t going to graduate on time anyway... my counselor thought I had a bad attitude anyways so they wanted me out... I actually really wanted to leave.

Elisabeth expresses how the alternative education program she now attends is supportive and the teachers “really care about the kids.” She attributes much of her success to the teachers in the program, “They support us in any way that we need and that makes a big difference for me, like the personal relationships with teachers helps a lot.” Despite Elisabeth’s academic, social and emotional struggles, she does share aspirations for her future, “Yeah I wanna be something and make good money one day so that I can take care of myself.” Her mother supports this aspiration by adding, “I want all my kids to have a good life and doing well in schools is a good way to get to that life.” The validation, caring, and support that she is now receiving in the alternative education program could make the difference in helping to reach her aspirations.

Sarah: “I would get in trouble for something stupid like being late too much or speaking up, so after a while I was just uninterested in school.”

Sarah is a high school student who struggles academically and has served suspensions for offenses such as tardiness and insubordination. She attends school with a majority of White students and White teachers and reports she is “only one of few Black kids at the school.” She is an only child and her mother is a single parent. She reports having an unstable relationship with her father and rarely spends time with him. She recently started high school and has not adjusted to the new school; she has not made friends and often feels alienated. She does, however, report
having a strong relationship with peers outside of school through her church. She became disengaged from school due to serving repeated suspensions and feeling that school was “boring.” She expresses concern about the inflexible disciplinary policies and argues that the Black kids are targeted for such policies, instead of allowing them an opportunity to express themselves:

Don’t kick kids out because they don’t learn nothing and then it’s like they [Black kids] are always the target for the teacher to talk to for every little thing... kids can be in school serving suspension or giving them a chance to talk to explain their side of things.

Additionally, she describes a very strict environment at her school where student voices are also silenced:

Yeah, so like I am always questioning stuff in class but it’s like the teachers don’t like that, they don’t really want to be challenged or question them cause they the authority so I feel like the teachers don’t want you to say anything.

Sarah’s awareness of teachers trying to silence student voices is clear, yet her resistance to this in the classroom is evident, as she reports, “I don’t care I will keep on taking and asking questions because teachers don’t know everything.” Subsequently, the sense of agency she displays in school comes with consequences, as this type of behavior leads to students being charged with “being disrespectful” and sent out of the classroom for questioning the teachers too much—in the teachers’ view, an act of insubordination. Sarah recalls being sent out of class numerous times for voicing her opinion and challenging the teacher, which, in some instances, resulted in her being kicked out of class.

Sarah’s mother Rachel has made frequent visits to the school to advocate on her daughter’s behalf. Rachel expresses support for her daughter, sharing: “I am a person who will
stay on them [school personnel] about making sure they turned this into a positive thing and used this as a way to look at this as one of Sarah’s strengths.” Rachel states, “I would often come to the school to sit in the classroom to observe and talk to the teacher and principal on ways she thought the school could do things differently.” A sense of pride emerges from Sarah when she discusses how her mother’s presence at the school has really seemed to make a difference: “After my mom came up there things got way better.” Rachel’s advocacy for her daughter was powerful as it affirmed her daughter’s sense of identity, voice, and modeled a sense of empowerment. When schools serve as sites of discomfort where they are constantly viewed as “troublemakers,” students’ interest in school and sense of self erodes, leading to disengagement. Sarah has strong and critical views about her school and what should happen:

Like really listen to them [students] talk... I think that more supports are needed for kids in school and should be in the school to help kids have a better education and feel good about themselves, like the schools only do so much like it’s only just enough to get by, it’s not like they are doing anything way different to help kids be all they can be. Sarah also feels that the classroom instruction is not relevant and she does not see how what was being taught would apply to her in the future. Sarah points out, “Well there really isn’t anything in school for me to relate to with school, like half the time, I don’t get what are they trying to teach us and I’m like how is this going to help me later on in life.” Sarah, like other youth in this study, believes that teachers should make learning more interesting and relevant to students’ lives.

Sarah perceives that once you get in trouble, you are always labeled and targeted as a student who will misbehave. She believes that she can do the work in order to get caught up to do well in school, however, she thinks teachers only believe you might mess up again, and that
the Black students are often labeled. As she puts it: “You are always walking around with stuff hanging over your head that nobody forgets about and then you get treated differently like maybe you are always gonna cause trouble or not listen or learn in class.” She goes on to add how the Black students in the predominantly White school seem to stick out like a sore thumb:

Like we are the ones who everyone knows in the school as the Black kids and so I am like aware of that and my mom talks about it too, just to always stay in line and do good ‘cause we will always stick out here... I wish there were more Black kids or other kids from other races and I know that we kinda stick out ‘cause it’s only a few of us here.

When referring to her disciplinary issues, Sarah expresses her wish that the teachers were not so judgmental, stating, “those times when I had trouble should not be the thing that determines anything.” In her view, in order to improve student teacher relationships, teachers should “spend more time with students to get to know them and make sure they get the type of help they need to succeed.” Her mother Rachel offers her own assessment of how disciplinary policies adversely impact students and the inconsistency among teachers in ensuring students have a rich learning experience; she points out:

It all depends on the teacher that your child is assigned to. The more committed and dedicated the teachers is the better educational experience they will have... the parents need to make sure their children get the support they need otherwise I feel they won’t get it... and with the discipline policies they are way too strict, I feel like they kick kids out of school for reasons that are trivial, to me many of things can be worked out another way.
Luke: “They suspend you for being late... it’s just stupid, like I couldn’t get in and now I can’t even come back.”

A basketball game is taking place outside on an unseasonably hot summer day. The game is clearly intense with a serious overtone as players on the court focus on playing the game. On the sideline, onlookers are yelling to players when they make a basket or steal a pass from the opposite team. Curious to find out who this young man is, I stand on the sideline watching and then ask one of the camp counselors, “Which one is Luke?” He points in the direction of a tall, slender young man wearing green basketball shorts, bouncing a basketball, and calling out plays to other players on the court. His physique lends itself to the skills he displays on the court, indicating his athletic talent. The game ends and after exchanges of praise with teammates and others watching the performance, Luke walks in my direction. Before the counselor can introduce us formally, Luke adjusts his shorts and extends a hand to introduce himself. As a new face in this unfamiliar environment, it was clear I was easily identified as the person coming to meet with him. The counselor ushers us to an area where we can talk.

Luke is a middle school student who lives with his mother and father and has three older siblings. His mother suffers from a chronic illness and is receiving disability benefits. Luke’s father works outside of the home as a contractor doing electrical and plumbing work. Luke’s mother, Karen, shared during her interview that work was slow for her husband right now, so the family is under a lot of stress as they are finding it difficult to make ends meet. Luke’s father David, also expressed feeling the pressure to provide for his family and stay on top of what is happening with his son in school, saying “it’s hard on us right now, but we gotta stay on top of Luke with this education so he can get through school.”
Luke attends school in an urban area with predominantly Black students and reports “there are like all White teachers and only three Black teachers in the whole school.” The community where he lives is predominantly Black with only a few White families living in the area. He is struggling academically, particularly with reading, and believes “the teachers don’t really understand me or care.” Luke receives special education services and has an Individualized Education Plan in place that provides him with academic support through the teacher consultant in his school who works with him one-on-one. Although Luke feels generally disconnected from school, he does report having a good relationship with his basketball coach and shares that the coach always emphasizes that the students need to do well academically in order to play sports. The coach’s encouragement is the one thing that has kept him motivated in school; as Luke puts it, “I really like him ‘cause he breaks stuff down and helps me see how I need to do better.” These sentiments are in opposition to how he views his teachers, whom he contends “don’t take the time to just get to know me more like my coach.” Having a supportive relationship in school is crucial for students, particularly in the case of a student like Luke, who often feels “misunderstood” by school staff because he is quiet and shy. In his view, this is often misinterpreted as “not listening,” resulting in referrals to the office and detention. Luke’s father David agrees that “they [teachers] are not making an effort to understand him or why he’s shutting down.” He adds:

First of all they misinterpret a lot with him, his quiet nature is seen as being defiant and not cooperating when if they just asked us or him what was going on they would hear a whole different story... I don’t like that they try to label my son as difficult or not listening.
Luke has been suspended for truancy, tardiness, insubordination, and disrespect and does not believe students receive fair consequences when they break the school rules. Luke goes on to express: “Like being late to school or being around a situation that had nothing to do with you means you get in trouble too, so times like that it’s not fair.” He offers a critical viewpoint when talking about the metal detectors in school and the long lines students need to stand in to get into the building: “They suspend you for being late or not being in school, it’s just stupid, like I couldn’t get in and now I can’t even come back.” From Luke’s perspective, teachers just want students out of their class and are not given the opportunity to speak up for themselves to explain what may have happened: “If you do try to say something they shut you up real quick by telling you that you will get more days, they don’t wanna hear what you have to say.” When student views are not taken into account and their perspectives are disregarded, it effectively silences their voices.

Luke, like Mark, also spends time out of the classroom to receive extra academic support and discloses his thoughts on this, sharing, “You feel different than the other kids and not as smart ‘cause they pull you out of the class to go and get extra help and everybody knows.” Luke also agrees that taking kids out of their regular class to get extra help is “embarrassing” and that the other kids always “know your business... and it’s all the Black kids, never the White kids in these classes.” He has struggled with getting in trouble and admits that he sometimes will purposely act out in class when he does not understand the work, saying “sometimes I will slack off and do things to get out of class.” Luke does not feel a sense of belonging in his school based on his academic struggles, and has disengaged due to the difficulties he has grasping the work in class. With regard to his reading insecurities in particular, he expounds: “Sometimes I feel scared to talk in class because I don’t know a lot of the questions the teacher will ask, and now
we do a lot of reading aloud in class and I really don’t like that.” He is aware that although the teachers may think he is a “bad” kid, he does not share that belief. He highlights the connection between being disengaged in the classroom and how it can lead to misbehavior and the contradiction between the two:

I mean even though school is boring on one hand and then if you are not paying attention or doing things in class then that means you get kicked out... then they want you out of school, I guess I just don’t see the point in how that helps kids learn anything... it’s crazy like we are blamed for being bored.

Despite experiencing difficulties in school, Luke has a strong sense of confidence largely due to the support from his parents and Luke’s basketball coaches who his parents contend, “understand Luke.” His mother Karen points out, “Luke is a quiet kid and doesn’t like to be put on the spot when he is uncomfortable... they [teachers] think he is being disrespectful or confrontational when he doesn’t talk or just shuts down, but they just don’t know him.” Karen also relates to feeling unsupported as a parent, commenting, “The school really didn’t make much effort to reach out to us when our son was struggling and that was really disappointing for us.”

She believes many minority children come into these schools with labels that are already attached to them as troubled children, children with learning disabilities or children who do not want to learn. Aware of how these issues in school impact how students are treated, and that the teachers and school staff are trying to affix labels to her son as “difficult or not listening,” she has decided it is critical to be there for him and advocate so that he gets the help he needs. Reflecting on her own experiences with teachers and her observations in the classroom at her son’s school, she offers this insight:
Traditional teaching methods are no longer effective for today’s youth. I think the education system needs to be revamped with methods that can grab and keep the attention of these kids... minorities receive a lower standard of education in the classroom and some minority students don’t have parents that are engaged in their learning experience as much as my husband and I are.

Karen further reflects on her own schooling experience in a school with predominantly White teachers—which in her estimation has not changed much today—sharing: “When we tell children they can grow up to be whatever they want to be, we must show them people who look like them in these positions so that they can imagine themselves there.” She points out that everyone should be “treated equally and receive the same education and resources and benefits in every community. It should not be based on where you live, how you look, and how much money you make.”

Luke’s parents elaborate on how grateful they are for the supportive relationship he has with his basketball coach, an African American male. In contrast to the relationship he has with his teachers, Luke’s parents say that in relation to his coach, “[Luke] he feels supported and cared for... and he doesn’t feel that from any of his teachers or other support staff.” Luke feels so strongly about the relationship between coaches and students that he believes “if kids played a sport they might feel more connected to school.” For Luke, playing sports and having a supportive relationship with his coach has kept him coming to school, although he stills feels disengaged in the classroom. Luke also believes students tend to disengage from school when the focus is always on discipline and explains how it becomes counterproductive if teachers take away activities as a form of punishment. In his view, this only serves to isolate you from others, stating: “They expect us to do bad, it’s always things for the good kids like rewards assemblies
but all we get is referrals and pink slips... I just don’t see the point in how that helps kids to learn anything.” Luke and his parents emphasized how teachers should get to know kids and their parents to better understand what is going on with students to help them be successful in school. Although the school in general, with the exception of the coach, has been unsupportive, Luke’s parents consistently demonstrate through their commitment and involvement that they care about his education and will continue to support their son, saying:

We will continue to be really present in our son’s education, so they (the schools) have no choice but to deal with us... our son has a bright future ahead of him and the teachers in the school would see that if they paid a little more attention to him.

Luke’s own insight into what schools can do to support students instead of kicking them out is clear:

I think the teachers spend all their time trying to keep you out of this or that and everything depends on that, like you will lose this privilege or that privilege if you don’t listen or have to be talked to... you know if they took the time to do more to help us out in class and understand us more that would be a better help... they don’t even ask you what’s wrong they just think you are being disrespectful to them or don’t wanna be here to learn.

Luke’s story is yet another glaring example of how students felt stigmatized by school practices and policies that keep them out of school, leading them to disengage from the classroom, which further weakens their already precarious academic situations. When significant numbers of Black students are being marginalized through exclusionary practices such as suspension and pull-out programs, it results in academic under preparation that raises serious questions about educational equity.
Isaiah: “I don’t like to raise my hand in class ‘cause they think I’m a trouble maker.”

Isaiah is a middle school student who lives with his mother and an aunt. He attends school in an urban community and attends school with predominantly Black students and predominantly White teachers. He has served in- and out-of-school suspensions for tardiness, insubordination, and being disruptive in class. Isaiah believes school is mostly boring. He has struggled academically and has fallen behind due to missing school while serving his suspensions and generally not getting the help he needs to succeed. He has been labeled in school as a “troublemaker” and has begun to internalize feelings of being a “bad kid.” He has been separated from other kids in school in what he identifies as the “room for trouble-kids,” which serves as a punishment for those children who are being disruptive in class. During this time, Isaiah divulges how “students are given worksheets to complete for the entire school day and separated from the other students as a form of punishment.” Isaiah expresses disdain for these consequences: “It’s like a waste of time ‘cause we don’t learn nothin’ they just give us these worksheets and tell us to be quiet and work on them, I guess they think it’s like a punishment, but it’s a joke.” From Isaiah’s point of view these consequences are clearly ineffective; he insightfully points out that the real punishment and impact is the isolation and exclusion:

It’s like crazy cause you are not around the other kids in your class and with all these other kids who did this or that, the teachers I think just try to get the bad kids out of their class so they don’t have to deal with all the Black kids in their class... I am there but can’t really say I feel part of the school because the focus is always on bad stuff so I feel like I’m not really part of the school.
Isaiah’s mother Eunice describes her experiences in her son’s school similarly, sharing, “He had some struggles and then he went through a period where he just didn’t like school and it was hard to know what was going on... the teacher reports he is always being a distraction or disruption in school.” Eunice shares how her experience with the school was only based on her son’s behavior and that she did not feel welcome in the school:

I only heard from the school when he was in trouble about something... there was not a lot of sitting down talking about what was actually happening at school... they focused so much on the discipline and following directions which kids need but it ain’t the only thing they need, kids need to know how to learn things on their own and think for themselves.

Isaiah further elaborates on his view of how schools place a heavy emphasis on discipline and seem to be constantly targeting the Black kids. Isaiah’s feelings of not belonging in school and the impact of serving multiple suspensions for what he described as “dumb stuff, like being late or being in the halls” caused him to disconnect from school even further, as he comments: “I felt like I wasn’t wanted in school so I just hung out at people’s houses in the neighborhood while my mom wasn’t home, I didn’t really have nothing to do.” It is clear that Isaiah views these consequences as socially and academically disruptive, and believing his teachers do not really care further contributes to his feelings of disconnect:

I don’t think all the teachers care that much, they act like sending us out of class and to the office or like serving suspension is supposed to be the thing that makes us straighten up, but it just makes me feel like you don’t want me here.

Isaiah also shares an awareness of feeling judged by his White teachers based on speaking “slang” in school. He states, “When you speak slang people don’t think you are talking
right or they think you not smart or something... slang is not a respectable way to talk... I’ve kinda learned how to say stuff and when to say stuff around certain people.” Although he is aware of the need to speak a certain way in different environments, he does not necessarily agree with why students need to change the way they speak to please others. He states, “You can’t really worry about everybody else’s opinions on things like especially on how you talk ‘cause it ain’t always right.” Isaiah’s experience of being sent out of class for misbehaving, serving out of school suspensions, and feeling judged only caused him to be more susceptible to academic failure.

**Summarizing Student Voices**

The narratives in this chapter highlight examples of students who feel excluded from school based on their experiences and interactions with teachers and administrators. Many of the students view their educational experience as a time period in which they do not feel as if they matter. Instead, they perceive a resounding lack of care and concern for their well-being. These students all face barriers in school and share how they would have benefited from support during critical times in their lives when they faced social, emotional, and academic challenges. Students consistently face disruptions in school due to unexpected life circumstances, but exclusionary school practices imposed upon them such as stigmatizing pull-out programs and disciplinary actions for often minor infractions only exacerbate the academic challenges faced by these students. They are adversely impacted by inflexible discipline policies, which view as unfair and unhelpful to their learning. Students are critically aware of the educational time that is lost if they are suspended, and that hours of missed school work only causes them to fall further behind academically. Further, the students relate how their experiences in school often lead to feelings of not belonging and perceptions of teachers who just want “bad” students out of their classes.
Yet, it is clear from the students’ vantage point that they value their education, in spite of what their teachers may perceive. Despite their experiences, these students still report a strong determination to succeed, thus demonstrating their resilience.

It is important to note that the narratives do also offer a contrasting view, however, as the students’ stories note interactions with caring and concerned teachers and coaches who are identified as significant adults in their lives. The students share how these supportive relationships with key individuals have made a key difference in how they experience school. Support from teachers, parents, and coaches have helped many of them develop positive self-identities, resilience, and determination.
Chapter 5: Lack of Belonging, Lack of Care, and Persistence and Resilience

In this chapter, the voices of parents, social workers and coaches are highlighted, in addition to those of students, in order to reveal the significance of caring supportive adults in the lives of students. Parents reflect on their own schooling experiences as children and how those encounters impact how they parent their children today. Social workers and coaches offer timely suggestions on the ways in which schools can effectively engage Black students in the classroom. Most importantly, though, the voices of youth are highlighted as integral to the discussion of how educational policies and practices directly affect their lives, identities, and possibilities. Key themes that emerged are: Lack of Belonging, Lack of Care, Persistence and Resilience.

Both low-income and minority youth are disproportionately impacted by school practices and policies that “make and unmake young lives” (Polakow, 2000, p. 2). Too often, schools serve as sites of disengagement and pipelines to juvenile justice, rather than sources of hope and opportunity. The various stages in the process of educational attainment are evidenced through the stories students share about how their trajectories were interrupted, but not derailed. The research investigating the everyday lives of youth is sparse and more often than not, polices are created for and about youth, but rarely with their unique perspectives in mind. Phillip Wexler (1992) in Becoming Somebody: Toward a Social Psychology of School noted, youth are struggling to become “somebody,” youth are “not struggling to become nobody” (p. 7). He further points out that this struggle is primarily structured by class and race differences, noting: “It is not merely a question of deficits or deprivations and advantages, but of different life worlds” (p. 8). The youth in this study demonstrate that they care about their education, but
identify schools as places that have, by many accounts, written them off. The students also identified caring and supportive adults in their lives who made a positive difference in how they experienced school.

**Lack of Belonging**

Adolescence is a period of development and self-formation during which belonging and acceptance can significantly influence healthy academic, social, and emotional outcomes (Anderman, 2002; Maeroff, 1998). Adolescents are acutely aware of how other people perceive and feel about them. In school, students are attuned to how teachers react to them and whether they are approving or disapproving. If students sense they are rejected, it can lead to feelings of exclusion. In the cases of Ruth and Elisabeth, both of whom experienced feelings of rejection due to their race, the result was their increasing withdrawal. Ruth’s earlier schooling experiences in the traditional school she attended led to feelings of disengagement and feeling that she did not belong, based on her interactions with teachers, leading her to comment, “They [White teachers] would make us [Black students] feel stupid... we just felt like we didn’t fit into that school.” Elisabeth echoed these sentiments as she described how White teachers provided more support to White students and less support to the Black students in the traditional school she attended. She pointed out that “the White kids seemed to always be treated better,” clearly suggesting differential treatment of her peers and other students in the school. Attending a traditional school with predominantly White peers and teachers can also contribute to feelings of isolation and social invisibility for African-American students (Goldberg, 2009). In *The Psychological Experiences of Students of Color* (2003), Thompson and Shultz discuss how the psychological burden of being a minority student in a predominantly White school can be very difficult and can contribute to feelings of loneliness:
The psychological price for being a minority student in a majority-White school is often heavy... psychological difficulties compound feelings of loneliness if you are a student in a school where you are in the minority, you may not feel as if you have—indeed, you do not have—the same social pool available to you as White kids do. (p. 1)

When students feel marginalized due to their race, their schooling experiences are compromised and negatively impacted as students often withdraw from school, display disruptive behaviors, or develop emotional issues. Research examining the consequences of prejudice and discrimination due to one’s race (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998) reveals that students’ self-esteem, identity, and self-efficacy are negatively impacted by discriminatory practices. Neblett Jr., Philip, Coburn, and Sellers (2006) examine the interconnectedness of relationships among racial discrimination experiences, parent race socialization practices, and academic achievement outcomes in African American adolescents. The disparity in treatment based on race impacts how students respond to their environment as they may internalize feelings of being all that is “bad.” Neblett Jr. et al.’s findings suggest that “adolescents’ racial discrimination experiences were associated with a decrease in academic curiosity, persistence, and student self-reported grades” (p. 199). Additionally, reports of discrimination at school were associated with increased levels of anger, depression, and “problem” behaviors. African American adolescents with low self-esteem may have a poor self-image and develop a belief that they are unworthy, incapable, and unable to succeed, and subsequently disengage from learning. According to Neblett Jr. et al., “Adolescents who believe they are not capable and unlikely to succeed may have little incentive to try hard and become less interested in learning with the passage of time” (p. 201).
The perspectives of the parents of the students in this study reveal how their own childhood schooling experience have shaped how they interact with schools and parent their own children. Given their own schooling experiences, many Black parents have a heightened awareness of how Black students may be judged or made to feel excluded in schools based on their race and class. Parent perspectives are highlighted in a later section of this study (see pp. 142-147).

