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# Taming The Elephant: An Examination Of The Identity, Coping Strategies, And Educational Aspirations Of Two Adolescent African American Males Who Live And Attend School In A Predominantly White Community

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TAMING THE ELEPHANT: AN EXAMINATION OF THE IDENTITY, COPING STRATEGIES, AND EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF TWO ADOLESCENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES WHO LIVE AND ATTEND SCHOOL IN A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE COMMUNITY

A Dissertation Presented

by

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## Abstract

This study is a critical ethnography that examines the relationship between the racial-identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations of two African American males who live (and attend school) in a predominantly White community. The participants reside in a Northeastern state where the African-American population is below 3%. Although they live in different parts of the state, symbols like the Confederate flag were regularly seen inside and outside of both high schools.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the primary interpretive framework used in this study. However, theory from educational psychology and sociology were also included. Through semi-structured interviews, on-site observations, and artifact analysis (e.g. high school transcripts, SAT scores, and samples of creative writing), this research advances the understanding of how being Black in a predominantly White community affected the participants' identity, coping strategies and educational experiences. Similar to how any system functions, the participants' identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations were nested and dependent upon each other. This included a number of balancing and reinforcing feedback loops. Although this study is qualitative and cannot be generalized, the experiences of the participants were similar. The difference was in their coping strategies.

The predominant culture that currently exists in most communities and educational institutions is deeply embedded in racism. This is systemic. It is time *all* institutions move forward and embrace diversity. Similar to the earth's resources, race relations must be sustained if we are to create a prosperous world for future generations.

Key Words: achievement, acting-White, agency, aspirations, identity, racism, resilience, stereotyping and self-efficacy.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

### 1.1 Problem Statement: Taming the Elephant

When people mention there is an *elephant in the room*, most often, it is a reference to some type of significant problem that--for whatever reason--most choose to ignore. In this regard, the Black-White achievement gap in education is certainly an elephant in the room. However, the educational achievement gap is an indicator of a much larger problem. This critical ethnography is focused on a different elephant. The elephant I am concerned with is in *musth*. Ogden (2014) writes male elephants in musth are “surging with aggressive hormones, and [will] kill you if you challenge [them].” This is the elephant I reference--a male in musth--and he is tired of his voice not being heard. Elephants like this are found all over the country. They are in urban communities (like Baltimore, MD--R.I.P. Freddie Gray) as well as in rural communities (like Burlington, VT--R.I.P. Rhynell Lewis). Social conditions in this country are getting to a boiling point and we must figure out ways to tame the elephant. No longer will he be silenced.

This study is the beginning in an open dialogue where I worked to provide a platform for disenfranchised voices. As James Baldwin (1992) wrote in a letter of guidance to his nephew, young Black men are born into a country that intends that they perish. Racism is a phenomenon that shapes the reality of all Americans; it is systemic and institutional. This dissertation research was interested in the coping strategies Black adolescents use as they navigate their way through a system designed to hamper their

inner-strength and sense of self because that is the only way anyone will begin learning how to tame the elephant.

## **1.2 Purpose and Rationale**

This study examined the identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations of African-American adolescent males living and attending secondary school in a predominantly White community. In addition to illuminating how the participant's perceptions of their racial identity affect their educational aspirations, I focused on the correlation between the participants' coping strategies and their educational achievement.