Throughout the interviews, student participants identified instances of encountering micro-aggressions. Previous studies have shown that African Americans often experience stereotype threat, micro-aggressions, and insults as part of their educational experience (DeAngelis, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Steele, 2010; Yosso, 2005). When students encounter negative stereotypes, it can lead to feelings of self-doubt and inferiority, thereby effectively threatening students’ self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993). Consequently, African-American students may experience a lack of belonging and may feel intentionally excluded in school. A lack of belonging and connectedness in school can account for increased rates in dropout, academic failure, and students displaying disruptive behaviors in school (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Finn, 1989; Maeroff, 1998; Osterman, 2000). Steele (1998, 2010) suggests that in order for students to succeed academically they need to develop positive self-identities and perceptions. The development of self-identity is a process whereby identity is chosen based upon a variety of possible “selves” that are informed by external micro-messages. Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings (2009) argue that:

Communities of color have constructed counter-discourse in home, church, and [informal] school cultures in order to maintain their sense of humanity. They know too
well that their sanity and development, both as individuals and collective, depend on alternative... knowledge. (p. 268)

The counter narratives of students in this dissertation reveal that they value their education and have developed an internal will to succeed, despite messages to the contrary imposed on them by others. Further, these students report feeling affirmed by caring, supportive adults (parents, coaches, and social workers) who have helped them to reject negative messages they encountered in school. A combination of self-talk—as in the case of Esther, who stated: “I’m gonna finish school, you better believe that!”—and counter story-telling has contributed to the students’ belief that they will succeed.

Several students in the study also felt they were targeted due to their race and, in some instances, due to their prior history with disciplinary problems, further contributing to feelings of not belonging. Isaiah believed that Black students are targeted and therefore receive more discipline than other students. Sarah, too, felt that the few Black students who attended her school were always targeted and expected to misbehave; she shared, “It’s like they [Black kids] are always the target for the teacher to talk to for every little thing.” Research reveals that the pressure of feeling as though you are under constant surveillance can lead to psychological distress among Black students (Goldberg, 2009). Mark also believed he was targeted and viewed as a criminal when the principal would say things to him and his Black friends to “try to scare them,” based on the principal’s problematic assumptions that the students were going to cause trouble, because perhaps they do not fit into the expectations of the dominant school culture. It is critical to acknowledge that we all hear things differently, listen to things differently, thus we interpret things differently. This is aptly illustrated in the encounter Mark described (see p. 100). It is likely that the principal in this case was either unaware or failed to acknowledge that,
perhaps based on his own limited experience with difference, lack of understanding regarding varying cultural norms, and ways of communicating, he simply assumed that this group of Black students were up to no good and intervened in a way that simply led to the students internalizing the notion that there were being unfairly targeted and viewed as criminals.

This construct of youth as criminals and a public menace has led many schools in urban areas, particularly those schools with high concentrations of poor students and students of color, to hire more security, install metal detectors and surveillance cameras, and in some instances employ police officers on site as an extension of the staff in schools (Robbins, 2008). These images are troubling, and raise concerns about the impact on the identity development of African-American youth. If youth are viewed and treated as a threat to society, criminals, and persons in need of being managed and controlled, this inevitably leads to fewer opportunities for these youth to develop self-discipline and the capacity to make responsible choices and decisions on their own. Deficit-based discourses, discriminatory practices, and media influences all contribute to Black students being viewed in negative and stigmatizing terms.

Children and youth seek acceptance and belonging as a normal part of their development and well-being. When students lack opportunities to establish healthy, supportive relationships due to rejection, they are deprived of a basic human need, which can adversely impact their schooling experiences (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Garbarino, 1995; Finn, 1989; Maeroff, 1998; Noddings, 2005; Polakow, 2007). Solomon (1990) argues that feelings of rejection lead to disruptive behavior and anger as a coping mechanism, particularly when students feel they are being treated unfairly. Feelings of rejection have also been associated with lowered self-esteem. Rejection as described by Garbarino (1995), “corrodes and damages the sense of self-worth in much the same way that cancer damages the body; it twists a child’s outlook and makes every
action painful” (p. 155; see Polakow, 2007). Elisabeth displayed disruptive behavior and had resigned herself to a belief that she was not as “smart” as the other students in the traditional school she attended, based on interactions with teachers whom she felt ignored her and never noticed if she was there or not. Youth who have low self-esteem often react differently to feelings of rejection and will resort to evaluative judgments and criticism of themselves, as evidenced in Elisabeth’s statement: “I didn’t ask for help because I didn’t think I could do the work no way.”

Mark and Isaiah receive special education services in school and reported that they are subjected to school practices that separated them from the other students in school by pulling them out of their regular classes to receive additional support. Their experience of being removed from class to receive academic support has led to feelings of shame and embarrassment. Mark and Luke both expressed feeling targeted as Black students and feeling as if they do not belong in the classroom. Mark stated: “I don’t think I belong cause I’m in with the slow kids... friends know you go to this different class and it’s all embarrassing, so I don’t wanna be there.” Luke corroborated, saying, “You feel different than the other kids and not as smart ‘cause they pull you out of the calls to go and get extra help and everybody knows.” In short, students feel stigmatized when they are pulled out to receive “academic support”—which often amounts to simply being given worksheets to complete in a separate room away from the other students and thus being excluded from social networks. Mark experienced this isolation from regular classmates on a consistent basis, primarily due to his different learning abilities and teachers making him feel that he does not belong. Although Mark is aware that he is behind academically and needs extra help, he strongly believes that it is unnecessary to separate students in school based on how they learn.
Pulling students out of class to receive extra help has proven detrimental to students by perpetuating feelings of otherness, shame, and making them feel excluded from students in the mainstream learning environment (Allington & Cunningham, 2002; Gelzheiser, Meyers, & Pruzek, 1992). The early work of Dunn (1968) challenged special education services that segregated students from regular classes by linking efficacy research with issues of ethics and equity. The author asserts that, when allowed to remain in regular programs, special education students tended to do better in the long run than when “pull-out” practices were relied upon to provide students with the academic support they need. Students who are exposed to more rigorous curricula, rather than remedial instruction, benefit from being challenged and more engaged in the classroom. According to Dunn (1968), students can be expected to approximate to the norms of the group, regardless of the nature of that group, as long as they are made to feel part of the group. In Dunn’s view, special education programs that use pull-out practices only perpetuate segregation by transferring disadvantaged students from one setting to another. The author asserts that children from minority or low-income families are being unfairly targeted and labeled as emotionally impaired and mentally retarded based on the inappropriate use of intelligence testing measures. As a result, Dunn argues that at least 60-80% of students from “low-status backgrounds” are subsequently placed in segregated and inferior special education settings “at the expense of the socio-culturally deprived slow learning pupils themselves,” illuminating “serious educational and civil rights issues which must be squarely faced” (p. 6). Dunn adds, “We must stop segregating by placing them into our allegedly special programs” (p. 6). Dunn noted that these actions contribute to feelings of inferiority and levels of acceptance among these students, and specifically points to the negative impact of labeling associated with removing students from the general education population. Dunn’s challenge was viewed as
timely and relevant during the Civil Rights Movement, specifically with the release of the 1966 Coleman Report, a time period of significant concern for African-American students.

In the decades that followed, Howard & Hammond (1985) suggested that images of Black intellectual inferiority were widespread and that these images in turn, have been internalized by Black people. Over twenty-five years ago, the authors’ work on the Efficacy Program cautioned educators not to equate performance with ability, because low performance is largely a behavioral problem and the authors advocated building on the strengths of African-American students. More recently, Critical Disability theorists have argued that disabilities are often viewed as individual problems that need to be fixed with treatments and prescriptions (Matthews, 2009). Students are often improperly diagnosed with disabilities, and overmedicated for reasons that may be better addressed through alternative strategies in schools and classrooms. According to Kauffman (2007) there is an overreliance on medicating students as a solution which “focuses our attention on the individual... and advises us to seek treatments (p. 254). Within education systems the dominant culture has established a standard for what is considered normal behavior and what defines academic success, thereby perpetuating instances of exclusion and otherness. This narrow focus often does not consider the multiple ways students can demonstrate that they are learning and making academic gains in school. Labeling and categorizing students further contributes to marginalizing experiences and disproportionality in schools.

It would seem these principles are especially important and applicable to African-American students who are overrepresented in special education services. According to the students in this study who describe school as boring and classroom content as not challenging or engaging, it would seem more appropriate to reconsider and redesign pedagogical practices,
rather than constantly blaming students for their disruptive behavior in classrooms. The students who expressed disdain with their placement in these lower-level classes—described by Mark as the “slow kids” classes—are often viewed by their teachers as problematic. But more often than not, this perception of their behavior creates a self-fulfilling prophecy that has led them to be placed in the lower-level classes in the first place.

Ruth perceived that the experiences in the traditional school she attended isolated the Black students, which resulted in many of her Black friends dropping out of school altogether, contributing to her belief that “the schools don’t even care.” Student drop-out rates have been high for decades particularly among poor youth of color (Fine, 1991). The American Psychological Association (APA) points to a connection between poverty and drop-out rates, where poor and minority students are five times more likely than their affluent peers to drop out of school. In addition, so-called “dropout factories” (schools that graduate less than 60% of their students) produce half of the dropouts nationwide, two-thirds of whom are ethnic minority students (APA, 2012).

Esther, who feels both the pressures of being a teenage parent and the stigma in school, shared how her principal sealed her educational fate by telling her that she “messed my future up by getting pregnant.” This harmful, disaffirming statement led to Esther disengaging from her school. Isaiah, who believes educators spend too much time focusing on negative behavior rather than building on students strengths, shared how he never felt a sense of belonging in school “because the focus is always on the bad stuff... the only way they know how to deal with us I guess is by getting us out if we are not doing what they want us to in class.” His mother supports his perspective by offering her own assessment of belonging in schools, “I am not convinced that all children feel they belong... those children who are so-called trouble makers
cause such overwhelm in the administration that the last thing they are worried about with those children is making them feel they belong.”

Healthy developmental pathways are often cut off if the proper supports are not put in place to change the trajectory. Current educational discourses and practices ignore the development needs of many youth and the external factors of social toxicity to which so many vulnerable youth are exposed (Garbarino, 1995). Issues such as poverty, domestic violence, abuse, street violence, and educational exclusion are all factors that contribute to the negative experiences of students in their lived worlds. These pervasive patterns must be interrupted through supports for students in order to foster healthy development. Finn and Rock (1997) argue that external support can help to facilitate a sense of belonging, healthy internal experiences, and strong academic and self-identities for students. Without a strong sense of feeling understood and accepted, students may experience deeply negative emotional occurrences and academic failure. When children feel they matter, are supported, and cared for, positive behaviors and interactions with teachers and peers are encouraged. Children who feel they are accepted and respected by their peers and teachers often feel empowered and actively participate in their education (Finn, 1989; Osterman, 2000).

When there are obstructions in the educational pipeline for African-American students, successful matriculation through K–12 schooling is threatened (Howard, 2013; Irvine, 1990; Ogbu, 2003). Howard (2013) specifically highlights how Black males face unique challenges in school as they are often labeled as problems, violent, and are largely viewed as undesirable students. Conversely, Howard highlights the paradoxical perception of Black males who are, on the one hand, loathed and, yet, simultaneously celebrated and loved in various arenas in mainstream culture when their talents and creativity produce profits for multi-billion dollar
sports and entertainment industries. Ladson-Billings (2011) describes this love-hate relationship stating:

We see African American males as “problems” that our society must find ways to eradicate. We regularly determine them to be the root cause of most problems in school and society. . . While the society apparently loves them in narrow niches and specific slots—music, basketball, football, track—we seem less comfortable with them in places like the National Honor Society, the debate team, or the computer club. (p. 9)

Even at the collegiate level, these issues are prevalent and problematic as Black students in post-secondary schooling have expressed feeling a sense of isolation and lack of belonging. The UCLA School of Law has launched an Awareness Campaign 33, so-named after the number of Black students among the 1,100 enrolled School of Law students—three% of the school’s student population. This campaign has drawn national attention to the lack of diversity at UCLA. They reported feeling silenced as their voices seem to be discounted in a White-dominated environment. Describing feelings of isolation and lack of belonging, two students candidly stated: “It feels isolating. It feels horrible. It feels like there is a lot of pressure... It feels like I don’t belong. It feels unwelcoming and hostile” (Byng, 2014, p. 1).

Similarly, a recent campaign to raise awareness at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor exposed how African-American students feel the same pressures and levels of exclusion due to isolation, lack of belonging and alienation (Byng, 2013). Students at both UCLA and the University of Michigan equally expressed the weight of feeling that their abilities were often called into question. In their minds, it was not enough to have earned the right to occupy space as students at these universities; they felt the constant pressures to prove they deserved to be there.
The adolescent students in this study clearly alluded to the fact they also did not feel as though they were good enough or that they mattered. These feelings were elicited as they were made to feel “othered” and different from their White peers. They felt that they were expected to misbehave, rather than excel academically.

When one examines the experiences of students who feel they are “the problem,” this raises questions about identity and coping strategies? Further, how are teacher behaviors influenced and how does this impact students who are overlooked and under-represented in gifted and talented programs, if the focus is always on the problem and not on examining the possibility that what may be happening in schools and classroom is the cause of student disengagement?

A critical examination of pedagogy practices and curricula appears to be necessary, based on the recurring statement made by students throughout this study indicating that school is “boring” and not “relevant to their lives.” When students do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum and view learning as not relevant to them, it may lead to varying levels of disengagement. As a result, students may end up disconnecting from school or displaying disruptive behaviors, increasing the likelihood that they will be subject to disciplinary actions. Students who are uninterested in school may decide to drop out altogether because they feel that school is neither relevant nor supportive in helping them address barriers and challenges they may face (Balfanz and Burns, 2012; Fine, 1991; Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute, 2012).

Several youth in this study shared common experiences of feeling excluded from school and a general sense of not belonging. As in the case with Ruth who encapsulated her experience in a traditional school as, “I never wanted to be there ‘cause I wasn’t really accepted for me... I
would never go back there because of how they treated me.” Marginalizing schooling experiences among youth contribute to feelings of disengagement and otherness which can lead to dire consequences, including lowered self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and acting out behaviors (Richman and Leary, 2009; Smith, 1989). Instead of focusing on what can be done in the classroom to keep students engaged, the focus is often on rules, discipline, order, and surveillance. Exclusionary practices, that produce isolating and alienating schooling experiences, effectively expel students from their adolescent lives and perpetuate academic failure by disrupting their educational trajectories (Baiyee, Hawkins & Polakow, 2013; Orfield, 2012; Polakow, 2000; Robbins, 2008).

**Lack of Care**

Various factors may inhibit teachers from developing caring relationships with students. Some of these factors point to the school environment, a lack of cultural understanding, the beliefs and attitudes about care among teachers, and what it actually means to be cared for (Goldstein, 1998, 2002; Meir, 2002; Noddings, 1984; Schaps, 2009; Thompson, 1998). One potential point of intervention may be to help teachers develop the capacity to establish more caring, supportive relationships with their students. Research demonstrates that caring and supportive relationships between students and teachers deeply influence academic success, and can also mitigate problem behaviors by deterring the likelihood of dropping-out, academic failure, and referrals for disciplinary action (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Davis, 2003; Rogers, 1994). The relationship between students and teachers is critical and lies at the heart of educating students. When these relationships are caring, affirming, and supportive, the effect on students can be profound as academic outcomes are positively impacted (Davis, 2003; Noddings, 1984; Rogers, 1994).
The participants in this study expressed feelings of disappointment because their needs were not attended to during critical and vulnerable periods of their lives. Many teachers were perceived as uncaring, unsupportive, and uninterested in whether students failed or succeeded, and in some instances students felt invisible. In the case of Elisabeth, she pointed out, “No one really paid attention or cared if I turned in school work or not.” Mark also shared how teachers seem to be just trying to “get through the day” and reported feeling that if they “do care about any of the kids, it’s not me and my friends.” According to Meier (2002), one of the most significant factors contributing to school success is the presence or absence of trusting, caring, supportive relationships between teachers and students. When students feel they can trust their teachers, they build confidence in adults who are entrusted to protect, nurture, and teach them in order to develop healthy academic identities.

Compounding issues for Esther were an unplanned pregnancy and an unsupportive school environment, as she commented, “When I found out I was pregnant, they didn’t really want to help me out or make it a little easier for me.” Her mother shared similar feelings and made the decision to take Esther out of the school because she was not receiving the necessary support she needed to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially. Similarly, Elisabeth’s experiences of not feeling cared for or noticed by her teachers were dramatic: “It was like I wasn’t there... there were teachers who never cared if I came to school or not. I guess those teachers didn’t really care about me.” Wexler (1992) points out the potential for isolation and feeling alienated from school when youth perceive a lack of care and concern for their well-being, as caring is an action that students can see and feel and requires adults to pay attention and genuinely demonstrate they are interested, and are concerned about the best interest of students, rather than exasperated by their presence. Students are very intuitive and know whether or not
they feel cared for and if they matter to adults. Wexler maintains that “the non-caring is active, and... students feel insulted and rejected—by the teachers who are offended and rejected by them” (p. 37). A lack of care and concern for Elisabeth’s academic, social and emotional well-being, coupled with a disturbed home environment during a tumultuous time in her life, led to increased problems in school, feelings of hopelessness, a sense of invisibility and non-belonging. Elisabeth’s mother, who was unable to provide the necessary support and advocacy for her daughter, felt the school system did not do much to improve the situation either, sharing, “I have had some bad experiences with these schools... the teachers really don’t take the time to be there for them (students) or to reach them.” Aware of her own struggles as a single parent raising four children, she believes “schools need to be there to help kids more, especially with parents who have a hard time on their own.”

In Noddings’ (2005) work *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, she describes caring as “a connection or encounter between two human beings” (p. 15). She adds that relationships are reciprocal where both individuals are responsible for contributing something. In student-teacher relationships, Noddings notes more often than not, breakdowns occur when one or the other refuses or fails to acknowledge the other person. Noddings (2007) presents an ethic of care in regard to education, and distinguishes between “natural” caring and “ethical” caring. In natural caring, she discusses how the motive to care is more instinctive as it arises on its own without being coerced. Ethical caring is described as a process that does need to be beckoned because the duty to care (or act in caring ways) often conflicts with the individual will and lack of motivation to do so. Noddings further explains that within the ethic of care, *caring* does not occur if there is not a relation between the care giver and the person who is cared for—in other words the person being cared for must recognize that “care” in order for it to have occurred. She
advocates providing an atmosphere of moral education, in which modeling, affirmation, dialogue, and practice, are present in the culture and climate of school, such that reciprocity between students and teachers can be achieved (Noddings, 2007).

Coaches were identified as significant adults in the lives of some of the students in this study. For that reason, the insight of coaches adds an additional perspective. Mr. Sampson, an athletic director and former coach, shares how student-teacher relationships are significantly impacted if students do not believe their teachers care, emphatically stating: “We need teachers who truly care about the education of our students!” Mr. Sampson believes building relationships with students is key:

We don’t realize the importance of engaging a student day one... it deters bad behavior... when that kid comes in, acknowledge them, welcome students, look them in the eye, it’s the beginning, the cornerstone of building a relationship... we don’t take the time to build those relationships and it’s hurting our kids.

Noddings (2005) contends that relationship building begins in the classroom and is two-fold: 1) the teacher demonstrates care for the student; and 2) Students learn to develop care within their learning environment, including the care they demonstrate for their own learning. An engaging and rigorous curriculum is often lacking and in schools today, where many students are “forced...to study a particular, narrowly prescribed curriculum devoid of content they may care about” (Noddings, 2005, xii). This was the case with Sarah who shared her disinterest in school, stating, “There really isn’t anything in school for me to relate to...I don’t get what they trying to teach us.” In schools, classrooms should be places where students can thrive, contribute, think creatively and critically; where ideas are valued between teachers and students; and where
students are viewed as individuals who have something important to contribute to what they will learn and why (Noddings, 2005).

Noddings (2005) proposes open dialogue as another approach, which is described as “open-ended, in a genuine dialogue neither party knows at the outset where the outcome or decision will be” (p. 23). This approach may be particularly beneficial for students who face challenges. If the teacher takes the time to listen to what is going on, instead of dictating what needs to be done, it may elicit a more positive response from students as their voices and perspectives are taken into account. The one-sided authoritarian approach practiced in so many schools today often creates limited opportunities for students to express and share their feelings to feel they voice and a sense of agency over their lives. In Noddings’ approach to dialogue, students are given the opportunity to ask questions, provide feedback and offer ideas. This type of dialogue can lead to better outcomes, as cyclical dialogue creates ownership and opportunities to learn from each other. This in turn can foster caring healthy relationships through modeling and practice. As Noddings (1992) points out, “if we decide that the capacity to care is as much a mark of personhood as reason or rationality, then we will want to find ways to increase this capacity” (p. 24).

When students genuinely feel confirmed and affirmed, their self-confidence and academic identity improves. When students believe that they are stakeholders in the decisions that affect them, they begin to believe that what they offer and contribute is valuable. If the student-teacher relationship established is caring, confirming, affirming and trust is established, positive academic outcomes among students result. This was the case with Ruth, who was validated by her principal at her alternative school. After learning how well she did on the test, he acknowledged this accomplishment by telling her that she was “one of the smartest students
in school.” Ruth’s internalized response was a belief that her principal affirmed her presence, saying, “I know he cares, ‘cause he did not have to say nothing like that to me!” Esther also reported feeling cared for by teachers who supported her in the alternative education program she attends, sharing, “My teacher now really cares about me, and all the kids that are there... a lot of us really struggle with school and they make it better for us.” Conversely, Isaiah shared that within his schooling experience, he could not identify a time where “anybody in school really showed they care... I mostly feel they don’t care that much.” In the following passage, Noddings (2005) shares her perspective on the purpose of education for our children:

…if the school has one main goal, a goal that guides the establishment and priority of all others, it should be to promote the growth of students as healthy, competent, moral people. This is a huge task to which all others are properly subordinated. We cannot ignore our children – their purposes, anxieties, and relationships – in the service of making them more competent in academic skills. My position is not anti-intellectual. It is a matter of setting priorities. Intellectual development is important, but it cannot be the first priority of schools. (p. 10)

Noddings prioritizes caring as essential for students’ well-being so that they have the ability to create lives that allow them to thrive, rather than just survive.

It appears obvious that developing and cultivating caring relationships between teacher and students should be a priority in schools; however, it is also important to note the reality that teachers are under pressure to meet the demands of state legislators and policies, which often do not consider the critical link between fostering student-teacher relationships. In order to encourage and promote relationship-building in schools, teachers must be supported by school administration as well, in order to create spaces to establish and maintain these relationships. If
schools value this relationship, then they need to do more than just say that this is a priority; they need to provide resources and training to help teachers develop positive relationships with students. Teaching is rewarding, yet challenging work that must be accompanied by sustainable levels of support to foster caring relationships between teachers and students. According to Aultman and Williams-Johnson (2009), the availability of resources and support within the school may alleviate some of the burden on the classroom teacher in order to foster these important relationships. Teachers who show concern for the needs of their students often have cooperative students who look forward to learning. Having the appropriate voice and choice is also affirming for youth, just as it is for adults, as Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson and Schaps (1995) have argued. These authors further maintain that students who experience their school as a caring, supportive and nurturing environment are more motivated, ambitious, and engaged in their learning. In particular, they point out how students’ positive relationships and sense of connectedness with teachers and their perceptions that teachers care about them is what stimulates their effort and engagement (Battistich et al., 1995).

The students in this study report school relationships that lacked caring, supportive adults who were committed to their success. However, their stories also provided examples of supportive, caring adults who did have a significant positive impact on their lives. Youth identify parents, social workers, and coaches as adults who helped support them during difficult times in their lives. The voices of these supportive adults add a contrasting perspective and highlight what can be done to bring students back into the full fold of participation in schools.

In the following section, the voices of parents, coaches, and social workers are presented. Additionally, the voice of one particular teacher, Mrs. Brown, is included to illustrate the perspective of an educator who has successfully engaged students in learning.
The Importance of Significant Adults in the Lives of Students

Voices of parents: Unconditional advocates. Parents play an integral role in the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development of their children. The perspectives of parents add an important dimension to this study and are significant because their voices often go unheard in the research and decision making related to school policies and practices impacting children. The parents in this study, understand the important role they share in advocating for their children’s education. Their voices entrust us to pay attention to patterns of educational indifference and inequality impacting the school lives and future life trajectories of their children.

The perspectives of parents provided examples of their past schooling experiences as children and how as parents they now find themselves acutely aware of the possible effects negative experiences of schooling may have on their own children. The voices of the parents of Ruth, Esther, Mark and Luke are represented below.

The value of education: Rebekah (Ruth’s mother). Rebekah, who is White, married, and thirty-seven-years-old, describes her overall childhood schooling experiences as positive. She shares, “I went to an elementary school that was very well-resourced and very well connected to the community” and goes on to express how she was a good student who grew up in a supportive household where her mother stressed the importance of getting a good education. By the time she entered her senior year in high school, she earned enough credits to enroll in a vocational school for half a day for a medical assistant program. She found the program “fairly interesting and I did that so when I graduated from high school, I graduated with my high school diploma and my medical assistant certificate so that was pretty cool.”
Rebekah firmly believes schools can serve as places where students can either be engaged or disengaged from learning. Having grown up experiencing school positively, she feels she has both the social and cultural capital to advocate for her child so that she has options in life. Rebekah shares that she has always been very supportive of Ruth in school and believes she “can do anything she sets her mind to.” She has been an active participant in Ruth’s education and says that she always attended parent teacher conferences, volunteered for school field trips, and helped in the classroom when her schedule permitted. Even though Ruth is temporarily placed in a residential living environment several hours away, Rebekah reports that she communicates with the staff often about Ruth’s progress. For Rebekah, having that “direct connection with the school, with the secretary, administrators, with my children” helps her to feel more involved in her child’s schooling experience. Although, Ruth faced academic challenges, the message of ‘doing well in school so that you have choices’ clearly resonated with her as she now has aspirations of a bright future beyond post-secondary schooling in spite of her circumstances. Rebekah expresses her satisfaction and appreciation for the support Ruth is receiving in her current schooling environment, sharing, “this school is giving her the opportunity to be successful and I’m grateful for that!”

The importance of parental support: Martha (Esther’s Mother). Martha is a fifty-six year old, single mother who describes her experiences in school as being very difficult. She describes the challenges of growing up in an environment with people of different races where the students were really “mean,” so it was really difficult for her to make that transition. She also shares how she didn’t feel like the teachers took the time to make sure the school and classrooms were safe. She states: “They didn’t do anything to stop things, the kids were like
really, really cruel, pulling my hair, calling me names, I remember feeling I did not belong or want to be in this place.”

Martha has maintained a strong presence in her daughter’s schooling and feels it is important for children to have different levels of support in school to help them succeed. In her view, there is a shared responsibility among parents and educators to ensure children are afforded the best education possible in order to succeed in life beyond elementary and secondary schooling. Her own struggles as a youth in school due to racial tensions and overt acts of discrimination have helped raise her level of consciousness in providing the critical supports she believes are necessary to support her daughter in school. Martha comments:

I know based on my own struggles all those years ago that you need a lot of support to get through school. I know times are different now, but our kids have other pressures to deal with and they need as much support as they can get and everybody plays a part in making sure children have a good education.

Martha also expresses the importance of being actively involved in the school, particularly for Black parents:

I was always up there and participating in things, those schools knew who I was and that Esther belonged to me... it was nothing they could tell me about my child I didn’t already know... as Black parents it is important to be there and show your face so these teachers won’t try to just tell you anything... trust me when you are there it makes a difference!

Martha is very supportive of her daughter and, based on her own schooling experiences, knows how important a supportive schooling environment is for many students. Martha expresses strong support for the alternative education program Esther currently participates in, sharing, “I
feel that the alternative education program helps all the kids believe that they can succeed and do well.”

**Focusing on student strengths: Salome (Mark’s Mother).** Salome is a thirty-nine year old African American woman who is a single parent. She is currently receiving disability benefits for a chronic health issue. She reflects on her own schooling experience of being judged and treated unfairly in schools. She believes this hindered her academic growth based on lowered expectations, sharing, “They treated me a certain way based off of how I looked and did not believe I would do well…they even said that the more advanced classes would be too hard for me.” She goes on to comment about an experience in school which demonstrated lowered expectations among teachers, sharing what a teacher told her parents, “They told my parents that you know she is probably not college material…and at one point in time when I got in trouble they said she may as well sit out the rest of the year and then start again next year.” This defeatist attitude displayed by her teachers led to her working even harder to prove them wrong.

She also shares how these experiences have impacted her own parenting and awareness: “I do believe when a child walks through the door and they are a certain color and where they live there are certain assumptions made about their abilities, and then no time gets invested in the problem gets worse.” She also points out that in her interactions with Black teachers she has observed that they often end up “assimilating in to the school culture, and making assumptions about certain students.” Experiencing this first-hand as a student, she offers an example of how she felt judged by both Black and White teachers who assumed she did not have the ability to succeed in more rigorous classes. In her estimation, the teachers had no basis to arrive at that conclusion:
They based an opinion about me when I walked in the door... their train of thought was you can’t do this, they thought it and they said it... they just jumped to this conclusion that I didn’t have the ability to do well in AP classes with no information.

Salome goes on to discuss how she believes her parents did their job in ensuring she had a good education, but that the school neither supported her nor believed she would be successful:

I hear people say it starts at home, well my momma started it and she sent me to y’all [school] and y’all didn’t’ finish, my momma did what she was supposed to do and y’all dropped the ball... she can’t do it by herself and that’s essentially what happened.

Salome believes her son, Mark, is bright and the schools have just labeled him as a problem student. She shared that the schools only contact her when something is wrong, stating: “I don’t ever get no calls when he’s doing well, only when he is messing up.” Salome demonstrates a critical awareness of the school’s tendency to focus on weaknesses rather than strengths. But as a strong advocate for her son, she often questions and challenges the teachers about what they are doing to keep him engaged in school, rather than allowing them to figure out ways to keep him out.

*Equality in Education: Karen (Luke’s Mother).* Karen is a married, thirty-five year old African American woman who is a stay-at-home mother. She describes her own schooling experiences as positive, sharing:

For the most part I enjoyed school. I was always an A-B student so I enjoyed a few perks for being a well behaved child that got pretty good grades. On some level I fit in the middle, I was not a misbehaving child with bad grades who got negative attention nor was I a straight A student who got all the positive attention and accolades.
She describes her upbringing as “lower-middle class and schools as average” and overall felt she received “an average education.” She explains that her own family is currently facing financial struggles, but says that this has not deterred them from ensuring their son gets a good education. Karen believes many minority children come into schools with labels that are already attached to them thanks to the media and larger society constructing them as troubled children, children with learning disabilities, or children who do not want to learn. Aware that these issues in school impact how students are treated, and that her son’s school officials have tried to affix labels to him as “difficult or not listening,” Karen says it has become critical to be there for him and advocate so that he gets the help he needs. Further, she believes that minority children often fall behind because the extra time that is often needed is not given to the child early enough in their schooling. Based on her own experiences in school, she believes:

Traditional teaching methods are no longer effective for today's youth. I think the education system needs to be revamped with methods that can grab and keep the attention of today's youth... minorities receive a lower standard of education in the classroom and some minority students don’t have parents that are engaged in their learning experience as much as my husband and I are.

Karen further reflects on her own experience in a school with predominantly White teachers and says: “When we tell children they can grow-up to be whatever they want to be, we must show them people who look like them in these positions so that they can imagine themselves there.” Further, she states: “Everyone should be “treated equally and receive the same education and resources and benefits in every community. It should not be based on where you live and how much money you make.”
Voice of social workers: Unwavering support. Contributing to the well-being of students are the relationships they have with supportive social workers. As a follow-up to strong sentiments expressed by students, two African American social workers were also interviewed to gain their perspectives and insights about advocating for marginalized students who attend both alternative and traditional schooling programs. One of the social workers, Ms. Hope works in the residential treatment facility for parenting teens, where some of the youth participants in this study were receiving social and academic support in a cooperative living environment. She provides an explanation of what she believes contributes to the success of being a good social worker. She states:

As a social worker you have to truly understand what you are fighting for or against, it has to bring change not only for that client or family but for a broader group of people and beyond. There are many levels of advocacy, understanding individual change is just the start; systematic change has to the overarching goal of advocates who fight for the people. When you truly know what you are fighting for, that’s when you know how to help.

Ms. Hope is the educational liaison at the treatment facility and is responsible for working directly with the schools on behalf of the parenting teens. She provides an example of a negative experience she encountered with traditional schools, sharing, “I’ve had teachers talk down to the students that are pregnant and parenting at some of the bigger schools…It’s almost as if they think the girls in my program will rub off in a negative manner on the other students.” Another social worker in the program, Ms. Light, shares her perspective on why she believes students disengage from school, particularly in the traditional school:
I think students disengage when they don’t feel supported... schools need to get better at giving students the supports they need... we all know students don’t learn the same, especially Black students, and I feel that it is the school’s responsibility to make sure there are different teaching styles for all children... it is not a one size fits all, different students need different things.

Conversely, Ms. Hope describes a positive experience with the alternative program many of the girls in the program attend, commenting:

The teaching staff in an alternative program typically have an extensive background working with harder to deal with students, they spend a lot of time working on lesson plans that are conducive to the learning styles and abilities of students. Mostly, they give their all to make sure these students go on to be successful, not only in a post-secondary program, but in college and life beyond.

She expresses her satisfaction with the commitment and dedication of the staff in the alternative education program, sharing:

I had a teacher at the alternative school actually bring the children of one of our girls home from school, just so other students didn’t have to miss school while the baby was sick. To me, that’s dedication to students’ education!

Reflecting on what social workers perceive as the biggest barriers facing African-American students, Ms. Hope explains, “Our children of color are so easily defeated or told that they can’t do, or won’t achieve and they believe it… it is our duty to take the education of our children in our own hands and make it better.” Ms. Light echoes these sentiments with an example of what she believes impacts the success of Black students in school, sharing,
I think race is a huge factor, it is sad, but true. I think students of color are generalized by race and how people of their color act or are supposed to be. For instance I’ve heard from Black students who wanted to be in AP [Advanced Placement] classes and were told no because of the counselor not thinking they could “handle” the work loads. Race plays a role and I feel it is so detrimental to the success of our Black students in public schools.

Ms. Hope goes on to share her beliefs on why students disengage from the classroom and offers recommendations on ways to help students become more engaged in the classroom: “I think students disengage when they don’t feel supported. The schools need to be do better at giving all the students the support they need…we need to start with individual learning plans for every student and cater to how they learn best.”

The girls expressed strong appreciation for the social workers who helped in the alternative education program and residential treatment facility. Ruth stated, “If it were not for these staff pushing me and helping me, I don’t know how things would have worked out…they show us they care by what they do and say.” Esther similarly expressed the view that, “the social workers here and at the [alternative] school are all about making sure we succeed in school and in life, they are the best and I will always remember them for helping me out.”

**Voice of coaches: A source of inspiration and motivation.** The students in this study who played a sport in school gave accolades to the coaches who motivated them in and out of school. Many of the youth shared specific examples of how they felt supported and cared for by their coaches. As a follow-up to gain additional perspectives, I spoke to high school athletic coaches to hear their viewpoints. Coaches who were interviewed were open, honest, and candid in their responses.
Mr. Sampson, an African American high school principal, has been an administrator for eleven years and has also served as the athletic director. He spoke about his experiences as a student athlete and the support he received as a student. He shares how, in his practice as an administrator, he observes teacher-student relationships deteriorate based on mismatched expectations and cultural misunderstandings. A lack of a caring relationship was cited as one of the main reasons he believes students are disciplined more harshly, as teachers often “just want the bad students out of their class.” Mr. Sampson candidly shares how the issue of race was also a possible cause for breakdown in relationship building.

Many teachers do not have the connections needed to make a student open to receiving what they are teaching or have not established a relationship including trust... I just think that when you are genuine with kids they know… as educators we have to make the educational process relevant to who they are and be genuine with our kids... we get in the habit of trying to make out Black kids White... dealing with (White) teachers here and in the other district, they can’t relate to our [Black] students and that’s the reason why there is so much disconnect.

Based on his experiences as a coach, Mr. Sampson explains why he believes student athletes excel in sports. He comments that sports represent “something students look forward to which makes them have a better attitude, helping them to learn better... and because of the passion and structure... student athletes understand there are standards they are being held to.” Building on these observations, Mr. Sampson offers examples of ways he encourages the staff he supervises to be more engaged in the school and the classroom, saying, “The most powerful thing we can do is employ educators that can identify with many different ethnic backgrounds and also can motivate students… and have the ability to keep students engaged with their lesson
plan content and delivery.” Mr. Sampson further comments that when “kids feel they belong, then you will see them contribute more.” He goes on to offer his perspective on how discipline is handled: “If we are constantly suspending kids and never touch the problem; administration and teachers need to look at what we are doing and put some things in place.” He goes on to add, I challenge teachers and tell them the only thing you can control is what it is in your classroom, if students are in the hallway as my teachers claim, I push back and ask why are they in the hallway and not in your class?

Mr. Sampson reflects on a sobering interaction with a parent whose child was facing suspension, but the parent wanted to keep the student in school:

I had a mom come in to advocate for her daughter about her suspension and she was like “look my daughter is in the twelfth grade and she has more education than anybody else in our family,” so we just never know where kids are coming from and we need to be aware of that.

Mr. Sampson knows first-hand how important it is to get an education and often shares this inspiring story about his own life with his students:

I read at a second-grade level and nobody even knew, I mean education was talked about in my house but because I was an athlete I was able to slide through the cracks, once I got to college, I was like, “Man I’m screwed, I don’t know how to read”... I never want any student to get out of high school ill-prepared like me and that’s why it’s important I hold every adult in my building accountable... I tell students don’t let us [adults] off the hook... don’t walk out of this building not being able to get what you need, it is so important for our students to hear this.
While some of these recommendations may appear to be common sense, they speak volumes to how often basic things are overlooked by educators, but not by students. Spending time after school to help students with school work and getting to know students are critical. Mr. Sampson comments that, “the personality and teaching style of the teacher matters along with how much the student feels the teacher cares about them” He emphasizes the importance of “greeting students, when they come in say their name, acknowledge them, look at them in the eye, it’s the beginning, the cornerstone of building a relationship.” He also believes that the building and classroom aesthetics are equally important, as he comments: “When I see White walls I get so discouraged, it looks like a prison, sterile, we don’t realize the importance of engaging a student from day one.”

Further adding to the importance of developing supportive, caring relationships with students, Mr. Sampson relates an example about his own niece, who was labeled as a “troubled student” and how educators missed an opportunity to tap into her academic potential:

They wanted to put her on meds in seventh grade... we had an idea though and decided to have her take the ACT [American College Testing] exam because I know my niece is smart... she got a 31, so she was basically sitting in class bored ‘cause she already knows the stuff... that’s what happens to our African American males, we make assumptions and figure they are just acting out, but they just might be gifted like my niece.

Mr. Jericho, another African American high school coach who has been teaching and coaching sports for eleven years also emphasizes the importance of developing relationships with students in school, stating:

Many teachers do not have the connection needed to make a student open to receiving what they are teaching or have a not established a relationship including trust... sports are
something students look forward to which make them have a better attitude and helps them learn better.

Mr. Jericho also discusses his views on teachers engaging students in school and the importance of reaching out to minority students:

The most powerful thing we can do is employ educators that can identify with many different ethnic backgrounds and also can motivates students... and have the ability to keep students engaged with their lesson and content delivery... the personality and teaching style of the teacher matters along with how much the students feel the teacher cares about them.

Mr. Sampson adds by expressing his disappointment and frustration with the curricula that does not promote high expectations:

The expectation is we don’t expect our kids to be excellent students, when I looked at the master schedule I saw no honors classes, no AP options, how do we expect kids to be excellent if we don’t give them excellent options?

Mr. Sampson also adds his perspective on the alarming discipline rates and how students may often misbehave because, like him, they may not know how to read; “You see the large suspension rates for Black males because a lot of us struggled in the classroom, instead of someone stopping to do some intervention.”

Mr. Jericho shares his perspective on why students seemed to express such as strong, positive connection to their coaches:

It’s a release or a way to get away from anything that gives you boundaries. When you are involved in sports and successful... It then provides you a sense of success, belonging, and it makes you feel good about yourself.
The experiences of Mark and Luke are indicative of the research that demonstrates that African American males thrive in after school sporting activities. Duncan-Andrade (2010) points out how teachers could benefit from observing these relationships, as they are often unaware or unconcerned about the realities facing African American males, unlike their coaches. Understanding this reality might help educators in their efforts to better engage with African American male students (Gay, 2010; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008; Stovall, 2006).

**Voice of a teacher.** Mrs. Brown is a sixty-five-year-old African American retired school teacher (see also Hawkins, 2011). Mrs. Brown has taught in various settings, including private and public school sectors. In addition to teaching high school Chemistry, she has taught GED (General Education Diploma) preparation courses, provided consultation for urban after school program development, and owned and operated a tutorial service for struggling students. I met with Mrs. Brown at her Ypsilanti home, where she raised two children and acts as a substitute caregiver for her two grandchildren. Mrs. Brown has a Master’s degree in secondary education. Mrs. Brown developed supportive, caring relationships with her students in which she engaged them and ignited their interest in learning.

Mrs. Brown recalls her later experiences working with students who were identified as children with learning disabilities, but were not classified as needing special education. She states that when she began working with these students, she realized that it was not a matter of their intellectual capacity, rather a difference in their frames of reference. These youth were predominantly African American. The youth’s placement in the course she taught was determined by their standardized test scores. She described:

… I had to develop an innovative way of teaching, however, this was something that I had personal knowledge with... The faculty had not taken the time to consider what the
cause of their past failures were. It wasn’t that they were unable to learn. They didn’t understand what the standardized tests were asking.... My technique was to begin reading various materials to them. We reviewed synonyms and my pupils were encouraged to learn different ways of expressing themselves verbally.... I don’t really think this was a challenge for me, because all I had to is transfer the knowledge of language I had gained through my formal and personal life education to their minds. . . .

Mrs. Brown later began working with young adults who had decided to take the GED test instead of remaining in high school. This setting proved to be unique, as she reports that it was in this experience that she learned that language barriers can also result from socio-economic status. While many of her colleagues were White, they had learned the various language styles and diction and used it as a tool to relate to the youth. “I shared my thoughts with my colleagues on ways we could enhance our students’ language base without taking away their culture.” Mrs. Brown’s experiences in school settings impacted her decision to begin a tutorial service. She shared:

I saw that I had implemented an effective technique to assist African-American students address any language barriers they may encounter by preparing them with the appropriate tools... I believe my students have the ability to understand multiple levels of the English language... That is vital in succeeding in the mainstream culture.

**Significant and supportive adults.** The voices of significant adults in the lives of youth demonstrate how integral the roles of supportive, caring relationships are for students in school and how those relationships can positively impact their schooling experiences. Parents shared their own experiences of schooling as children and how those experiences impacted and shaped how they parent their own children and interact with schools today. Some of the parent
participants further demonstrated an acute awareness of the possible effects race has on the educational experiences of their children and how awareness of this, in turn, influences how they advocate for their children. The stories of the parents in this study raise important questions that have implications for the intersecting roles that educators, researchers, and parents all share. As Salome, Mark’s mother pointed out, the teachers only seemed to notify her when there was a problem to report regarding her son; she never received any calls about anything positive. In many cases, teachers do not end up calling those parents who are struggling just to check in with parents or to report how things are going. More often than not, school staff have come to adopt a belief that most (Black) parents just do not care and the way that they parent does not complement the normative expectations and culture of schooling (Delpit 1995; Fields-Smith, 2005; Finders and Lewis, 1994; Reynolds, 2010). Many parents are acutely aware of how much is at stake when Black children, particularly Black boys, are labeled as defiant and trouble, leading to detrimental effects on their lives and their educational futures (Foster and Peele, 1999; Noguera, 2008; Howard and Reynolds, 2008).