When president Barack Obama launched the Department of Education's Race to the Top (RTT) program in July 2009, "A major premise of the RTT was that piecemeal reform would not help the nation improve student achievement or eliminate achievement gaps between student groups" (Manna & McGuinn, 2013, p. 13). This being the case, another quantitative study regarding Black adolescent achievement looking merely at numbers will do little in furthering research around ways Black students either engage or disengage in the acquisition of their education. It is important to note, I do not equate compulsory schooling with notions of intelligence or as a valid measurement of one's education (and critical consciousness). The average Black child is forced to attend an institution designed to keep them mindless, docile, and 3/5<sup>th</sup> of a human being. In the U.S., "Mandatory education serves children only incidentally; its real purpose is to turn them into servants" (Gatto, 2003, p. 159). Furthermore, African American children are stereotyped as being lazy, ignorant, and incapable of performing as well academically as their White counterparts (B. D. Tatum, 2007). The U.S. education system has a number



of roadblocks put in place to stymie Black students from developing a sense of praxis (which would better their situations). The racially biased curriculums that exist in schools are intentional (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Downey, 2008; Fisher, 2005; Harris, 2006; B. D. Tatum, 1992, 2003, 2007).

### **1.3 Research Goals**

African American students are underachieving because of two reasons: A) most curriculums are racially biased; and B) the majority of teachers expect little if anything from the disenfranchised (Anyon, 1980; Gatto, 2003; MacLeod, 2009; B. D. Tatum, 2007). Far too few educators have the cultural awareness to respond effectively to the educational needs of Black students (Berlak & Moyenda, 2001). America has stigmatized African American youth through stereotypical images of laziness, stupidity and ignorance in the media and through popular culture--as a result, this is often how the typical educator views their Black students. The dehumanization of Black people in society leads to many misconceptions. Unfortunately, most educators still operate as if the notion of intelligence is a fixed entity (B. D. Tatum, 2007). Therefore, these teachers have low expectations and a disinvestment in the education of the African Americans in their classroom.

The goal of this study was to illuminate the participants' coping strategies and the influence these strategies have over their academic performance/achievement. For instance, if one takes what Bourdieu refers to as an "anti-intellectual" stance toward education, from which an oppositional identity occurs, they will not succeed academically. That individual does not view school as a vessel of social mobility; instead

they equate schooling more with ideas of immobility. More often than not, those governing the classroom--the average teacher--lack a critical-consciousness and are not interested in the enlightenment of their students (hooks, 1994; B. D. Tatum, 2000). Unfortunately, this type of teacher does not approach education as a practice of Freedom. Many school districts use a one-size-fits-all approach when developing curriculum (Walls, 2014). Due to a lack of cultural responsiveness and self-actualization, the average American educator stereotypes the already marginalized students in the classroom. For example, Blacks are typically thought to be inherently lazy, ignorant and deceitful. All Americans--not just those governing the classroom--are bombarded with images in media and popular culture where Blacks are depicted as animal-like deviants.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations of African-American adolescent males living and attending secondary school in a predominantly White community. In addition to illuminating how the participant's perceptions of their racial identity affect their educational aspirations, this research shows a correlation between the participants' racial identity, coping strategies and their educational achievement.

While the number of different coping strategies is many, the Centre for Studies on Human Stress (CSHS) describes coping strategies as being in two different categories--problem-focused strategies and emotion-focused strategies (Coping Strategies, n.d.. Retrieved June 4, 2015, from <http://www.humanstress.ca/stress/trick-your-stress/steps-to-instant-stress-management.html>). Some examples of problem-based coping strategies

include: individuals analyzing a situation, working harder to improve a situation, and applying learned knowledge or speaking to someone who directly affects the situation. Brooding, fantasizing/imagining a different reality, seeking social support, blaming others and/or choosing to avoid/deny the situation are examples of emotion-focused strategies.

This study was based on illuminating the following research questions:

1. What is the participant's sense of their racial identity?
2. What coping skills/strategies does the participant utilize to combat stress correlated with being Black in a predominantly White institution?
3. How do these coping skills/strategies affect the participants' educational aspirations and achievement?

### **1.5 Potential Significance of the Study**

As Bridges (2011) stated, "there is limited research that examines coping strategies used by African American males" (p. 155). Similarly, Seaton (2014) wrote, "Although sparse, there is a growing literature examining coping strategies and racial identity as mediators and moderators for perceptions of racial discrimination among Black youth" (p. 883). A number of studies illuminated ways the institution of school alienates Black males but the majority of these studies (Allen, 2010; Foley, 2004; MacLeod, 2009; Noguera, 2003; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Seaton, Upton, Gilbert, & Volpe, 2014; Seaton & Yip, 2009) do not focus on how the participants deal with the stress inherently caused from attending a racially biased school. Furthermore, the participants in most of the studies focused on the coping strategies of African American

males living in homogenous urban communities (Chandra & Batada, 2006). Other studies interested in the coping strategies of African American males in predominantly White institutions consisted of college-level participants (Bridges, 2011; Hayworth, 2014).

Bridges' (2011) study examined the impact being Black had on the development of psychologically healthy coping strategies among African American males at a predominantly White university in the southeastern United States. He concluded by stressing Black males "need and seek greater self-awareness, self-understanding and appreciation" (p. 164). He also noted the relationship participants in his study had "with other African American males, African American women and their families allowed them to cope with being a small minority at a major White university" (p. 164). His findings were insightful but the coping strategies utilized by the participants, when they were in secondary school, were not mentioned--let alone examined. The relationship between racial discrimination, racial identity and coping strategies are complex. Seaton, Upton, Gilbert, and Volpe (2014) found that "Black youth mainly utilize avoidant coping strategies, which are negatively linked to mental health" (p. 888).

Furthering the research conducted in the aforementioned studies, this dissertation research examined ways the participants construct racial identity, how that sense of identity affects their educational aspirations, as well as ways they cope with being Black in a predominantly White institution (that is designed for the majority of its students wherein the participants are a minority). The results from data collected in this study have the potential to impact policy, practice and curriculum. Hiring a different school superintendent, principal and or teacher is not going to address the problem of racially

biased curriculums and the ways students of color cope. A paradigm shift is needed and studies like this will assist in beginning that transition. The education system does not need to evolve; it is time for a revolution.

## **Chapter II: Review of Literature**

The following review of literature is separated into five subsections. The first focuses on identity theory. The next section explores notions of self-efficacy. The third section centers on the learning, culture and context of schooling in the U.S. (also examining the educational gap and academic disengagement), while the second to last section is concerned with social theory. The concluding section of the literature review discusses similar research.

### **2.1 Identity Theory**

Often times, Black kids equate being educated with being white. Referencing the field work of John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham, Tatum (2003) explains that “Certain styles of speech, dress, and music, for example, may be embraced as ‘authentically Black’ and become highly valued, while attitudes and behaviors associated with Whites are viewed with disdain” (p. 61). She continues to write, “During the encounter phase of racial identity development, when the search for identity leads toward cultural stereotypes and away from anything that might be associated with Whiteness, academic performance often declines” (Tatum, 2003, p. 62). One way to combat this oppositional culture would be to take more of a constructivist approach to education and start flipping classrooms as a means of better promoting academic aspirations and attainment. Post-modern approaches to developing curriculums seem more inviting to students of color.

Black children are “invisible (simply omitted from discussion) or represented in ways that are based on negative stereotypes” (B. D. Tatum, 1992, p. 331). Research suggests, while the concept of “acting white” may not be universal, “it can be an

influential force in African American peer groups” (B. D. Tatum, 1992, p. 332.). Unlike Ogbu, Tatum does not place blame on the victims. She recognizes the development of oppositional identity as being an adaptive response to one’s environment. Tatum urges educators to begin understanding the role environmental factors (such as Black role models) play in the identity development/shifts of Black youth.