Reynolds (2010) points out how parents are often are faced with the dilemma of explicitly discussing with their Black children the unique challenges they will face in school and in society. Many times, those children who seem to have the least of everything in the rest of their lives often get less overall at school as well (Oakes, 1985). Salome also pointed out how teachers may end up adopting a deficit framework and a belief that certain types of students will not succeed. However, it is also clear that building on a child’s strengths rather than weaknesses may help to promote positive academic outcomes. Although educators have gained insight into the nature of racial inequalities and how this may impact school success or failure, this is an area that requires further research and attention. Parents also shared the importance of instilling the
value of education in their children as an important factor they believed contributes to school success. Parental support and engagement were also highlighted to demonstrate how the role of parents could buffer some of the negative impacts of schooling their children may experience. Having strong advocates in the lives of students can help to mitigate barriers and overcome obstacles in the lives of youth in school. Further, engaging the voices of parents, both their stories and their counter storytelling, offers a perspective that sheds light on the social realities and lived experiences among people of color (Delgado, 1999).

**Persistence and Resilience**

In education, the terms persistence and resilience are often used interchangeably. Research suggests that what makes a child resilient is “the relative strength of individual characteristics and external protective processes (supports provided by school staff, communities, and families) compared to the influence of risks and vulnerabilities in the external environment” (Winfield, 1994, p. 2). Rutter (1990) describes resilience as doing well against the odds, the ability to cope and thus recover from attendant risks. He goes on to suggest that the term more explicitly refers to “the positive role of the ubiquitous phenomenon of individual difference in people's responses to stress and adversity” (p. 181). Because resilience is defined as a dynamic rather than a static concept, educators, social workers, parents, and community members play pivotal roles in helping to build young people’s potential to be resilient, and they serve to strengthen protective processes in the face of external risk factors such as low teacher expectations, physical, verbal, or sexual abuse, alcohol or other drug abuse, teen pregnancy, homelessness, parent incarceration, and other challenges (Geary, 1988; Winfield, 1991).

Risks among youth, whether they occur in their own lives, in their immediate families, or in their wider social contexts, inevitably affect their behavior in the classroom (Hanewald, 2011).
The youth in this study demonstrated instances of resilience and determination at various points in their lives. In the case of Mark, who experienced academic and behavior challenges, it is important to note that he also faced a traumatic event when his brother was killed. This tragedy had a profound impact on him and undoubtedly contributed to the barriers he faced in school. It was clear for Mark, that as a way to cope with the risks faced in his life, he decided to channel his energy into sports and was determined to make his mother and grandmother proud by doing well academically and athletically.

In the case of Elisabeth who experienced homelessness, a disruptive home environment, and academic challenges, she had dreams of a successful future and believed the support she was receiving in the alternative school program she attended, provided her with the tools she needed to reach that goal. A child’s capacity to deal with adversity in spite of his or her circumstances is illustrated in the patterns of resilience in these cases by demonstrating the sheer strength, will and determination of these students to succeed. In the face of adversity, students express a sense of agency and grit to succeed in spite of their circumstances. In the case of Esther, she seems unphased by what the naysayers thought when she faced judgment by the principal who felt she “messed up her future by getting pregnant.” In her words: “It don’t matter ‘cause I’m gonna finish school, you better believe that!... I know I need to do well for my son.” Esther’s mother, too, believes her daughter will succeed, despite the defeatist attitude held by educators at her previous school, as described by Esther’s mother: “They were [school staff] very disappointed and instead of letting her know she could still do well, they just made her feel bad about it... she is still going to make it though, she really wants to do well.”

Although Ruth’s experiences with racism at her previous school, coupled with instances of exclusion and marginalization, could have led to her disengagement, she counteracted those
experiences by choosing to turn the page and focus on reaching goals she set for herself and succeeding in a new learning environment. Her excitement about completing school was evident in interviews with her. She now feels she has the supports she needs to be successful and shares her aspirations of becoming a famous singer after earning her GED. She says she owes her success to her teachers and social workers at her placement, sharing, “They really want me to do well…I know that because the teachers and staff here are so supportive with all their help and encouraging me to do better.”

Mary is a fifteen year-old high school student in the tenth grade who attends school with predominantly Black students and White teachers in an urban community (See Appendix A: Student Profiles). She lives with her mother in a single-headed household and has reported having behavioral issues. Mary (whose case was not included in Chapter 4) also suffered emotional and academic challenges and expressed feelings of anger due to her father being incarcerated; still, this did not prevent her from staying on track academically. In spite of those setbacks, she did not let her circumstances define her as she was determined to do well. Mary sought counseling and relied on support to help her deal with her feelings of anger and frustration. Mary also expressed feelings of shame and embarrassment about her father’s incarceration, which had a significant impact on her. She reports, “My dad was never really around to talk to and it was hard when other kids talked about their dads... it was really embarrassing to be in school and the other kids knew my daddy was locked up.” The reality of growing up with a parent who is incarcerated can be a difficult adjustment for any child (Hairston, 2007). The strong sense of support from home and school has helped mitigate barriers that Mary faced through intensive intervention and support services in school, which, in her words, help students “grow academically and socially, they give us second chances.”
Further instances of determination and resilience can be found in the case of Isaiah, who expressed how he wants to make his mother proud, “I know my mom wants me to do good in school, so I can be something... I stay in school at least so I can try.” His mother echoed sentiments of fostering a positive identity among youth by believing in their abilities, sharing, “All kids have potential to be what they want, but we all play a big part in making kids feel that in themselves.”

Parenting teens and resilience. For Ruth and Esther, both of whom became pregnant and felt stigmatized and marginalized as a result, they were determined to succeed in spite of what others believed. Many teen pregnancies lead to a downward spiral from which many teens do not completely recover. In order to interrupt the cycle and negative impact that may occur, programs and services are needed to provide adolescent mothers with additional support. In the cases of both Ruth and Elisabeth, the alternative programs they attend provide the comprehensive support they need. Additionally, the residential treatment facility for parenting teens where both young women live provides temporary wraparound support services that include access to child care, counseling, mother-infant programs, and parenting classes—all designed to help these teen mothers with the academic, social, and emotional support they require. Horowitz (1995) argues that teen mothers have been constructed as passive dependents lacking agency who are stigmatized routinely in the media and by policy makers. Altering the negative chain following pregnancy heavily depends on adolescent mothers’ receiving additional training and education (Apfel and Seitz, 1996; Benson, 2004). In order to empower young women and help promote their capacity for developing agency, Rutter (1987) has suggested specific strategies for reducing the negative impact on adolescent mothers, such as improving access to quality prenatal care and programs designed to encourage adolescent parents to
continue schooling. These programs might include on-site or community-referred day care, mother-infant programs, parenting classes, and ongoing health care services for mothers and children. Pillow (2006) explores the politics around supporting the education of parenting teens. The author examines Title IX as a federal policy that guarantees the rights of parenting teens as a lens to argue that lack of knowledge, research, and practices about the education of parenting teens leads to the construction of a negative discourse. Pillow asserts that parenting teens benefit from supportive programs that ensure they receive the academic, social, and emotional support needed to be successful in school and life.

When reviewing the literature on successful parenting program models, such as the one that is currently helping two of the participants in this study, it is clear that programs are most effective when comprehensive services such as child care, case management, and services are provided on-site. Services that focus on parenting education, self-sufficiency, along with medical and social services for mother and baby are also critical components. Additionally, education programs aimed at increasing the attendance and retention rate in schools of parenting teens are most effective when the aforementioned supports are in place to promote and foster positive outcomes (Apfel & Seitz, 1996; Clay, Paluzzi & Max, 2011; Healthy Teen Network, 2008). In January and July of 2012, the Federal Government’s Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) issued a report that focused on strategies and gaps in supporting pregnant and parenting teens. The discussion was focused on what works for pregnant and parenting teens. The report summarized priorities, gaps, and challenges, and identified opportunities to support pregnant and parenting teens. There were several effective program components cited when working with parenting teens which were integral to success; these included: emphasizing education (including financial literacy and post-secondary schools); integrating services and referrals to
comprehensively meet the needs of teens; establishing strong participant-provider relationships; articulating well-defined program goals and processes; strengthening family relationships; giving consideration to influence of developmental factors; recruiting, training and retaining highly skilled staff; and providing welcoming program environments (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Adolescent Health, 2012). The U.S. Department of Education’s report on Supporting the Academic Success of Pregnant and Parenting Teens (2013) has made amendments to its original report issued in 1972 under Title IX of the Education Amendments. The updates to the report identify pregnant and parenting teens as one of the most vulnerable populations facing barriers in reaching their educational goals, and lists strategies and priorities in addressing the needs of parenting teens. The residential program the girls in this study were participating in had many, if not all of the components listed above and is in alignment with the priorities set forth by the federal government. The comprehensive services and support the girls in this study are receiving can be attributed to their positive experience and optimism about their future.

Although poverty is a risk factor for school failure, all of the youth in this study who live in low-income households are struggling to confront challenges in school and have aspirations to a better future. Students who live in poverty face barriers that often increase the likelihood and threat of academic failure, becoming disengaged, and dropping out of school altogether (Abelev, 2009). Nieto (1994) points out that several studies reinforce how school plays an integral role in impacting either positive or negative outcomes among students who are facing barriers. Poverty and school disengagement may appear to be overwhelming odds that students need to overcome, yet, they should not serve as a predictor for academic failure. All children need to be offered equitable educational opportunities and access to have the best chance at succeeding in school.
and life (Gorski, 2013; Noguera, 2003). At different points in their lives all the students profiled in this study, encountered daunting challenges. But, as evidenced in their stories, they were not completely derailed. In the face of their struggles, these students did not lose sight of what was important to them—becoming somebody and asserting choice and agency.
Chapter 6: Disrupted Education, Debilitating Discipline, and Language Games

Students in this study all expressed how their education was disrupted as a result of disciplinary action, disengaging curricula, and not getting the critical academic, social and emotional support needed during vulnerable times in their lives. Students also critiqued the harsh disciplinary policies in school and how serving suspensions and being sent out of class as a punishment adversely impacted their education and led to feelings of isolation and exclusion. They described how their language served as another mechanism which marginalized and excluded them from school. In this chapter the following themes will be discussed: Disrupted Education, Debilitating Discipline, and Language Games.

Disrupted Education

The youth in this study contradicted the notion that they do not value their education, a widely held view in deficit-based educational discourse. All the students recognized the importance of school, even though their experiences were often negative and stigmatizing. Students were keenly aware of what was lost when they were excluded from school and consistently articulated how their education was disrupted through disengaging curriculum. In Luke’s case, because the teachers did not engage students and would often just resort to reading directly from the book or giving students worksheets to complete, he reported: “School was boring, teachers would just read from the book…half the time I did not want to be there so I left.” In Ruth’s case, she felt alienated and isolated in the traditional school she attended and pointed out how an indifferent teacher caused students to disengage in the classroom. She commented: “In class we just stayed to ourselves... I only passed because I had a tutor, he [the teacher] for sure didn’t help me with anything.”
The accounts reveal the need for educators to examine how their pedagogical approaches may actually serve to disengage, rather than engage students in school. Cardichon (2013) emphasizes the importance of a rigorous and engaging curriculum, noting that it can also serve as a deterrent for misbehavior, decrease disciplinary issues in school, and promote college and career readiness post-graduation. Nationwide, far too many students are denied access to more rigorous and engaging curricula. Minority students from low-income neighborhoods, in particular, often attend under-resourced and under-performing schools with less experienced teachers, thereby increasing the likelihood of student drop-out rates, discipline rates, and lower graduation rates. Students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities suffer dire consequences as their access to a more academically rigorous and engaging curriculum is even further out of reach given structural inequalities across schools and school districts (Cardichon, 2013; Toldson, McGee, & Lemmons, 2013).

When racial and economic disparities are taken into account when examining suspension, expulsion and special education rates and, conversely, gifted and talented programs, it is clear that marginalized students are not highly valued or given access to the same opportunities. Subsequently, they also often lack the social and cultural capital of their privileged counterparts who can weather school disciplinary policies with less disruption to their educational lives (Baiyee, Hawkins, & Polakow, 2013). Student learning is disrupted when students are suspended or expelled from school leading to valuable educational time being lost. As Mark critically pointed out in his case: “Being kicked out only teaches them that if you mess up and do something they want you out of here…all you do is fall more behind in class.” In Michigan in particular, schools are not mandated to provide alternative education options for excluded
students (ACLU, 2008). Students are often left with minimal options when they are subjected to punitive disciplinary actions.

Worse, once students’ education has been disrupted, it can often set in motion a harmful, vicious cycle. Students who are suspended or expelled may be left at home, unsupervised by an adult. Student disengagement may also lead to referrals to juvenile justice. Being denied educational access can end up effectively pushing vulnerable youth into the school-to-prison pipeline. There is also a strong connection between student disengagement and disciplinary referrals serving as a strong predictor for high absenteeism and truancy rates in schools. Conversely, students who are engaged are less likely to be bored, are motivated, and are less likely to act out in class. Clearly, misbehavior and suspensions can be more effectively addressed by providing students with coursework that is rigorous, relevant, and engaging (Arcia, 2006; Baiyee, Hawkins, & Polakow, 2012; Toldson, McGhee, & Lemons, 2013).

**Debilitating Discipline**

The students’ narratives in this study reveal why harsh punitive discipline policies fail. Exclusionary disciplinary measures have contributed to deplorable outcomes among students. Zero-tolerance policies have had a debilitating impact on the lives of students across the nation and inexorably undermine the constitutional rights of students. As noted before, Michigan has some of the harshest zero-tolerance policies in the nation (Robbins, 2008; Zweifler and DeBeers, 2002). Many students in this study expressed being suspended and receiving referrals for offenses such as disruptive or disrespectful behavior. Michigan refers to these offenses as “snap suspensions,” made possible by Michigan’s Public Act 103 of 1999, which allows teachers to penalize students at their discretion for behaviors they code and label as disruptive or disrespectful. These snap suspensions can serve as a loophole for educators to circumvent any
semblance of due process for students when being issued a suspension (Michigan Legislative Council, 2009). In the case of Mark, he reported: “Being kicked out of school for dumb stuff don’t make sense and then you are not learning anything, so I don’t really know how that helps.” Luke explained that students often stand in long lines simply to enter the school and pass through security measures, which often leads to being late to class or unable to enter at all and, in some cases, led to being suspended. He aptly pointed out the absurdity in this practice, stating, “Theysuspend you for being late... it’s just stupid, like I couldn’t get in and now I can’t even come back!” Mark’s observations regarding this unintended effect of increased security measures have been confirmed in Mukherjee & Karpatkin’s (2007) study, which found similar problems. Compounding this issue is the fact that students rarely have any continuity of education while serving suspensions, because appropriate alternative education is not mandatory in the state of Michigan unless a student is receiving special education services (Askew et. al, 2012).

The U.S. Department of Education’s (2014) report Rethinking School Discipline reveals huge disparities in disciplinary rates. Suspended students are less likely to graduate on time, are more likely to repeat a grade, drop out of school, and become involved in the juvenile justice system (Orfield, 2012). According to Secretary of State Arne Duncan (2014), the number of secondary school students suspended or expelled over the course of a school year has increased by roughly 40% in the last four decades. To make matters worse, exclusionary discipline is applied disproportionately to students of color and students with disabilities. Data from the report of the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), conducted by the Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2013), revealed that minority students, in particular African Americans are disproportionately represented in rates of discipline. African-American students without disabilities are more than three times as likely as their White peers to be expelled or suspended.
African Americans represent only 18% of students nationwide, yet, they represent 35% of the suspensions issued to students (Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2013). As federal disciplinary data is analyzed, it reveals exclusionary practices that negatively impact poor children of color at alarming rates. Orfield (2012) states:

Students who are barely maintaining a connection with their school often are pushed out, as if suspension were a treatment.... Every dropout costs society hundreds of thousands of dollars over the student’s lifetime in lost income, and removing a large number of students from school undermines a community’s future. (p. 4)

Educationally, and morally, Duncan (2014) argues that this situation is “simply unacceptable” (p. 1). Students in this study shared similar concerns about the discipline policies. They believed they were often suspended from school for minor offenses which, in their view, could have been addressed more appropriately by taking the time to talk to students and hear their point of view, or by using alternatives approaches. In this recent Department of Education Report released in July 2014, Duncan acknowledges that “the school-to-prison pipeline must be challenged every day” (p. 1). Researchers conclude that a school’s climate may have more to do with its success than the resources at its disposal. The Department of Education *Rethinking School Discipline* report further revealed that “things like high expectations for students, caring relationships between teachers and students, and feeling safe at school were more associated with success” (p. 1). Ruth echoed these sentiments as she noted the importance of healthy student-teacher relationships: “I know students can be a handful, but teachers need to better understand where kids are coming from... schools can be a good place if the right people are heading them up.” The authors of the report assert that the staggering disproportionality in discipline rates are not caused by differences in children; they are caused by differences in training, professional
development, and discipline policies themselves, which are inequitable and discriminatory. Simply put, it is adult behavior that needs to changed, examined, and evaluated.

**African American males and the discipline dilemma.** African American males are suspended at even higher rates than other groups. African American males have consistently been identified as a population of students who are academically and socially marginalized in U.S. schools (Anderson, 2008; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2008). Small wonder, then, that Mark said of his principal: “He thinks we [Black students] are all criminals and just wanna cause trouble for the school.” These students are more negatively represented in academic outcomes than any other group. Polite and Davis (1999) share how these outcomes are indicative of a larger societal issue. The authors chart the ways in which Black males have historically been viewed by society as criminals and/or entertainers who are stereotyped as physically superior but intellectually inferior. Researchers, themselves, are guilty of playing a significant role in constructing negative images of Black males who are often portrayed as individuals in constant need of intervention (Howard, 2013). Noguera’s work (2008) is pivotal in offering a counter-narrative and a different lens through which to understand how cultural and structural factors play out in damaging ways for Black males. Noguera points out that Black males can change the narrative by redefining their racial identities and demonstrating that Black males can do well in schools and maintain their cultural integrity. The current research that exists on high-achieving Black males indicates they demonstrate resilience, persistence, and determination to overcome racial stereotypes (Howard, 2007; Price, 2000). Noguera (2008) argues that it is necessary to disrupt patterns of underachievement among Black males and that both the “subjective and objective dimensions of identity related to race and gender” must be critically examined in order to create a different trajectory (p. 27).
Critical Race Theorists specifically argue that the experiences of Black males in schools are largely connected to overt and covert forms of racism endemic to the U.S (Bell 1992; Delgado, 1995; Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995). They point out that racist practices are so embedded in U.S. society that they have become normalized. Duncan (2002) contends that “conditions... marginalize adolescent Black males, placing them beyond love in schools and in the broader society” (p. 131). In his examination of the role race plays in schools and how it contributes to underachievement among students of color based on “stereotype threat,” Steele (1992, 1997, 1998, 2010) argues that doing well in school is facilitated most when students feel affirmed in their abilities. However, he points out that “Black Americans are still haunted by a specter that threatens this belief and the identification that derives from it at every level of schooling” (p. 72). Ferguson (2000) illuminates these sentiments as she encapsulates the prevailing and stigmatizing perceptions embedded in institutions and society, stating:

The worst-behaved children in the school are Black and male, and when they take tests they score way below their grade level. They eat candy, refuse to work, fight, gamble chase, hit, instigate, cut class, cut school, cut hair. They are defiant, disruptive, disrespectful and profane. These Black males fondle girls, draw obscene pictures, make lewd comments, intimidate others, and call teacher names. They are banished from the classroom to the hall, to the discipline office, to the suspension room, to the streets so that others can learn. (p. 46)

Ferguson illustrates how Black males may be labeled, criminalized in schools, and ultimately funneled through the school-to-prison pipeline. This type of perception begs the question of how Black males can experience academic success or social inclusion when such pervasive beliefs exist among educators and administrators in schools.
Black males represent a mere 7% of the student population in U.S. schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), yet they are consistently and disproportionately represented in rates of academic failure, discipline, and special education. Simultaneously, they are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs and Advanced Placement classes. The negative public perception of Black males undoubtedly influences how society views this group and ultimately how Black males view themselves (Howard, 2013), threatening the educational attainment and prospective life chances for Black males and their participation in society.

Yet, the male students in this study point to their relative strengths as opposed to deficit-laden accounts. The dominant deficit-based discourse would have us believe there is something that needs to be done to fix African-American students, but the counter reality suggests that schools and practices need to be fixed so they effectively serve African American males. It is critical to shift the paradigm to analyze policies and practices which impact these youth, and to understand what contributes to and reinforces destabilizing schooling experiences.

The impact of disciplinary patterns and how schools respond to Black males in schools has been examined by Lewis, Butler, Bonner, and Jourber (2010) in relation to academic achievement. Their findings revealed that Black males were three times more likely to be disciplined in schools and also held the highest disciplinary referral rate when compared to any other group. Lewis et al. offered several recommendations to address these profound inequities in school. The recommendations included increased levels of culturally relevant approaches among teachers to improve classroom management and engagement. In order to change the negative image of Black males being viewed as “problem” students, more attention and focus must be spent on how to consistently and effectively engage these students so they are able to reach their full potential.
Even well-intentioned educators might be disposing of some of the very students they are trying to educate. Kumashiro (2002) argues that “anti-oppressive educators have an ethical responsibility to reflect constantly on students they may be disposing of, and how to rework their practices” (p. 203). Students themselves consistently voice their preferences for teachers who are strict and caring—teachers who have high expectations and challenge their academic prowess, yet are responsive and supportive (Foster & Peele 1999). For example, Noguera (2008) proposes specific characteristics of effective schools for African American boys. These include a commitment to inclusive and intentional teaching, an academically demanding curriculum, high expectations, an organized and safe school climate, and respect for and validation of students, parents, and families.

**Language Games**

Many African Americans engage in some form of code-switching depending on where they are, who they are communicating with, and what they are communicating about. Code-switching—a cognitive process of alternating between two different linguistic variations, grammatically or socio-linguistically in a single conversation, is a common practice within African American culture (Myers-Scotten & Ury, 1977). Code-switching is apparent in the ways we interact with each other professionally and in public spaces. Demby writes: “For many of us, we subtly, reflexively change the way we express ourselves all the time. In a sense we are hopscotching between different cultural and linguistic spaces and different parts of our own identities—sometimes within a single interaction” (p. 1). For example, African Americans often refer to “using your work/office voice or professional phone voice.” Students often observe this skill at an early age by listening to members of their own family engage in code-switching. These examples even extend to the political arena, as President Barack Obama has been
observed code-switching. In January 2009, for example, while eating at a restaurant, a cashier asked him if he needed change when paying for his meal. President Obama replied with the common AAVE phrase, “Nah, we straight.” In another instance, President Obama was interacting with the White assistant coach of the Olympic basketball team. President Obama offered the coach a conventional handshake, but then turned around and greeted African American all-star Kevin Durant with a *dap*, while simultaneously saying to Durant, “My man!” yet another phrase used commonly in African American culture.