On the contrary, brooding, *Uncle Tomming*, and/or rather “acting white,” is the “secondary” culture that Ogbu claims stems from “street culture” and hip-hop. Ogbu does not take into consideration the fact that popular music is being used as a means of social reproduction. As Dead Prez (2003) says, “We don’t own no boats/we don’t own no planes to bring no dope/we don’t make no cellophane baggies to bag it up/we just caught up in the game/don’t you know (it’s bigger than this shit)?” Although they do not mention the stratification theory, rap artists like Dead Prez do address issues like social justice and institutionalized racism. What critics like Ogbu neglect to recognize is that some hip-hop artists (such as those like Black Star, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, The Roots, Common, Little Brother, Diamond District, Killer Mike, Jon Conner, R.E.K.S., Jay Electronica and Kendrick Lamar, to name just a few) write music with positive messages that empower and uplift Black youth.

McWhorter (2010) argues that the Black achievement gap is a result of anti-intellectualism. Like, Ogbu, he too suggests Blacks equating the notion of school with being White, therefore reject such. He claims that Blacks’ poor academic performance is not due to racism, inadequate funding, class status or the level of education a child’s parents may have. McWhorter is insulted by how he claims Blacks are “underestimated.” McWhorter suggests educators’ interests must lie in shedding the “shackles of anti-

intellectualism” (p. x) if we are ever to close the achievement gap. He feels “secondary schools should urge black children to form study groups,” (p. x) and that “Minority students should also be given standardized tests on a regular basis in school” (p. 92). Furthermore, McWhorter opposes affirmative action because it obstructs Blacks “from showing that they are as capable as other people” (p. 92).

## **2.2 Self-Efficacy**

Fisher (2005) examines differences in self-concept, academic behavior and self-reported personal experiences between Black students, who are high-achieving, and those who are low achieving. Fisher critiques Ogbu’s oppositional culture theory by stating it relies too heavily on historical contexts. Ogbu neglects to take into consideration the effect “current relationships in the school between Black students and teachers; the impact peers and family have on student achievement; student self-concept; and socioeconomic issues” (p. 208). While Fisher has a number of relevant theoretical claims, this study is limited in terms of generalizability due to the ethnic split among Blacks in this research. It is also unclear what factors have contributed to the achievement of these students. Fisher suggests further research be done that focuses on teacher perception and treatment of native born Black students in comparison to Black immigrants. A shortcoming of Ogbu’s Ecological Culture (EC) theory does not consider environmental factors as contributing to the achievement gap. While Africans and African Americans may be considered *Black*, the latter have spawned from the *peculiar* institution of slavery.

Downey, Ainsworth and Quinn (2009) claim Blacks ultimately have positive attitudes toward school. However, due to low achievement scores, the authors explore the idea of Blacks’ pro-school attitudes as lacking credibility. Other explanations view these



pro-school attitudes with more credibility. Other studies conclude that while these pro-school attitudes may be sincere, Black students' educational aspirations and attainment are ultimately hampered by other factors (such as socio-economic, family structure and neighborhood resources) (Andrews, 2014; Harris, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995; MacLeod, 2009; A. W. Tatum, 2006; B. D. Tatum, 1992, 2003). Most notably, this research challenges ideas that Blacks' "pro-school attitudes often do predict, and attitude-achievement associations for Blacks are largely similar to those of other minority groups" (p. 15).

An individual's concept of self-efficacy is closely related to their aspirations in life. Easterlin (1976) writes how behavior is influenced by the interplay of a person's aspirations and the resources that allow them access to these aspirations. For example, I currently live in St. Albans, VT--I worked at the junior high school I used to attend almost twenty years prior. Not many people make it out of the neighborhood. Kids aspire to what they feel they have the chance of becoming. The (current-day) typical resident in my neighborhood does not strive for much more than a blue-collar profession. Getting a "city job" is as good as it gets for most folks around my way--city jobs have good benefits, keep the lights on and food on your table.

Another--more poignant--example is how I never thought of myself as capable of pursuing a doctoral degree because (until college [thankfully, I made it]) society kept telling me, "school is not for niggers like you; you are not smart enough." Once in college, a major coping strategy of mine was problem focused. I worked harder while analyzing the situations I was constantly faced with. My