Alim and Smitherman’s book, *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.* (2013), offers a perspective on the political, cultural, racial, and social contexts of language by taking the conversation beyond the usual academic purview. They examine language and race as social constructs that undoubtedly intersect with and speak to larger political and societal issues that stigmatize certain groups in America. President Obama has been described as being one of the most charismatic and eloquent orators of our time with a unique and effortless ability to connect with a diverse group of audiences. He is adept at using linguistic tools such as code-switching based on situation, context, and circumstance. However, he is also subject to “linguistic profiling” as he has been identified as “sounding Black” based on his tone and pitch, yet also widely recognized as *articulate* (p. 58). These are the inescapable markers of speech. Sounding “Black” has often been associated with negative stereotypes about levels of intelligence, ability, and morality, while sounding “White” is often associated with speaking Standard English, being articulate, and having high levels of intelligence. Because Standard English is associated with those who are members of the dominant group, it functions as the “language of power” (Alim and Smitherman, 2012; Delpit, 1998).
African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is repeatedly devalued in academic settings, notwithstanding scholarship demonstrating its linguistic complexity and its benefits for Black children in terms of their cultural identity. For any group that has been historically oppressed, one way to deepen the oppression is to devalue their language by categorizing it as deficient. Furthermore, the intentional devaluing of non-standard language is still a common practice in U.S. schools (Alim and Smitherman, 2012; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 2000). Those who do not conform all too often end up dropping out of school, or more accurately, being pushed out. Language thus serves as another mechanism to exclude students and create feelings of otherness based on the way they speak.

The African-American youth and parents in this study attested to engaging in varying levels of code-switching in and out of school. Many students were aware that mainstream society often passed judgments and made assumptions about one’s intelligence based on how others speak. As Ruth mentioned, “I think they [the teachers] was judging me because I talk Black... they had a problem with me... and they way I talk.” Her White mother also noticed differential treatment based on the way others spoke, saying: “I think people tend to respect a person more if they sound educated.” This statement demonstrated that an awareness of speaking in ways that are culturally congruent to the norms grants you access to the “culture of power” that exists in schools (Delpit, 1995). Martha, a Black parent, also believed many Black parents who speak a stigmatized language are often devalued and judged in schools based on how they speak, which she described as “ghetto.” Ghetto is a term that is often associated with being Black and behaving and speaking in certain ways—a marker of deficiency used to classify African Americans along lines of race and class. In sum, ghetto means failing to behave in ways aligned with White, middle-class norms. In turn, ghetto is inherently seen as a class marker.
According to Griffin’s (2012) study, in which she explored race relations in an urban school district, “a number of White students admitted to viewing Black students collectively as ghetto” (p. 167). Subsequently these images are reproduced and reinforced through the media with constant portrayals labeling Black culture as deficient and “other.” As Hebdige (1979) writes:

> The media not only provide groups with substantive images of other groups, they also relay back to…[marginalized]…people a “picture” of their own lives which is “contained” or “framed” by the ideological discourses which surround and situate it…[the media] has colonized the cultural and ideological sphere. (p. 85)

Isaiah revealed the internalized notion that when you talk “ghetto” or slang, people may assess your intelligence and assume you are not smart based on how you speak. On the other hand, Isaiah shared how he engages in code-switching between home and school “like in school around my friends I can talk how I want but just not like everywhere people don’t understand the slang we use.” In Mark’s case, he also shared how he talks differently around friends because his grandmother emphasized how it is important to use proper words in school because the teachers “won’t think you smart if you talking in slang.” Mark also internalized that the way he spoke was unacceptable in mainstream society. Sarah expressed similar feelings although she rejects the judgments associated with speaking a certain way and assumptions others may make about your intelligence based on how you speak; as she defiantly stated, “That’s how Black folks talk and that’s who we are so I don’t really get trying to change it for other people.”

Banks (2006) argues that although we live in a linguistically and culturally pluralistic society, the United States has perpetuated and promoted a hegemonic view on language, which encourages those outside the mainstream to abandon their own culture, values, and traditions (Craig and Washington, 2004; Cummins, 1997; Heath, 1983; Kersten, 2007). Exploring student
perceptions and experiences highlights the importance of critically examining school practices and exploring cultural and linguistic diversity in schools and classrooms as a complex and multi-layered set of experiences. This phenomenon was noted in two pilot research studies in which students, teachers, and parents were interviewed about their experiences in schools as it relates to language use (Hawkins, 2011a, 2011b). Parents and educators reflected on their schooling experiences and shared how they often felt judged about how they looked and spoke, and felt that AAVE was often viewed as Standard English—but with mistakes.

A research study by Wheeler, Cartwright, and Swords (2012) demonstrates that reading assessment and instruction is impacted by a teacher’s ability to identify the use of AAVE in students’ reading and writing skills. The authors contend that the ability to identify and distinguish dialect from reading error has a significant impact on the reading scores of African-American students. Their research demonstrates that cultural mismatches take place in the classroom between teacher and student, thus adversely impacting the academic achievement and assessment of abilities of African-American students. Student disengagement and marginalization in the classroom resulting from the mismatch of language and culture among teachers and students have also been linked to disproportionate suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to special education (Wheeler et al., 2012).

In schools, student and teachers’ expectations of conformity manifest themselves in tangible examples of teachers’ over-correcting the language of students who use AAVE. Over-correction leads to feelings of self-doubt impacting the development of positive identities, particularly when students are learning to read—this is where many instances of over-correction occur in classrooms (Wheeler et. al., 2012). As Mark stated, “teachers are always making sure we using certain words and correcting our words, like they will say you need to say it like this,
not like that, or this is the right way to speak.” Further, research demonstrates that the consistent use of over-correcting students can lead to devaluing of a student’s cultural and linguistic heritage. Given the linguistic and cultural history of this dialect, there is often a negative connotation and negative social consequences associated with speaking AAVE. For example, those who speak AAVE may face discrimination because of the stereotypes and value judgments often associated with this dialect. Ruth, who felt judged by teachers based on the way she spoke, stated: “I think they was judging me be because I talk Black.” Christian (1997) confirms: “Often people who hear a vernacular dialect make erroneous assumptions about the speaker’s intelligence, motivation, and even morality” (p. 1).

The experiences that youth participants in this study shared about how they choose to incorporate language into their daily lives can also be illustrated in Wittgenstein’s concept of the “language game,” which illuminates the interactive and inter-subjective meanings and uses of language (Wittgenstein, 1953). Wittgenstein uses the analogy of language and playing a game according to certain rules. He argued that using language was similar to playing a game in that we are following rules, but not the same rules all the time. He contends that we are always taking part in some of form of “language games” at one time or another and confusion usually arises when a statement made in one “language game” is interpreted or misinterpreted according to the rules of another. Similarly, AAVE is a rule-governed language system that often goes stigmatized and unrecognized due to assumptions and beliefs about the language itself (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 2000). Wittgenstein offers the analogy of a game of chess. If a player is told that a certain piece is the king, this does not actually tell them anything unless they already know the rules of the game. The meaning of the game and piece must co-exist for understanding, thus simply naming and correcting cannot be the basis for learning
language. Wittgenstein argues that there is no one singular view of the world. Hence, if we apply his argument to code-switching there is space created to respect diversity in language. In sum, language is part of us—we shape the use of language as language shapes us (Wittgenstein, 1953).

**Exclusion and its Impacts**

The youth in this study clearly attested to alienating and isolating experiences stemming from their feelings and interactions of exclusion and/or indifference. Students shared how boring and unimaginative class lessons led to school disengagement, and stated that they lacked supportive and caring student teacher relationships. Youth were excluded through suspensions and exclusionary practices such as pull-out programs in schools. They expressed how they felt their education was disrupted as they were isolated from the mainstream student population based on their learning disabilities. Students further critiqued harsh discipline policies and offered recommendations on what could help students remain in school, rather than pushing them out. African American males, in particular, in the stories presented in this study present a picture of exclusion that aligns with national data about their overrepresentation in discipline rates and special education, and underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs. Interviews also revealed that Black students who spoke AAVE were made to feel as if their language choice was not acceptable in schools and classrooms. Consequently, in order to assimilate to the norms and culture of the schools, students engaged in code-switching. Students and parents alike shared how society maintains negative perceptions which lead to judgments about perceived levels of intelligence if students speak a stigmatized dialect.

Ogbu (1978) argued over thirty years ago that in America we espouse equality but practice inequality, and he compared American society to a caste system. In Ogbu’s view,
Blacks were defined as inferior to Whites and as individuals not in the need of the same kind of education. He argued that this assumption is carried over into the schools when teachers do not demand the same level of competency from or demonstrate the same different levels of support for Black students and White students. These issues, among others, continue to perpetuate the ever-widening achievement gap between Black and White students. A structural critique and efforts of intentional change within the education system is necessary to address these critical issues.

Recent research examining the educational pipeline of African-American students revealed that many of these students continue to lag behind most ethnic groups in almost every level of academic achievement (NCES, 2009; 2011; 2013) with a demonstrated average of trailing 20 test-score points behind White students on the math and reading assessments—which equates to a difference of about two grade levels—and representing only 10% of students participating in rigorous courses (NCES, 2009; 2011). African-American students are not faring well when compared to other groups in terms of academic success. The persistence of underachievement raises concerns about what is happening within schools to perpetuate this cycle (Steele, Perry, & Hilliard, 2004).

The research is clear in demonstrating that African-American students by and large are adversely impacted by policies and practices that places the success of their academic futures in jeopardy, with African American males in particular being even more severely impacted (Noguera, 2003, 2008; Price, 2000). A recent study conducted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2011 also found that children who live in poverty and are reading below their expected grade level by the time they enter third grade are three times as likely to not graduate from high school as students who have never been poor. The students in this study are especially
vulnerable as they are African American and are living in families at or below the federal poverty line.

The media also plays an integral role in shaping how the lives of youth are viewed as violent, dangerous, and in need of being controlled in our society. In particular, Meiners (2007) suggests that television and media portray youth of color as “superpredators,” while “disproportionately using images of street crime that highlight African-Americans or Latinos as perpetrators” (p. 83). These assumptions are often tied to images that are constantly reproduced and seen on the news by teachers, administrators, and school staff who may internalize these images and adopt a belief that students of color are representatives of a violent culture. This, in turn, may translate into lowered expectations and classrooms in which teachers and administrators expect students of color to misbehave and thus focus more heavily on rules and classroom order, rather than ensuring that all students are exposed to a rigorous curriculum. Such attitudes and beliefs deny students the opportunity to be academically successful.

It is important to point out that although the experiences described by these students were disturbing in some instances, their persistence and determination was a point of strength that is critical to highlight. Several students were determined to do well and succeed in spite of the barriers they faced and feelings of judgment they experienced by teachers and administrators. The students were determined to prove others wrong. The students saw themselves in stark contrast to how the adults perceived them in school. The dominant narrative would tell us they do not care about school, but their voices provide evidence that proves otherwise.
Chapter 7: Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

“None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody—a parent, a teacher…bent down and helped us pick up our boots.” (Thurgood Marshall)

In order to improve the experiences of students in schools, we should all ask what we can do to help our children pick up their boots—in some cases, even making sure they have boots first—to help them build positive futures for themselves. The grossly disproportionate rates of African American and poor children who are impacted by exclusionary practices and policies remain disturbing. The failure of the nation to ensure all children receive an education that allows them to fully participate in their school and community is appalling. As a nation we should all carry this shame, yet it is students and parents who ultimately bear the burden of this reality. Critical questions need to be posed: Why are so many students, particularly students of color and poor children, not prospering in school? Why does this discourse about underachievement continue decade after decade and why has so little changed? Why do so many children seem to be drowning in school, while many adults in decision-making roles focus on describing the water—really it’s blue, it’s wet, it’s cold, now what?

The voices of students have been presented in this study and illuminate the impact of exclusionary practices and policies on their lives. The students do not see themselves as victims, but as imaginative, creative, and intelligent souls who are developing social and cultural agency. Nonetheless, their stories also relate their lived experiences of marginalization. By linking student achievement and educational inequality to the broader literature on exclusion and marginalization, this study aims to raise awareness of the importance of developing pedagogical
practices that incorporate cultural and linguistic diversity, framing differences among students as opportunities rather than obstacles (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Over twenty-five years ago, Oakes (1985) revealed how marginalized youth are often described as deviant, criminal, and culturally deficient. In the narratives presented in this dissertation, we can see that not much has changed, as many marginalized youth continue to grapple with these images in schools today. It is time that we listen to the voices of youth and use their stories and experiences as a springboard to contradict and challenge the dominant deficit-based discourses and exclusionary practices and policies impacting students of color in school (Ayers, 1996). The youth who participated in this study are not just telling a good counter-story; they invite us into their lives to awaken our consciousness, to ask us to be more present, to be more caring, and to pay attention in order to change the negative social and educational outcomes for African-American youth. Youth in schools today appear to be getting less and less. National studies point to a lack of care, a lack of qualified teachers, and a lack of engaging and rigorous curriculum that is relevant and meaningful to their everyday lives. They provide a disturbing picture of punishments being applied in many cases for minor offenses, of students being pulled out of their regular classes to receive remedial work or being humiliated by teachers who make them feel as though they were undeserving or did not belong (Anderman, 2002; Anyon, 1980; Appleton, Christenson, and Carter, 2008; Bear, 2010; Blanchett, 2006; Cardichon, 2013; Delpit, 1995). Adequate academic preparation is imperative in K-12 schooling and educators must examine how their practices help or harm diverse students, in order to reduce the racial inequities and damaging educational practices often perpetuated by educators who were insufficiently prepared in their degree programs to work effectively with minority students (Harper, 2012; Harris III, Bensimon, and Bishop, 2010).
In the preface to *City schools and the American dream: Reclaiming the promise of public education* (2003), Pedro Noguera notes that the people who know the least about education often have the most to say about what needs to be done. But when we consider the race and class disparities in the education system, he questions whether America truly does value “all” children (p. xii). The most recent *Federal School Discipline Guidance* report (2014) addresses exclusionary school disciplinary practices that are disproportionately impacting students of color, poor students, and students with disabilities. This highly anticipated document takes some initial steps to address the criminalization of children of color and the role race plays in disciplinary practices. The report contends that rethinking school discipline policies in schools is long overdue, noting that “too many schools resort too quickly to exclusionary discipline, even for minor misbehaviors…schools should remove students from the classroom as a last resort, and only for appropriately serious infractions, like endangering the safety of other students, teachers, or themselves” (Duncan, 2014, p. 1). Another widely publicized critique of abusive discipline can be seen in a recent New York Times editorial, “Torturing Children At School,” exposing examples of brutal treatment nationwide—and citing a high school student who suffered brain damage at the hands of a school resource officer who shocked the student with a Taser gun. Such extreme disciplinary measures should cause public outrage at what is being done to our children, in the name of discipline and order. Not only is this a violation of constitutional rights among minority students who are subject to discriminatory arrest practices and brutality—it is also immoral. It is significant that the New York Times, a national and international voice with close to 2 million subscribers, has taken such a strong position on school disciplinary policies stating: “Many districts need to overhaul practices that criminalize far too many young people and are applied in ways that discriminate against minority children” (2014, p. 1).
Fair and equitable discipline policies are an important component of creating an environment where all students feel safe and welcome. Schools are safer when all students feel comfortable and are engaged in the school community in humane and non-damaging ways and when teachers and administrators have the tools and training to prevent and appropriately address conflicts and challenges as they arise. Equipping school officials with an array of tools to support positive student behavior will both promote positive school cultures and climate, and avoid the use of disciplinary policies that are discriminatory and dangerous.

**Educational Practice Implications**

**A strengths-based approach: Parent involvement.** School success has often been associated with parents’ involvement and engagement practices in schools. According to Reynolds (2010) children whose parents are involved tend to perform better in schools than those whose parents who are not involved despite their socio-economic status. Parents who do not question and challenge school practices and fail to advocate for their children are entrusting the fate of their children to the schools (Noguera, 2008; Perry, 2011). The voices of parents must be encouraged and valued by schools in order to create successful partnerships that promote the academic success of African-American students. In this study, parents were identified as supportive and strong advocates in the lives of their children. Many of the students I interviewed contended that if it were not for the support of their parents, they would not be able to handle many of the barriers they faced.

African American parents often find themselves fighting against a school system that operates on a deficit model, rather than building on the strengths and assets of all students. More often than not, Black parents feel that they do not belong in schools, that their voices do not matter, and that their children are predestined for failure. Public schools often are viewed by
Black parents as offering no real hope, opportunity, or chance that their children will be afforded the encouragement, care, and support that all children deserve. It is often assumed by policymakers and educators that somehow the norms, values, and language of Black people do not support or complement the culture of education (Perry, 2011). According to Delpit (1995) educators, along with policymakers, tend to view Black parents as more of a deficit to their children’s educational development than an asset.

Educational policies and practices still lack awareness about the intersectionality of power, poverty, and race and the role this plays in the experiences of African American parents advocating on behalf of their children. During follow-up interviews, parents discussed their remembered perceptions of schooling as students themselves, and their perspectives now as parents with school-age children. Parent involvement is crucial along many dimensions of students’ school lives. In the following section parent involvement is unpacked in terms of prevailing assumptions and in relation to implications.

**Parental involvement—A brief critique.** In the mid-1960s educators and policymakers focused on parental involvement as a promising way to improve educational outcomes for poor and underachieving students. During this time period, the Head Start model was also developed that involved parents as paraprofessionals. White, Taylor, and Moss (1992) have discussed the emergence of parental involvement programs aimed to encourage the active engagement of mainly low-income and ethnic minority parents to prepare their children for a more successful school career and to prevent educational delays on the part of so-called “children at risk.” In this way, federal policies tried to foster parental attitudes and behaviors that were modeled on White middle-class norms, with the assumption that there was a gap between family and school cultures that could be overcome by activating the involvement of parents. The focus on the
connectedness of families and schools gained popularity, as evidenced by the number of programs that focused on improving parent involvement. Policymakers and educators tended to present parental involvement as a panacea that would be helpful to overcome nearly all educational inequalities traditionally attributed to social class differences.

According to Englund, Luckner, Whaley, and Egeland (2004) there is a positive correlation between parental involvement and children’s school achievement. Other studies by Christenson, Rounds & Gorney (1992), Epstein (2001), Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, Fendrich (1999), Keith, Keith, Quirk, Sperduto, Santillo, and Killings (1998), and Kim (2002) have revealed similar findings. Epstein’s (2001) research reveals parental involvement is correlated with better academic work, more positive school attitudes, higher aspirations, and other positive behaviors for students across all grade levels. However, there are other research studies that seem to be more skeptical about making this connection. For example, Fan & Chen (2001) conducted a meta-analysis to synthesize the quantitative literature about the relationship between parental involvement and students’ academic achievement. The findings of this study indicate that the connections between parental involvement and successful outcomes have been somewhat inconsistent. According to these authors, ambiguity and confusion in the very definition of parental involvement make it difficult to generalize across the various studies, and may have contributed to the inconsistency of findings. In fact, the researchers note that only one or some aspects of parental involvement have been studied. Additionally, researchers often use different methods to measure parental involvement (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992) which has also contributed to inconsistent research findings. In short, much of the literature about parental involvement is not really about parent involvement, but about parents who are not involved yet, or who are not involved in the “right way”—all too often defined as conforming to
the very specific invitations and expectations of the school and its members. According to Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Brissie (2005), parental involvement in schools has almost exclusively focused on how involvement must happen on school-defined terms. Likewise, Lightfoot (2004) finds that programs are generally structured around the assumption that there is one best, or one so-called normal path for child development and that some group of so-called experts, such as educational psychologists or program instructors know better than parents how to ensure children are on this path. Baker, Kessler, Piotrkowski, and Parker (1999) discuss how the pleas to respect parents’ home cultures and habits have also been ignored. As a result, depending on how parents try to get involved with their children’s education, their efforts may very well be overlooked.

How parental involvement manifests and is understood varies across racial and ethnic groups. Diamond, Wang, and Gomez (2004) assert that African American families tend to show their involvement through home-and school-based involvement, and intervened more in their children's school—something the authors termed “front stage/activist” involvement. In comparison, Chinese American families are less likely to be active in schools, manifesting their involvement through home-based activities, which Diamond et al. (2004) define as “back stage/behind the scene” involvement. They conclude that non-dominant/ethnic cultural capital can be equally as useful a form of parent involvement. These findings show that although the strategies among African Americans and Chinese Americans and the way they view parental involvement are different, they still share common goals and aspirations about their children’s education.

Parental involvement has also been defined across studies as representing many different behaviors and practices at home or at school, including parental aspirations, expectations,
attitudes, and beliefs regarding a child’s education (Hong & Ho, 2005). Many researchers and theorists point out that operationalization of the term parental involvement is often vague and at times inconsistent, despite the intuitive meaning of the concept (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992). According to Brito and Waller (1994), parental involvement is a term that can include many different activities. For example, it can range from an impersonal visit to school once a year, to frequent parent-teacher consultations and participation in school governance. Parental involvement can also refer to parental expectations and the ways parents help their children develop positive attitudes or how they assist with homework (Bloom, 1984). Lareau (1992) illustrates in a striking way how schools privilege certain types of (middle-class) family culture and discourse, leading to the construction of an “ideal-type” of parental involvement, which almost by definition excludes other, mainly lower-class parents. In short, much of the literature about parental involvement includes, by definition, certain kinds of parents and certain kinds of involvement.

Yet, parents play an integral role in helping to shape the educational outcomes of students. Their involvement in schools is vital and is a relationship that should be fostered, engaged and maintained to promote the success of students in schools. This study highlights how parents were often viewed by the schools not as allies, but as adversaries in their children’s education. Concerns point to approaches which restrict the critical role parents play in supporting their children in schools and there was a failure to recognize multiple ways for parents to be involved in schools because they did not conform to cultural and normative expectations of their roles. As has been noted, schools often define parental involvement on their terms, thereby limiting the ways parents can help in shaping and influencing school
practices effectively excluding and recognizing various forms of involvement (Brito and Waller, 1994; Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Diamond, Wang, and Gomez 2004; Lareau 1992).

Deficit-based discourses often frame parents who are from non-dominant backgrounds as deficient, in need of support, and reliant on a school system that has failed to effectively engage them in the first place (Gorski, 2013; Valencia, 2011). In response, schools must encourage parents to come to school to help ensure their interactions and experiences will be positive in order to build strong school family-partnerships, so that students will have the best opportunity to thrive in schools.

Although policies have been created to intentionally promote parental involvement there is often a failure to examine how parents see themselves as involved in their children’s education, and more importantly how they see schools as facilitating a process that values their input and perspectives. When space is not created in schools for dialogue about how to support families in ways that bring their unique perspectives into shaping school policies and practices, a disconnect between home and school widens the gap of progress for students.

Parental involvement is most successful when it is viewed, practiced, and promoted as a reciprocal partnership between the home and school. Although, many researchers agree that parental involvement is important, it is the type of involvement that is most significant, in terms of the difference it makes in a child’s academic, social, and emotional development. From a strengths-based perspective it is important to recognize and support the involvement of parents in a variety of ways by empowering them so they emerge as engaged and respected participants in schools and communities.

**Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy.** According to Dewey (1956) schools must make a concerted effort to bridge the gap between home and school in order to value the
knowledge, culture and language practices that students bring to the classroom. Kersten (2007) argues that schools need to make a more concerted effort to bridge the gap between school and the lives of children, particularly those who are marginalized, stigmatized and often “othered” by the dominant culture. This disconnect often results in unimaginative curricula, a heavy emphasis on standardized testing versus engaging students in critical thinking and developing higher order cognitive skills, in addition to a pedagogy which is culturally relevant and responsive to meet the needs of diverse students (Kersten, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

As educators, it is important to examine the critical role of pedagogy in embracing the different ways of knowing that students bring to the classroom. The role of pedagogy according to Cope and Kalantzis (2000) is to embrace cultural and linguistic pluralism that creates access and opportunity, without reproducing school inequities. To ignore these issues is to invalidate their importance in education spaces leading to increased marginalization among students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, thus perpetuating marginalization. Noted historian, Carter G. Woodson, known as the “Father of Black History” argued in his ground-breaking work *The Mis-education of the Negro* (1933), that the education of Black people was a tragedy. His concept of mis-education was based on the educational system’s failure to present authentic Black history in the schools, and the scarcity of literature available for such purposes. He asserted that most history books gave little or no space to Black people’s presence in America, and that the neglect and distortion of facts concerning Blacks in most history books “deprived the Black child and his whole race of a heritage and relegated him to nothingness and nobodyness” (Woodson, 1933, p. 8).

Affirming the histories and cultures of diverse students aid in shaping cognitive skills that are critical to how students learn in and out of school (Hollins, 1996). As schools examine their
MAKING YOUTH MATTER

pedagogical practices, it is essential to create meaningful learning environments that enhance learning by grounding teaching and learning in the rich histories, culture and identities students bring to the classroom (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Nieto, 1999). If educational institutions ignore this crucial link between culture and the cognitive skills of their students, a missed opportunity to engage students can lead to instances of fractured and fragmented academic success. Students who are marginalized based on linguistic diversity may also experience feelings of inferiority, isolation and alienation (Labov, 1970). The ultimate goal ought to be to help teachers gain a better understanding of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, in order to bridge the divide between what students already bring to the classroom and what they need for continued success (Hollins, 1996).

Changing demographics reveal how classrooms are increasingly diverse, both culturally and linguistically. Developing an understanding and respect for the language students use in home and community life is crucial to their engagement in school. The development of culturally responsive approaches and strategies may reduce inequities and improve academic outcomes, particularly among African-American students. Ladson-Billings (1995) contends that culturally-relevant pedagogical approaches build on all the strengths of students by incorporating their histories, traditions, identity, and self-expression into classroom teaching as a way to value their culture to expand their learning. Curriculum in schools must reflect the culture of African Americans as well as the culture of other groups on an equitable basis (Gorski, 2013).

African Americans were forcibly brought to this country, uprooted from their own rich culture and stripped of their heritage like no other group in America while a slave culture was imposed on them. Even after the abolition of slavery, widespread discrimination existed, denying African Americans access to education. While this history is painful and often
uncomfortable to discuss, we cannot pretend this situation did not exist. What continues to exist and remains problematic are attempts to deny the existence of African American culture. There must be truth in curriculum in order for African Americans to be proud of their heritage, not shamed by it. Truth in curriculum diminishes the notion of viewing African Americans as deficient.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is described by Lee (1995) as “one response that addresses cultural mismatches directly and often addresses macro-level structures indirectly” (p. 6). Students need to know they are valued and respected and that they matter. Adults play a critical role in helping to nurture and promote the development of positive self-identity and concepts among students to expand their possibilities in education and beyond. The importance of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy provides a framework to use while working to develop solutions for teaching children in urban communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As race and class intersect with language diversity, all of these issues raise concerns about equity as it relates to the academic achievement of African-American students in schools.

Challenging the dominant structures through critical examination and interrogation of policies and practices are necessary to promote equitable outcomes in schools. As it relates to classroom practices in K-12 schools, Ladson-Billings has pointed out that educators must ask the question—Why do we teach what we teach and is it relevant to the lives of the students who sit in front of us? Further, she argues that if we value the culture of minority students, we will teach it and educators must move out of spaces of comfort, as change occurs in these instances. She also discusses the importance of engaging with parents and using their strengths to complement student learning, and urges the fostering of positive and supportive parental and community relationships in developing relational trust.
Ladson-Billings’ call to action for educators is to be courageous enough to engage with students on issues of race, highlighting three areas of CRP that are critical to embrace in schools: 1) Student learning; 2) Development of cultural competence—the ability to be firmly grounded in one’s own culture of origin and fluent in at least one culture, with a goal of everyone becoming bi-culturally competent in schools; 3) Socio-political consciousness which questions—Why are we teaching what we teach and how is learning connected to the everyday lives of students (G. Ladson-Billings, personal communication, May 7, 2014).

For example, understanding hip hop as a common culture and relevance to student’s lives and closing the cultural, linguistic, and digital divide between students and teachers may also lead to improved student outcomes. Ladson-Billings believes it is a moral imperative to engage students by taking the time to understand their culture. If we value the culture of diverse populations we will teach it in classrooms, which means educators must do the work to understand other cultures when teaching in a cultural space different from one’s own. The students in this study all shared instances of not seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum or the learning being relevant to their lives. Students’ narratives from this study demonstrated that they did not feel that teachers connected with them academically, socially, or emotionally. In Sarah’s words “Well there really isn’t anything in school for me to relate to with school…” In Isaiah’s words “…They [White teachers] can’t relate to us or try to understand us... I think they just try to get the bad kids out of their class so they don’t have to deal with all the Black kids in their class…”

In order to positively impact educational outcomes for students, it is imperative that we understand the language, history and culture of African-American students and develop culturally responsive approaches and strategies that create relevant learning experiences which
value and respect the culture, traditions and language diversity of these students. With this research, I hope to influence educational outcomes for minority students who speak AAVE with some possible recommendations that include: improved teacher education programs that prepare teachers to work in linguistically diverse classrooms, and culturally relevant pedagogy and classroom instruction and practices to increase levels of student achievement among those children who may be marginalized based on the way they speak.

**Rigorous and engaging curriculum in schools.** For far too many students from low-income families, students of color, and students with disabilities, the schools they attend are often not structured to provide them with a rigorous and engaging curriculum. This, in turn, negatively affects the creation of a positive school culture and climate. According to Cardichon (2013) there is a direct relationship between a positive school climate and student engagement. To reduce the disproportionate rates of discipline and underachievement among students, access to more rigorous curriculum must be made available and as Toldson, McGhee, and Lemons (2013) point out, academic disengagement is highly correlated with disciplinary referrals. Academic disengagement has also been attributed to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 which resulted in a deleterious effect on curriculum as a heavy emphasis was placed on test-based accountability and less emphasis on building the kinds of caring, supportive student-teacher relationships that Noddings (2002) advocates. Particularly alarming was the negative impact that NCLB standards and reform efforts had on African-American students. Darling-Hammond points out how standardized testing often ignores critical real-world skills students need to obtain, and narrowing the curriculum makes it less engaging overall (Darling-Hammond, 2000; 2004; 2009).
In order to increase academic engagement among students, some strategies may include increased representation in gifted and talented programs, advanced placement class offerings, dual enrollment in high school and college, deeper and more relevant learning, and support services for students that may be accomplished through comprehensive wraparound services within schools and communities. Wraparound services could be provided in a manner that coordinates school and community programs for children, including but not limited to: family engagement, extended learning opportunities and youth development, after-school mentoring and tutoring programs. Wraparound services that are sustainable and comprehensive need effective coordination between the school and community-based initiatives and/or organizations. Successful coordination could facilitate these specific interventions that the students need in order to build social and educational capital.

For low-income students of color, to combat the learning lost during the summer months, many districts are now looking at balanced calendars that restructure the days children attend school, making available a school calendar where learning is spread out over the course of the year to reduce gaps in learning that often occur during the summer months.

To address misbehavior in schools, progressive pedagogical approaches suggest that student behavior problems, and subsequent suspensions, can in part be mitigated by engaging students in coursework that is academically rigorous and engaging. When a school increases its capacity to provide a positive school climate and a more rigorous and engaging curriculum, students in turn are more engaged.

**Alternative intervention strategies.** Schools have always dealt with issues of students fighting, skipping class, and breaking rules, but what is different now is that many of these violations are being handled by law enforcement officials rather than school staff. However,
punitive disciplinary measures have consistently been favored over alternative intervention strategies. But there are alternative approaches that have shown promise such as Restorative Justice, the use of evidence-based positive behavior management strategies, in-school suspensions, and the provision of mental health services for students experiencing mental health challenges. In addition, another promising program, *Response to Intervention* (RTI) exemplifies a positive behavior support model. RTI is a three-tiered, data-based, non-special education intervention approach that blends assessment, instruction, and intervention to minimize challenging behaviors deemed to put students at risk for school failure (Bayat, Mindes, & Covitt, 2010).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is another preventative strategy used to establish clear expectations for behavior from the beginning of a school year. Under this model, training is offered for students and staff throughout the year as a way to mitigate behaviors through a process that is fair and consistent. It is clear that there is a need for greater flexibility and reasonable judgment in examining how school districts address student misbehavior by viewing the whole child and doing everything possible to keep students in school. Implementing positive, school disciplinary practices, such as school-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) and Restorative Justice programs are delivering promising results (Scott, Gagnon, & Nelson, 2008; Wachtel, 2013). These models are shown to increase academic success and decrease referrals to the office, suspension and expulsion rates. These models also take some initial steps in reversing the trajectory of too many youth being funneled through the “school-to-prison pipeline” by reducing the over-reliance on suspensions, expulsion, and referrals to the office as forms of discipline. Punishing problem behavior has not been shown to reduce problematic behavior, nor to provide opportunities for children to learn
from their behaviors and repair any harm that may have been caused. Instead, punishment has been shown to increase the levels of aggression, drop-out rates, and academic disengagement and failure among students (VanNess & Johnstone, 2007; Zehr, 2002).

**Adolescent realities and development.** The decision made by schools to assign punitive consequences to students often creates more problems than it actually solves. Developmentally, adolescents are impulsive, reactive, and often believe they are invincible, and tend to be risk takers (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Geronimus, 2003). Understanding the reality of adolescent development and normalizing adolescent behavior means that schools would benefit from developing pro-active strategies to mitigate issues that arise among adolescents in school. When students need understanding and tools to restore the harm they have caused, more often than not the response is simply harsh punishment.

Mattering among adolescents ranks high on the order of importance in developing a sense of belonging in schools. Studies have revealed that adolescents who perceive they matter show a greater sense of feeling they belong and higher levels of psychosocial well-being. According to Marshall (2001), mattering is perceived as feeling that he or she is important to others. Mattering is a human condition that is necessary for thriving, and is particularly important for healthy adolescent developmental (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). According to Rosenberg (1985) individuals who perceive they matter indicate lower levels of depression and academic stress. Conversely, the absence of mattering is associated with depression, loneliness, exclusion, and academic stress (Dixon-Rayle, 2005; Dixon Rayle & Myers, 2004; Marshall, 2001; Rosenberg, 1985; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Baumeister and Leary (1995) also discuss how emotion and cognition are influenced by the need to belong. The students in this study expressed how the ethic of care seemed to be missing in their interactions with teachers and
administrators as they all pointed out instances where they did not feel they belonged, were cared for, or mattered to the adults who were entrusted to care for them—all of which contributed to the factors that created barriers and setbacks in their academic lives.

The findings in this study are similar to those of Newman (1981) who demonstrated through specific examples how students identified whether or not teachers cared for them. Students had very clear examples of characteristics that indicated if a teacher was nurturing or supportive. For example, students identified good teachers as teachers who were fun, caring, devoted, patient, intelligent, a role model, expressive, personal while, on the other hand, describing non-caring teachers and disengaging teachers as teachers who talk down to you when you ask questions. One of the participants in Newman’s study shared how teachers would embarrass students in front of the class. Ruth, a participant in this study echoed these sentiments as she specifically identified instances in her traditional school where a teacher would embarrass and demean students in class to make the students feel stupid and how the students hated being in that class. Ruth shared how her academic struggles in school led to feelings of exclusion. She described hating school as she provided an example about an interaction with a White teacher who made her feel she did not belong: “If you answered the question wrong, he [teacher] would make you feel stupid.” She went on to cite another example of how this White teacher spoke to Black students, “The teacher said in front of the class “see that’s what happens when you don’t do your homework, glad to see your priorities are in order” Mark, another participant in this study, was critical of pull out practices where students received remedial work which was in his view a tactic to make students feel “dumb.” Although, this may not be the intention of educators, it is noteworthy to point out the importance of listening to student perspectives and further examining how pedagogical practices and intentional and unintentional acts can be
internalized negatively by students. Students view being separated from their peers as being “othered,” leading to a lack of belonging and not fitting in, which has dire consequences for their healthy adolescent development.

**Alternative education programs.** Alternative schools and programs have changed over the years and today mean different things to different audiences, making it difficult to clearly categorize and define alternative education. There are, however, some salient features that exist in many of these programs. Most alternative programs have the following features: small class sizes; an emphasis of one-on-one interaction between students and teachers; an emphasis on creating a supportive learning environment; an emphasis on creating opportunities for student success, particularly as it relates to the student’s future; and flexibility in the education program, so that learning is designed to meet the needs of students (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Morley, 1991; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990). The students in this study who transferred to alternative education programs discussed how the levels of engagement and commitment from teachers and school staff made a positive difference in their academic outcomes. The students spoke highly about the programs in which they participated, particularly the levels of support available to ensure their success.

In Michigan where this study was conducted, Alternative Education exists as a separate program within a K-12 public school district or charter school established to serve and provide youth a choice or option when their needs are not being met in the traditional school setting. There are three mandated goals for alternative schools: that students attend by choice; that the school or program be responsive to unmet local needs; and that the student body reflect the racial and socio-economic mix of the community (Michigan Alternative Education Organization, 2013). According to the State of Michigan Pupil Accounting Manual (2009), the reasons for
participation in these program include: expulsions, court referrals, pregnant or parenting adolescents, or previously dropping out from school. Additionally, in some instances an alternative education program may be appropriate for those students who simply are more academically successful in a non-traditional setting (Michigan Department of Education Pupil Accounting Manual, Section 5A-1).

There are instances when students are sent to alternative programs or situations where they enroll in alternative programs by choice. An alternative education program is often defined by specific program characteristics, such as programs that focus on behavior mitigation, interests, functional levels as well as academic challenges, and where individualized support is tailored to meet the needs of students. Behavioral programs might be designed for students who need a more structured setting in order to facilitate their learning and the learning of others. Programs designed around student interest might include an environmental program or vocational academies. Functional-level programs might include high school completion or academic or skill remediation (State of Michigan Pupil Accounting Manual, 2009).

Alternative programs are an option for those students having difficulty in adjusting to a larger school environment where there are decreased opportunities for one-on-one attention and where the traditional school environment is less effective for those students who are disengaged and vulnerable. Some of the students attending alternative schools are finding success in smaller alternative environments as we saw in this study with Ruth, Esther, and Elisabeth. A major reason for this success is the family-like support structure, in which caring peers and adults are the rule and not the exception. The staff in these schools often create opportunities and expand possibilities for students as they integrate learning and meaningful work. Further, the structure also includes an ongoing commitment to the training and development of staff. Alternative
programs place a heavy emphasis on developing and transforming the whole child by focusing on individual learning needs and helping students see how they can contribute to their communities and society at large.

The research is limited on viable alternative education options for school districts, however, primarily because the availability of such programs is driven by federal and local funding. Michigan is one of eleven states that does not require school districts to provide suspended or expelled children with alternative education (Baiyee, Hawkins, & Polakow, 2013; Zweifler and DeBeers, 2002). Michigan’s zero-tolerance policies place the burden of alternative education on parents, as students can be denied readmission to their home schools if they have been out of school for a prolonged period of time, and have been unable to access alternative programs due to cost or transportation difficulties (Zweifler and DeBeers, 2002). The wide disparities in alternative education services further compound the crisis of push-outs as options are limited with service delivery being inconsistent.

A students’ sense of belonging, satisfaction, and self-esteem are frequently examined together in alternative school studies given the connections between these characteristics and the importance of success for students who are alienated from the educational system. In general, student reports of their experience at alternative programs have been positive and align with student perspectives in this study; they too provided positive feedback on their alternative education experience. Alternative education program models demonstrate improved outcomes among students by offering more supportive, nurturing, and caring learning environments. Smaller class sizes and increased levels of individualized attention between students and teachers have shown to be an effective strategy in increasing levels of academic success among students (Lehr and Lange, 2000; Lehr and Lange, 2003). Although these programs seem to effectively
reach students who are not doing well in traditional school settings, the threat of many alternative programs being eliminated or consolidated due to budget cuts poses yet another fundamental concern. One of the ways to perhaps address this issue is to consider integrating alternative education programs and traditional programs as there seems to be some promise in shared services, access to educational opportunities and social participation (Danielson, 2002).

Alternative programs have the potential to provide a caring, nurturing, hopeful environment for many students who are marginalized in traditional school settings. The students in this study who attend alternative schools narrated a trajectory from vulnerable academic situations in their traditional schools where they were in danger of academic failure, to building positive, supportive relationships in alternative education environments and finally experiencing more success and a sense of belonging in school.

**Educational Policy Implications**

**Solutions not suspensions.** Over 3 million students were suspended from school nationwide in 2006 and 102,080 were expelled, yet the majority were for non-violent offenses such as truancy and insubordination. Disproportionality in relation to race, ethnicity, disability, and poverty continue to exclude far too students from school (ACLU, 2008; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; US Department of Education, 2014). The over-representation of African-American students – 15% in comparison to White students at 5%--is an alarming trend that speaks profoundly to issues about civil rights, racial bias, and the impact on youth whose school lives are often adversely impacted by exclusionary discipline policies (LaMarche, 2011).

Michigan has some of the harshest zero-tolerance policies across the nation and ranks fifth in the nation in terms of student suspensions disproportionately impacting students of color and students with disabilities. Solutions Not Suspensions (SNS) is a national campaign to end
disparities in discipline rates in public schools. The call to action by the national campaign was instituted to address the overly harsh discipline measures schools use which adversely impact students of color, particularly African American males. SNS focuses on shifting the cultural climate within schools, encouraging schools to change how they perceive and respond to African-American students. Suspensions do not accomplish the intended purpose of helping students learn from their mistakes, to the contrary, they frequently have the opposite effect (LaMarche, 2011; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Suspensions often increase rates of misbehavior as students are caught in a vicious cycle of labeling and a self-fulfilling prophecy, incurring cycles of escalating disciplinary exclusion. Suspensions also increase feelings of shame and alienation, as students feel rejected and excluded from school. Suspensions mean lost hours of instructional time and make it more likely that students will end up repeating grades, dropping out, or ending up in the school-to-prison pipeline. The underlying issues that cause students to misbehave or disengage often go unaddressed. If students are facing barriers at home, for instance, suspensions are only likely to make things worse for the student.

Schools must take responsibility for the many snap decisions that lead to the suspension and expulsion of students. Students and families have a need for schools to explore and identify alternative strategies, rather than bear the onus of the responsibility when a student makes an error in judgment that can be more appropriately addressed and resolved in school. Incremental steps are being taken to reverse the downward trajectory often resulting from suspensions and expulsions. Schools across the nation have come under scrutiny for the arbitrary and discriminatory application of harsh discipline being issued to students. Zero-tolerance policies undermine the educational rights of students while educational exclusion creates feelings of shame and otherness, thereby eroding student self-esteem. Students are often silenced by adults
who place restrictions on their access to education. Examining, critiquing, and dismantling zero-tolerance policies is vital to address the violation of rights among students, particularly for poor students and students of color (Insley, 2001; Robbins, 2008).

**Educational rights.** The students whose voices are presented in this study provide us with an on-the-ground perspective of how school practices and policies exclude them from school. Their frustration, their sense of not belonging, not feeling cared for, being unfairly targeted and viewed as trouble makers, point to valid concerns and awareness about missed and disrupted school time—all of which speak to a profound disrespect for their young lives. The narratives profiled in this study are not intended to encapsulate the entire experience of African-American youth in schools, yet they do highlight how students’ lives are being derailed and disrupted by exclusionary educational policies.

From a rights-based perspective, educational exclusion can be juxtaposed against the International Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which affirms children’s rights to dignity, agency, and freedom of self-expression (Baiyee, Hawkins & Polakow, 2013). The students in this study who experienced exclusion in school were often silenced and their perspectives were not taken into account. Of the nine students interviewed for this study, none of the students were given the opportunity to express his or her views (CRC, Article 12) nor were they asked by teachers and administrators to share their perspectives and their side of the story. Their narratives reveal that discipline was not implemented “in a manner consistent with the child’s dignity” (CRC, Article 28). The United States is one of the outlier countries that has not yet ratified the CRC. Racism and racial discrimination are cited as underlying factors raising serious concern about the “failure of the school system to educate pupils adequately, serving rather as a conduit to juvenile and criminal justice” (UN Human Rights Council, 2009, p. 19).
Among the criticisms of zero-tolerance policies raised by the Human Rights Council were the severe punishments being issued to students for minor offenses, and the clear racial disparities in how such punishments are meted out. In addition to concerns being raised about violations of rights related to zero tolerance and agency, human rights are violated when children and youth are deprived of access to a high quality education. According to the CRC, Articles 28 and 29 recognize the right to an education and state that discipline in schools should respect children’s dignity (Article 28) and that “Children’s education should develop each child’s personality, talents and abilities to the fullest” (Article 29) (See also Baiyee, Hawkins & Polakow, 2013).

However, the students in this study who have been marginalized by egregious policies and practices are not extended the dignity or supports they need to emerge as engaged learners. Further research is necessary to examine the violation of educational rights among children and youth. It is necessary to challenge and change the punitive discourse to one that identifies the strengths of students, and holds the education system accountable for ensuring that they are affirming the rights of students through their policies and practices. The students in this study offered recommendations to keep students in school rather than push them out. From a rights based framework, engaging student voices and perspectives can help shape and inform educational policies and practices.

**Critical Race Theory Implications**

According to Critical Race Theorists the experiences of African-American students in school in the United States are bound up with a legacy of racial discrimination and largely connected to overt and covert forms of racism (Bell 1992; Delgado, 1995; Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995). Microaggressions frequently occur in the lives of students and are so embedded in the fabric of society that they become normalized. As Steele pointed out in his examination of
the role race plays in schools, underachievement among students of color is attributed to “stereotype threat,” Steele (1992, 1997, 1998, 2010). Conversely, when students do well in school it is often attributed to caring, supportive, relationships that affirm students and their abilities. Critical Race Theory in this study served to critically examine the role race played in students’ experiences in school. At various points in the study, students identified instances of microaggressions they encountered in schools and pointed out ways in which exclusionary practices led to stigmatization. Students consistently identified race as a factor that contributed to feelings of exclusion in school. For example, Mark a participant in the study pointed out how the White principal in their school constantly viewed him and his friends as trouble makers and often commented how they were headed to detention if they did not straighten up.

The perceptions of these students constitute their reality. Their counter-narratives revealed racialized experiences of marginalization. Critical Race Theory served to explore how exclusionary policies and practices in general, and more specifically in this study, unfairly and disproportionately targeted African-American students. The students’ stories also demonstrated their resilience and how they were determined to succeed despite the stereotypical views, assumptions, and judgment imposed on them by others.

Stigma, Stereotyping, and Exclusion

The student narratives illustrated how stigmatizing and marginalizing experiences caused them to feel excluded from school and in some instances disengage. Goffman’s work revealed the importance of understanding the impact that stigma, stereotyping and exclusion has on the young lives of students and what can be done to interrupt the cycle and reengage students in the learning process. Through their stories we learned how they felt a sense of otherness based on their interactions with adults who were entrusted to care for them. The students observed
differential treatment between White students and Black which further marginalized them and from their perspective limited their access to resources. They felt unfairly targeted due to their race and experienced a lack of belonging which undermined their rights, agency and voice. Their stories gave voice to many of the issues facing students in schools and served as a call to action to listen to them and act on their behalf through policy and practice level changes.

**Recommendations**

**Student recommendations.** The students in the study had clear ideas of how they learned best, what helped them, what hurt them, and what recommendations they would make to change schools in order to help them learn better. The learning spaces in our education systems could and should empower and create voice for all students, especially those who are vulnerable and under-served. Those who feel powerless often have fewer options and access to opportunities, thus greatly diminishing their social capital. Fostering agency among youth increases their power and voice, thereby increasing their ability to advocate for themselves and become more actively engaged in their education.

The participants shared schooling experiences that highlighted various levels of disengagement due to alienating interactions with teachers, boring, unimaginative curricula, and exclusionary policies and practices. Disengaging pedagogy is embedded in teacher-control, is dismissive of students, and often demonstrates teachers’ lack of interest in preparing for class or teaching, which leads, in turn, to many students disconnecting from school altogether (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Cadrichon (2013) has examined how implementing rigorous and engaging curriculum fosters promotes a positive school climate in which students are engaged in learning and encouraged to succeed, thereby narrowing achievement gaps and improving
learning outcomes. The report is comprised of federal, state, and local recommendations for increasing access to high-quality, rigorous, and engaging curriculum.

Almost a century ago, Dewey (1938) reminded us to be more critical of the important role that the school plays in student achievement and pointed out how schools often place blame on the student, rather than critiquing how classroom instruction may impact student learning. His writings are prescient as he described a child in a classroom:

Engaged in physical truancy, or in the mental truancy of mind-wandering and finally built up an emotional revolution against the subject he was held to be at fault. No question was raised to whether the trouble might lie in the subject matter or in the way in which it was offered (pp. 46–47).

Students in this study were candid in discussing how teachers did not create meaningful or relevant learning experiences, and would often just teach from the book or give students worksheets to complete. In this way, students were constantly reminded that their role in the classroom was just to “sit and get,” (Tate, 2004). The approach of “sit and get” limits voice, participation, and engagement among students. For poor students and students of color, in particular, it is critical to mitigate experiences of marginalization and stigmatization. The voices of students matter and their voices should be heard and infused in how they learn in school to promote academic success (Pitre, Pitre, Ray, & Hilton-Pitre, 2009). Too often, there is a tendency to blame students and their families, rather than examining the role that schools and those within them, play in contributing to the disengagement of students.

All too often policy and school decisions affecting youth are created for and about, but not with them. While the focus in many schools is on setting up metal detectors as ways to improve school safety, students are simply saying that better relationships with teachers and
more flexible school practices would be more effective and appropriate. Disengagement among the nine students interviewed was prevalent as students pointed out examples of inequitable discipline, inflexible school culture, and disrespectful teachers. The idea that adults know “what’s best” did not work in many cases for these students, as they consistently articulated what helps and what harms. We should all ask ourselves the question: How can we expect students to succeed if they don’t feel they are valued or that they belong?

It is critical that educators value, respect, and listen to students’ voices. Ruth insightfully and simply points out, “Schools can be a good place if the right people are heading it up.” Ruth’s contention is on par with the literature showing how administrative leadership is a key component to developing and fostering climates and cultures in school that are supportive, nurturing, and attentive to the whole child. Elisabeth’s recommendations for ensuring students are supported are simple and memorable:

Someone should reach out to the kids that are struggling…I think it was probably a lot of kids like me that didn’t feel like they were smart enough to finish school, and just dropped out…being there and showing support for kids can really help them go a long way I think.

Educational recommendations: From a school-to-prison pipeline to a school-to-college pipeline. Traditionally, education has been viewed as a vehicle for upward mobility and a college degree as a means to an equal opportunity for success. Our focus needs to shift from a school-to-prison pipeline, to how we could intentionally create space for and funnel those same students into a school-to-college-pipeline. Preparing students for futures beyond secondary education is a vital imperative that must be examined and addressed. The way students are
prepared in K–12 schooling has a direct impact on how successful they will be in post-secondary schooling, if that is the route they choose to pursue (Howard, 2007).

Yet, a huge amount of progress still needs to be made to address the profound disparities impacting low-income, minority students in schools. When reviewing the research from decades earlier, the statistics are not that different from patterns we see today. In order to increase rates of admission, retention, and graduation for African-American students in college, we must simultaneously address the failure of many African-American students who do not complete high school. It is imperative that students are engaged in secondary schooling so they remain contenders for college admission and completion, both academically and financially (Howard, 2007). Twenty-five years ago a College Board (1985) report on Equity and Excellence focused on the quality of education Black students were receiving and how they were affected by school reform policies. The report revealed that the conditions for Blacks were alarming. The report stated that although many of the legal barriers to educational opportunity had been removed, education to a large extent remained separate and unequal in the U.S:

Minority students are disproportionately placed in vocational courses or in low track classes in which they are not intellectually challenged, in which teachers lack enthusiasm, in which expectations normally are low, and in which children get the message that they cannot succeed. (College Board, 1985, p. 24)

The report further stated that it was very important to ensure that all students have access to a high quality education, noting that there were many reasons to provide equal opportunity, but that more importantly, it was morally right. Similarly, Hodgkinson (1984), a demographer sounded an urgent alarm arguing that all Americans benefit when a new generation of people becomes part of our national fabric, adding high levels of energy, creativity, and productivity to
our society; conversely, if they do not become productive members of our society, all of us have diminished futures.

Jones DeWeever and Gault (2006) in a report from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, examined the role resilience played in the lives of women (predominantly single mothers of color) who faced trials and tribulations while trying to pursue higher education and maintain their welfare benefits with little to no support from their caseworkers who viewed them as part of the problem rather than the solution. Yet, the women shared high aspirations for a successful future and despite their circumstances they indicated overwhelmingly (83.7%) that the factor most contributing to their decision to pursue higher education was the desire to improve their financial situation for their families, making clear linkages between education and upward social and economic mobility. The education “premium” for African American women is astonishingly high—a four-year degree resulted in a 92% increase in earnings in comparison with a high school degree (Deweever Jones and Gault, 2006).

The promise of schooling is deeply rooted in the history and culture of African Americans. In this age where there is fear that large numbers of Black youth will not be adequately prepared for the future, the efforts to improve their educational outcomes intensifies. Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children’s Defense Fund commented: “Fifty years after Brown v. Board of Education and 40 years after President Johnson declared a War on Poverty many minority and lower-income children still lack a fair chance to live, learn, thrive and contribute in America” (State of America’s Children, 2004, p. 1).

In more recent research, Howard (2007) reveals that for African-American youth, the more things change, the more things remain the same, and the need for solutions continues to increase. The numbers of African-American students graduating from college is worsening.
The statistics in secondary schooling related to school drop-out rates, academic underachievement, and disciplinary rates are particularly distressing and while the legal barriers to educational opportunity have been removed, education to a large extent remains separate and unequal in the U.S. This begs the question: How do we address the issues in secondary schooling and the problematic number of African-American youth who do not graduate from post-secondary institutions?

Research indicates that active engagement is a critical component contributing to the success at the collegiate level. Some of the areas attributed to success include: resolving masculine identity conflicts; developing strong Black identities, particularly on predominantly White campuses; access to social capital and resources; and overcoming educational and socioeconomic disadvantage (Harper, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Harper, 2008; Harper & Griffin, 2011). Harper and Quaye (2009) state: “We know one thing for certain: Students who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities and experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, are more likely than are their disengaged peers to persist through graduation” (p. 4). Funding priorities should be redirected towards investing in youth early, so that schooling places them on trajectories for college. This also means that our schools must create access to more rigorous, engaging curriculum in order to prepare students who will emerge ready to attend two- and four-year colleges and universities.

Creating a culture of success. If the purpose of teachers, administrators and school personnel is to help students succeed, then we must eliminate the practice of inundating African-American students with explanations as to why we believe they are failing. If students cannot entrust educators to teach them what they need to know to be productive, contributing adults, then it will remain an uphill battle in reducing disproportionate numbers of students who are
represented in discipline, underachievement, and special education rates. Schools must stop placing blame on students, their parents, and their communities as reasons for their academic struggles. It is the role of schools to educate students irrespective of their level of competence and work with them to help them reach their potential. While early education is the first point of intervention, we cannot assume that even at the middle and high school level it is too late to reach students. Patterns of exclusion and students being underserved have become entrenched. This research and documented data describing these issues is not a new phenomenon. Decade after decade, the same pervasive patterns rear their ugly heads and while the discourse is pervasive, the solutions are absent.

It is important to develop approaches that help educators understand, value, embrace, and incorporate cultural and linguistic diversity in their pedagogy. Recruiting and retaining effective teachers who are reflective, diverse, culturally proficient, and willing to critically examine their practices can help to narrow the achievement gap and provide children with models for how to live in multicultural environments (Meier, 2002).

Students who have been identified as needing special education services should be mainstreamed into quality-level courses, rather than the remediation that often exists in pull-out programs. One approach in education could be to create Individualized Education Plans for all students, in which learning goals and objectives are created collaboratively between students, teachers, and parents and are designed to meet the unique learning needs of individual students. Further, interventions that focus on the strengths of students would be particularly effective vis-à-vis African American males in schools. Some of these approaches should include culturally responsive pedagogy along with additional strategies that engage African males in the classroom (Banks, 1993; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2008). There is a
pervasive belief that uniformity must exist in ways of speaking and writing, which further exacerbates issues related to power, exclusivity, and lack of diverse emotional and cognitive learning spaces in the classroom. These perceptions and attitudes about language maintain power structures that are camouflaged in various forms of institutionalized racism and must be addressed through teacher training and awareness-building through public education campaigns in order to transform classrooms into welcoming and inclusive landscapes.

**The role of social workers.** Social Workers are integral to the task of advocacy as it relates to the issues impacting the educational experiences for many vulnerable, underserved youth in schools. Advocacy is a powerful strategy in challenging social injustices which impact vulnerable, oppressed and underserved populations (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Social workers are poised to advance the interests of social justice and incorporate in their work, support empowerment and voice for those populations who are disadvantaged, face discrimination, or are disempowered, particularly in schools where issues of bias, discrimination and inequity are especially problematic for poor children and children of color (Hawkins, Fook, and Ryan 2001). Social workers play a vital role in supporting students and families to promote positive academic outcomes for vulnerable youth, by strengthening public education and influencing policy and practice issues in schools to address issues of equity and access. Many social workers in practice operate from a strengths-based perspective in order to empower and improve the well-being of those who are impacted by exclusionary practices in society or schools. In this study, students identified social workers as significant adults who supported them by providing a critical safety net to help them attain success.

The role of social workers in the education system is important as social workers are tasked with being an advocate for the child and his or her family. In many instances, social
workers are vessels of knowledge who carry in-depth histories and provide tremendous insight about the lives of youth and families they serve. Social workers by virtue of their role as advocates establish relationships built on trust and mutual respect, and are often able to uncover layers related to a child or family’s struggle, which often times impact students in school. Social workers can assist in removing roadblocks facing students in education and their perspectives should be solicited and integrated in how to best serve students in school. The multi-layered facets of a school system can be a daunting task for any parent, coupled with poverty, homelessness, and the challenges of single parenthood. The outcomes for children of color are severely diminished when faced with these multiple barriers and their futures are further threatened. Social workers can serve a critical role as a support and advocate in the face of adversity—they become the voice of those who have been silenced, the spark for those who cannot find their fight, and the light for those traveling through a dark tunnel.

**Building positive student-teacher relationships.** Students want to know they are cared for and valued and that they matter. In this study, however, many students reported a lack of caring and belonging in schools and classrooms. Conversely, students described positive interactions with teachers, social workers, coaches, and administrators in alternative schooling environments. The role classroom teachers play in the educational experiences of African-American youth is critical and widely documented (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Walker, 1996). Building strong relationships between students and teachers requires dedication, effort, and willingness to engage students in meaningful ways. Promoting positive relationships between students and teachers has been linked to more positive student outcomes in school. Kohn (1996) points out that, “Children are more likely to be respectful when important adults in their lives respect them. They are more likely to care about
others if they know they are cared about” (p. 111). These are simple, yet powerful examples of fostering positive relationships between teachers and students in schools that may improve outcomes.

**Promoting student voice and agency.** A goal of this research has been to foreground the voices of students. For decades, the voices of students have often been disregarded as policies are made for, about, but rarely with their perspectives in mind. Low-income students and parent voices are largely missing from the educational discourse and research. As the students and parents in this study indicated, engaging their voices is critical and necessary in order to challenge and critique the dominant power structures that silence them. Educators have a responsibility and are in a powerful position to advocate for students by promoting inclusivity and initiating dialogue to challenge the dominant discourse. Acknowledging that power dynamics and inequalities exist, and being courageous enough to facilitate conversations about discrimination and voicelessness means that we are listening and hearing what is being said about the experiences of others. It is through the listening and hearing that we must then act to bring about changes to positively impact the lives of students. Creating safe, non-judgmental interactional spaces where authentic dialogue of learning and knowing among students and teachers is taking place is critical. While this level of engagement is powerful and empowers advocacy on behalf of students, educators should bear in mind that the way they interact with students often reflects the ways they have come to define their own role and identities as educators. Cummins (1997) aptly states:

> No classroom or school is immune from the influence of the coercive power relations…On a moment-to-moment basis educators, in their interactions with culturally
and linguistically diverse pupils, sketch their ideological stance in relation to issues of diversity, identity and power. (p. 107)

When youth feel they matter, research shows that they are more engaged in their learning and involved with programs or activities and are less likely to display disruptive behaviors and commit delinquent acts. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) suggest that “mattering is a motive: the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension exercises a powerful influence on our actions” (p. 165). Marginality and mattering are polar opposites and, as this study shows, are more than words; they constitute the very real and powerful spectrum on which students fall. The call to action is to work towards bringing those students who are on the margins back into the full fold of participation by demonstrating how adult interactions with youth, indeed, make a difference in shaping their academic identities. Helping students feel they belong and are valued creates connections between students and teachers that allow students to believe in their own personal worth.

**Study Limitations**

This study explored the lived experiences of low-income, low-achieving African-American students. While the students’ experiences are compelling, they only focused on a small sample of low-income African Americans. However, qualitative research findings that are linked to the broader literature on exclusion and discrimination establish theoretical transferability and interpretive generalizability (Denzin, 1989; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Maxwell, 1992). The use of thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) and foregrounding the voices of the participants helps us humanize and adds depth to what statistics and quantitative research
may reveal. Situating the implications of this study in the broader research helps us to better understand how to further influence educational policy and practice research.

This study contains limitations that could be further addressed through additional research. For example, understanding the differences in schooling experiences between low-income and higher-income students may provide a useful comparison to see how students fare when different income levels are examined in relation to schooling experiences in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Additionally, the variations in stories and experiences could be further explored over time, as the participants share their stories about their perspectives at specific points and times in their lives.

Focusing on one racial group also poses limitations for the study, as there is not a comparison point with other ethnic groups who may also be experiencing instances of exclusion in school, particularly along the lines of class and disability. Although the purpose of the study has been to highlight student strengths, it is also the intent of this study to challenge the dominant deficit-based discourse that has produced so many negative intended and unintended consequences for African-American students.

Additional qualitative research is needed to explore the lived experiences of African-American students from various socio-economic backgrounds. Examining the experiences of African-American students who are high-achieving and understanding what strategies promote successful outcomes, would be additional areas to examine relative to building on the strengths of African-American students. Conducting other qualitative studies with students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds could also add another perspective to the research by comparing their schooling experiences. Additionally, several quantitative studies could also be conducted to add to the scholarly discourse by identifying characteristics of successful students in comparison
to students who are struggling academically. A mixed-methods approach using qualitative and quantitative data could also be explored to examine exclusion and its impact on academic achievement.

**Final Words**

The quality of our education will determine the strength of our democracy, the vitality of our economy, and the promise of our ideas. It is through the schools that the nation has chosen to pursue its agenda, and it is there in the classrooms that the battle for America's future will be won or lost…


Creating opportunities and expanding possibilities for *all* of our nation’s youth must be at the forefront of the policy agenda to create systemic change in our education system. This systemic change must happen at the national, state, and local levels—with our children’s rights being the number one priority when decisions are made. Highly experienced teachers and well-resourced schools are factors that can contribute to positive outcomes, but so, too are strategies such as engaging our youth and creating spaces where students play a major role in decision-making processes. The severe costs of zero-tolerance policies must be critically examined in order to evaluate the ways in which so many youth of color have been marginalized and stigmatized. In recent advocacy efforts through the Campaign *Walk with Me*, students and parents rallied against zero tolerance policies in Michigan. They walked 80 miles from Detroit to Lansing, demanding that zero tolerance policies be dismantled. One of the 16-year-old students walking in the protest stated: “We’re walking to show our legislators that our young people care about their education and are willing to walk 80 miles for it to modify zero tolerance and stop trivial suspensions” (Burns, 2014, p. 1). Here we have yet another testament to students who are
speaking out against policies that are threatening their education and futures. The investment of more public resources in educating Black students instead of funneling them through the pipeline to prison is a serious, yet sensible policy implication that must be examined (Harper, 2012; Robbins, 2008).

A failure to address these issues impacting poor students and students of color implicitly gives credence to the myths that in order for minorities to succeed they should assimilate more towards dominant White cultural norms and expectations, at the expense of abandoning their own cultural and linguistic diversity. Rather than a focus on the students themselves, there must be an exploration and critique of the educational system’s shortcomings in effectively engaging all students by altering practices to promote equity and access in schools (Harper, 2009b).

To conclude this dissertation, it is fitting to acknowledge the work of education pioneer and former president of Eastern Michigan University John Porter. He made significant contributions during his tenure as president as he demonstrated how leadership in schools could effect change. In August 1988, in his address at the Ron Edmonds Summer Academy, Porter exclaimed, “Let’s stop talking and let’s start acting” (p. 203).

Our country cannot afford to allow any student to be subjected to collective preconceptions, and latent or overt prejudices regarding who does and does not have the capacity or background to succeed in our schools. We know what the problems are and we know what the solutions are. We know that significant and fundamental changes must be made in the structure of our educational system. We have created these problems; the question is whether or not we have the will to apply the solutions. Over two decades ago, Hornbeck and Salamon (1986) aptly noted that if we create solutions we will succeed, but if we do not, the consequences will be quite significant economically and politically for this country.
This research is personal for me and I earnestly believe our children will be the leaders who will inherit, shape, and impact this world together. I understand the reality and the crisis, but I do not believe that ‘these’ children—the Black and Brown ones—are wrong and I do not think they are doomed to failure. The statistics, the poverty rates, the test scores, the health outcomes are deplorable and for these reasons my heart aches; however it does no good for a heart to ache without raising the awareness and working towards improving the outcomes.

By listening to the voices of marginalized youth, we uncover new knowledge grounded in their life experiences and begin to understand how identities are formed through the intersections of social, cultural, academic and psychological forces (Lipman, 1998; Noguera, 2003). Students are more perceptive than is often assumed. They are keenly insightful when they reflect on what has shaped their schooling experiences and what needs to be done to improve it in order to ensure their success in school and beyond. Throughout this research, I have attempted to challenge school cultures that privilege certain students while marginalizing others. I have sought to challenge the discourses that label students as deficient, and to foreground, instead, their rich histories, culture, and experiences as sources of pride and belonging. It is critical to bring all students into the fold of full participation in order to work toward making youth matter.
References


*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, Opinion; May 17, 1954; Records of the Supreme Court of the United States; Record Group 267; National Archives.


(in)formed views. Childhood, 19(1), 129-144.


Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children, et. al., Plantiffs, versus Ann Arbor School District Board, defendants: Memorandum Opinion and Order. Civil Action No. 7-71861.


Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. NY: Philosophical Library.


Appendix A: Student Profiles

Student Participant Summaries

Nine students are profiled in this study. The sample consisted of five female and four male students in middle and high school. Five of the participants attend schools in urban communities and four attend schools in suburban communities. Of the nine participants, seven are included in the cases found in Chapter 4; however, all of the participants are included in the thematic analyses provided in Chapters 5 and 6. In the following section I provide brief summaries of each of the students.

**Ruth.** Ruth is a sixteen-year-old high school student in the eleventh grade. She is a teenage parent who lived with her mother in a single-headed household until her mother recently remarried. Ruth previously attended a traditional school in a rural area, but due to academic and social barriers she faced in the traditional school in her hometown, her mother made the difficult decision to seek an alternative schooling and living environment. Ruth is currently in a residential treatment facility for teenage parents in a “home-like” cooperative living environment that offers social, emotional, academic, and parenting support. She attends an Alternative School in a suburban community with a diverse student population and is working towards completing General Equivalency Diploma (GED) requirements.

**Esther.** Esther is a seventeen-year-old high school student in the twelfth grade. She previously attended a traditional school, but due to academic, social, and emotional challenges along with a history of disciplinary issues and skipping school, she fell behind academically. As a result of these challenges, Esther made the decision to seek admission in a program that offered on-site parenting and academic support. She is a teenage mother who lives in a single-headed
household with her mother in an urban community, but is currently in a residential treatment facility for teenage parents in a “home-like” cooperative living environment that is supportive and nurturing. She is enrolled in an Alternative School that is located in a suburban community and is working towards GED completion. Esther has a strong support system within her family, which she reports has helped her to get back on track in school.

**Elisabeth.** Elisabeth is an eighteen-year-old student in the eleventh grade. She previously attended a traditional school where she was suspended for fighting, excessive tardiness, and truancy. She reported being very behind academically, which led to the decision to transfer to an alternative education program. She is working towards GED completion in a school located in a suburban community. Elisabeth lives in a single-headed household with her mother and three younger siblings, but has limited family support and appeared to show signs of low self-esteem.

**Sarah.** Sarah is a fourteen-year-old high school student in the ninth grade who attends school in a suburban community. She lives in a single-headed household with her mother. Sarah has struggled academically and missed a lot of school while serving suspensions and skipping classes, which resulted in her falling behind academically. She has served in-school and out-of-school suspensions for fighting and truancy.

**Isaiah.** Isaiah is a thirteen-year-old middle school student in the seventh grade who attends school in an urban community. He lives in a single-headed household with his mother and does not have a relationship with his biological father. He has served in- and out-of-school suspensions for tardiness, insubordination, and being disruptive in class. Isaiah believes school is mostly “boring” and he has struggled academically. He has fallen behind due to missing
school from serving suspensions and general reported feeling that he was not getting the help he needed to succeed.

**Mary.** Mary is a fifteen-year-old high school student in the tenth grade who attends school in an urban community. She lives with her mother in a single-headed household and has struggled academically. She attributed her behavioral issues to her father being incarcerated for most of her life. She shared having mixed emotions from her peers’ perceptions about the school she attended, but in general felt her school was very supportive.

**Mark.** Mark is a sixteen-year-old high school student in the eleventh grade who attends school in an urban community. He lives with his mother and grandmother. He reported that he did not have a consistent relationship with his father. He plays football and shared that he has a supportive caring relationship with his football coach. He mostly believes school is uninteresting and has struggled academically to stay eligible for sports, which is the one thing that has kept him motivated in school. Mark expressed that he really wants to graduate and earn a scholarship to play football in college.

**Luke.** Luke is a fourteen-year-old middle school student in the eighth grade. He lives in a two-parent household with his mother and father. He attends school in an urban community and is struggling academically. He feels very connected to his basketball coach at school and shared how the coach always emphasizes that students need to do well in order to play basketball. He has been suspended for tardiness, insubordination, being disruptive, and loitering in the halls.

**Samuel.** Samuel is a fourteen-year-old middle school student in the eighth grade who attends school in an urban community. He has struggled academically and has missed a lot of school while serving suspensions and skipping classes. He lives with his mother, and he has an
older brother who is in jail. He reported not having a relationship with his biological father who lives in another state.
Appendix B: Demographic Survey

1) Which category best represents your age?
   □ 18-21
   □ 22-35
   □ 26-30
   □ 31-40
   □ 41-50
   □ 51-60
   □ 61 or over

2) What is the highest level of education you have completed
   □ Less than high school
   □ High School/GED
   □ Some College
   □ 2-year college degree
   □ 4-year college degree
   □ Master’s Degree
   □ Doctoral Degree

3) What category best describes your income?
   □ Less than 10,000
   □ 10,000-19,999
   □ 20,000-29,999
   □ 30,000-39,999
   □ 40,000-49,999
   □ 50,000-59,999
   □ More than 60,000

4) What is your current marital status?
   □ Single, Never Married
   □ Married
   □ Separated
   □ Divorced
   □ Widowed

5) What is your household size?
   □ 2
   □ 3
   □ 4
   □ 5+
Appendix C: Tentative Sample Questions

Students

1. Tell me how you feel about your school?

2. Do you feel that you have the help you need from your teachers and staff in school to do well in school? If so, can you give me some examples?

3. Are there times when you felt you did not belong in school or your classroom? If so, do you mind sharing some of those experiences?

4. Can you tell me about a time when felt your teacher or school staff really cared about you? Can you tell me about a time when you did not feel your teacher or school staff did not care about you?

5. Can you tell be about a time when things were going well and a time when things were going badly in school?

6. What are some ways different cultures are celebrated in your school? Are there times when you feel positive or negative about the celebrations?

7. Do you talk differently when you are at home, around your friends, and at school? If so, how would you describe the language you use and why you talk differently?

8. Do you feel that you are ever treated differently based on how you speak at school, home or around friends?

9. Have you ever received any form of discipline in school? If so, do you mind sharing the reason why and how it made you feel to be disciplined in school?

10. What ideas do you have on making sure all students in school feel that they are part of the school and get the help and support they need?
Parents

1. How would you describe your overall experience with your child’s school?

2. Are there times when you felt your child was really supported in the school? Were their times when you felt they were treated unfairly by the school? If so, do you mind sharing?

3. How often do you communicate with the teachers and staff in the school? Are you invited to participate in activities in the school?

4. How are different cultures and backgrounds celebrated and included in classroom and school activities?

5. Do you feel connected to your child’s school? Could you describe a time when you really felt connected? Were there times you did not feel a sense of belonging or connectedness to the school? If so, do you mind sharing?

6. How would you describe the language that you use? Do you believe there is a difference in how you are treated based on how you speak?

7. Do you believe the school works hard at making sure all children feel that they belong? Do you have any recommendations you would like to share on ways schools can ensure families feel connected to the school?
Appendix D: UHSRC Approval

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Education First

May 18, 2013

UHSRC Initial Application Determination: EXPEDITED APPROVAL

To: Ms. Celeste Hawkins
Teacher Education

Re: UHSRC #130413
Approval Date:
Category: Approved Expedited Research Project
May 15, 2013

Title: Exclusion, Marginalization, Language Use and its Impact on Student Achievement among African American Students

The Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee (UHSRC) has completed their review of your project. I am pleased to advise you that your expedited research has been approved in accordance with federal regulations.

Renewals: Expedited protocols need to be renewed annually. If the project is continuing, please submit the Human Subjects Continuation Form prior to the approval expiration. If the project is completed, please submit the Human Subjects Study Completion Form (both forms are found on the UHSRC website).

Revisions: Expedited protocols do require revisions. If changes are made to a protocol, please submit a Human Subjects Minor Modification Form or new Human Subjects Approval Request Form (if major changes) for review (see UHSRC website for forms).

Problems: If issues should arise during the conduct of the research, such as unanticipated problems, adverse events, or any problem that may increase the risk to human subjects and change the category of review, notify the UHSRC office within 24 hours. Any complaints from participants regarding the risk and benefits of the project must be reported to the UHSRC.

Follow-up: If your expedited research project is not completed and closed after three years, the UHSRC office will require a new Human Subjects Approval Request Form prior to approving a continuation beyond three years.

Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-0042 or via e-mail at gs_human_subjects@emich.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jennifer Kellman Fritz
Faculty Chair
University Human Subjects Review Committee
October 12, 2013

To: Ms. Celeste Hawkins
   Teacher Education
Re: UHSRC #131008M (130413)

Category: Approved Modification Expedited Research Project

Approval Date: October 8, 2013

Title: Exclusion, Marginalization, Language Use and its Impact on Student Achievement among African American Students

The Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee (UHSRC) has completed their review of your modification for a previously approved expedited project. I am pleased to advise you that your expedited research modification has been approved in accordance with federal regulations.

Renewals: Expedited protocols need to be renewed annually. If the project is continuing, please submit the Human Subjects Continuation Form prior to the approval expiration. If the project is completed, please submit the Human Subjects Study Completion Form (both forms are found on the UHSRC website).

Revisions: Expedited protocols do require revisions. If changes are made to a protocol, please submit a Human Subjects Minor Modification Form or new Human Subjects Approval Request Form (if major changes) for review (see UHSRC website for forms).

Problems: If issues should arise during the conduct of the research, such as unanticipated problems, adverse events, or any problem that may increase the risk to human subjects and change the category of review, notify the UHSRC office within 24 hours. Any complaints from participants regarding the risk and benefits of the project must be reported to the UHSRC.

Follow-up: If your expedited research project is not completed and closed after three years, 12/12/14, the UHSRC office will require a new Human Subjects Approval Request Form prior to approving a continuation beyond three years.

Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-0042 or via e-mail at gs_human_subjects@emich.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Jennifer K. Fritz

Dr. Jonnifor Kollman Fritz
Faculty Chair
University Human Subjects Review Committee
Appendix E: Consent Forms

Letter of Introduction for Parents/Guardians

Brief Information

I am a doctoral student in the Educational Studies Doctoral Program at Eastern Michigan University. My dissertation is an interview-based qualitative research study in which I explore how exclusion, marginalization, and language use impacts African-American students’ experiences in school and whether they feel included or excluded. One area this research study will specifically explore is how students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Ebonics are made to feel included or excluded in schools based on how they speak.

The study involves one audio-taped interview of approximately one hour in which I will ask you questions about your perceptions of your child’s experiences in school and with your agreement, may request to meet with you for a follow-up interview for further clarification. Participation in the study is completely voluntary and you will be assured of complete confidentiality if you choose to participate.

Benefits of the Project

This dissertation study will provide me with valuable information about students’ perspectives and opportunities to further develop research in the field of education. There are no direct benefits to you; however as a participant this may be an opportunity to reflect on your own perceptions about feeling included or excluded in school as described in the interview process. There are no foreseeable risks to participating in the project.

Dissemination of Results

Findings from the research project will be shared with my dissertation committee at Eastern Michigan University, as part of the requirements in partial fulfillment of my doctorate degree; the study findings will be disseminated in a final dissertation which will be available through the University’s system. In addition, the findings may be shared in publications and conference presentations. Your identity and that of your family, your school, and your community will be protected at all times in any dissemination of findings and complete confidentiality will be ensured.

Please initial which of the options below you choose: whether you would or would not like to learn more and possibly take part in the study.

YES, I would like to learn more about this study ____ (Initials) and I can be contacted at:
__________________________________________(phone #) or mailing address ____________________________________________

NO, I would not like to learn more about this study ____ (Initials)

After initializing your choice, please return this letter to the ________________________________

If you would like to participate in the research study, please read and sign the consent form on the following page
Consent Form for Parents/Guardians

I agree to participate in one or more interviews conducted by Celeste Hawkins as part of a doctoral dissertation study about exclusion, marginalization, and language use and how it may impact African-American students’ experiences in school. One area this research study will specifically explore is how students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Ebonics are made to feel included or excluded in schools based on how they speak. I understand that the interview(s) will last approximately 60 minutes and that the interview(s) will explore perceptions of my child’s schooling experiences and how academic expectations impact achievement. I will be asked questions about my child’s experiences in school and any other issues that I would like to discuss about my views on language usage.

I understand that my participation in the interview(s) is completely voluntary; that I may choose not to answer certain questions, and that I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time with no negative consequences, no penalty, nor loss of benefits. I further understand that my confidentiality will be protected at all times and that a fictitious name will be assigned to me after the interviews are completed, and that any identifying characteristics about me or my family will remain confidential. The tapes and transcriptions will kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home office and in a password protected computer file. I further understand that if I decide at any point after the interview that I do not wish to participate, my tapes and transcripts will be destroyed and no material will be used from the interviews.

I agree to allow these confidential research findings from my interview(s) to be anonymously disseminated with my confidentiality fully protected at all times, in Eastern Michigan University presentations and/or disseminated in future publications, conferences, and professional settings.

If I have any questions concerning my participation in this study now or in the future, I can contact the principal investigator, Celeste Hawkins, at (734) 274-0694 or via e-mail chawkins@emich.edu

Consent to Participate: I have read or had read to me all of the above information about this research study, including the research procedures, possible risks and the likelihood of any benefit to me. The content of this information has been explained and I understand. All of my questions, at this time, have been answered. I hereby consent and voluntarily agree to take part in the study.

Interview Respondent’s Name (print): ____________________________________________

Signature: _____________________________ Date: ______________________________

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Jennifer Kellman-Fritz (734.487.0042), Chair of UHSRC, human.subjects@emich.edu
Letter of Introduction for Students

I am a doctoral student working on my dissertation at Eastern Michigan University and am interested in understanding the views and experiences of students about school and whether you feel included or excluded from school “stuff” and how you feel about yourself as a student and whether you think how you talk is viewed differently by others. This study involves one audio-taped interview of approximately one hour in which I will ask you questions about your perceptions and experiences about school and with your agreement, may request to meet with you for another interviews to ask more questions if needed. Participation in the study is completely your choice and you will be assured of complete confidentiality and privacy (no one will know your real name) if you choose to participate.

Benefits of the Project

This study will provide us with important information about students’ perspectives and opportunities continue research in the field of education. There are no direct benefits to you; however as a participant this may be an opportunity to reflect on your own thoughts about feeling included or excluded in school as described in the interview process. There are no foreseeable risks to participating in the project.

Dissemination of Results (Talking and Writing about the Results)

Findings from the research project will be shared with my dissertation committee at Eastern Michigan University, as part of the requirements in partial fulfillment of my doctorate degree; the study findings will be written in a final dissertation which will be available through the University’s system. In addition, the findings may be shared in publications and conference presentations. Your identity and that of your family and your school and your community will be protected at all times in any sharing of findings and complete confidentiality will be ensured.

YES, I would like to learn more about this study  (Initials) and I can be contacted at: ____________________________________________

(phone #) or mailing address ____________________________________________

NO, I would not like to learn more about this study  (Initials)

After initialing your choice, please return this letter to the ______________________________________

If you would like to participate in the research study, please read and sign the consent form on the following page:
Assent Form for Students

I agree to participate in one or more interviews as part of a research study that will focus on my views and experiences about school and whether I feel included or excluded from school “stuff” and how I feel about myself as a student and whether I think how I talk is viewed differently by others. I understand that the interview(s) will last approximately 60 minutes and that the interview(s) will focus on my views of my experiences in school. I will be asked questions about what I think and how I feel about belonging in school and any other issues that I would like to talk about regarding my school experience.

I understand that my participation in the interview(s) is completely my choice; that I may choose not to answer any questions, and that I may decide not to participate at any time with no negative consequences for me and no penalties. I also understand that my privacy and confidentiality will be protected at all times (no one will know your real name) and that I can choose a fictitious name, and my school will be assigned a fictitious name and that any information about me, my family, my school, and my community will be completely confidential.

The interviewers will be audio-taped typed up in the form of a transcription. The tapes and transcriptions will be assigned a code and kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researchers’ home office and in a password protected computer file. If I decide at any point during or after the interview that I do not wish to participate, my tapes and transcripts will be destroyed and no material will be used from the interviews. I understand that there are no foreseeable risks and there are no direct benefits to me from participating in the project.

I agree to allow these confidential research findings from my interview(s) to be anonymously shared with my confidentiality fully protected at all times in Eastern Michigan University presentations and/or if shared in future publications, conferences, and professional settings.

If I have any questions concerning my participation in this study now or in the future, I can contact the principal investigator, Celeste Hawkins, at (734) 274-0694 or via e-mail chawkins@emich.edu

Consent to Participate: I have read or had read to me all of the above information about this research study, including the research procedures, possible risks and the likelihood of any benefit to me. The content of this information has been explained and I understand. All of my questions, at this time, have been answered. I hereby consent and voluntarily agree to take part in the study.

Interview Respondent’s Name (print): __________________________________________

Signature: __________________________ Date: ________________________

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Jennifer Kellman-Fritz (734.487.0042), Chair of UHSRC, human.subjects@emich.edu
Consent Form for Parents/Guardians of minors

I agree to allow my child______________________________ to participate in one or more audio-taped interviews as part of a research study that will focus on students’ perceptions of marginalization and exclusion. I understand that the interview(s) will last approximately 60 minutes and that the interview(s) will focus on my child’s perceptions and experiences of school.

I understand that participation in the interview(s) is completely voluntary; that he/she may choose not to answer certain questions, and that I may withdraw and discontinue his/her participation at any time with no negative consequences, no penalty, nor loss of benefits to my child. I further understand that his/her confidentiality will be protected at all times and that a fictitious name will be assigned to my child after the interviews are completed, and that any identifying characteristics about him/her or my family or school or community will remain confidential. The tapes and transcriptions will be assigned a code and kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researchers’ home office and in a password protected computer file. I further understand that if my child or I decide at any point during or after the interview that he/she does not wish to participate, the tapes and transcripts will be destroyed and no material will be used from the interviews.

I understand that my child’s privacy will be secured and complete confidentiality will be maintained in any dissemination of the study. I agree to allow these confidential research findings from my child’s interview(s) to be disseminated and that his/her confidentiality will be fully protected at all times, in any Eastern Michigan University presentations, future publications, or conferences. I understand that there are no foreseeable risks and there are no direct benefits to my child from participating in the study.

If I have any questions concerning my child’s participation in this study now or in the future, I can contact the principal investigator, Celeste Hawkins, at (734) 274-0694 or via e-mail chawkins@emich.edu

Consent to Participate: I have read or had read to me all of the above information about this research study, including the research procedures, possible risks and the likelihood of any benefit to me. The content of this information has been explained and I understand. All of my questions, at this time, have been answered. I hereby consent and voluntarily agree to take part in the study.

Parent/Guardian Name: ____________________________________________________

Signature: ________________________________ Date:

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee If you have questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Jennifer Kellman-Fritz (734.487.0042), Chair of UHSRC, human.subjects@emich.edu
Appendix F: Definition of Terms

**African American**: Black, U.S. native-born individual who speaks English as her/his primary language; obtaining primary and secondary education in the United States. The terms African American and Black will be used interchangeably throughout this study.

**African American Vernacular English (AAVE)**: a nonstandard form of American English characteristically spoken by African Americans in the United States.

**Marginalization**: the social process of becoming or being made marginal (especially as a group within the larger society).

**Exclusion**: the process or state of excluding or being excluded. For the purposes of this study, exclusion in the specific form of suspension and expulsion is defined as follows:

…if a student is expelled for a mandatory offense as defined in section 1311(2) of the revised Michigan School code 380.1311, a student is excluded from any school in the state unless he or she is sight-and-sound separated from any other educational program…(Zweifler & Debeers, 2002, p. 201).

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)**: a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

**Critical Race Theory (CRT)**: an academic discipline focused upon the application of critical theory, a critical examination of society and culture, and its relation to the intersection of race, law, and power.
Table 1

*Student Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>H/M*</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>A/T</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>U/S*</th>
<th>G/D</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Discipline*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>A/T</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>S, River</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>A/T</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>S, River</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>U, Valley</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>U, Valley</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisabeth</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>A/T</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>U, Valley</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>S, Mountain</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>U, Prairie</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>U, Prairie</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>U, Prairie</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Female; 4 Male
6 High School; 3 Middle School Students

H =High School Student

M=High School Student

A=Attends an Alternative School

T=Attends a Traditional School

A/T=Has attended both Alternative and Traditional Schools
Disability=Self-report by student/parent indicated that student is receiving Special Education Services in school for a diagnosed disability. An Individualized Education Plan is in place.

U=Attends school in an Urban School District

S=Attends school in a Suburban School District

G=Student is working toward General Equivalency Diploma completion

D=Student is working towards High School Diploma

GPA=Grade Point Average on a 4.0 scale reported at the time of the dissertation study. GPA indicates a student’s GPA at the traditional high school. Students working towards GED completion do not receive grades.

Discipline=number of suspensions served during the 2012-2013 school year.
Table 2

*Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Counts-Fall 2012 District-Level Data: K–12*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Name</th>
<th>Free Lunch Eligible</th>
<th>Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible</th>
<th>Not Eligible</th>
<th>Total Count</th>
<th>FRL Total</th>
<th>FRL %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>River</td>
<td>3,649</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>12,464</td>
<td>16,653</td>
<td>4,189</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valley</td>
<td>1,842</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>2,262</td>
<td>1,882</td>
<td>83.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain</td>
<td>2,533</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>14,979</td>
<td>18,025</td>
<td>3,046</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prairie</td>
<td>1,143</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>1,245</td>
<td>1,180</td>
<td>94.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Kids Count in Michigan Data, Fall 2012*

The school districts of Valley and Prairie indicate that over 80% of students in the district are eligible to receive free and reduced lunch, while River and Mountain districts represent less than 30% of students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Is it clear that low-income students are the minority in River and Mountain district while Valley and Prairie has a majority population of low-income students.
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy applies to the diversity of the student body and describes effective teaching with knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds, whereas Culturally Responsive Pedagogy actually reacts, adjusts, and changes according to the students who are enrolled in the classroom in order to genuinely engage them in the learning (Irvine, 2010). The terms Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy are both used throughout this study.

A three-person family with household income below $19,530 was classified as living below the federal poverty level (FPL) in 2013 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

The way students are prepared in K–12 schooling has a direct impact on how successful they will be in post-secondary schooling, if that is the route they choose to pursue. Alternative Education is a separate program within a K-12 public school district or charter school established to serve and provide youth a choice or option whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting.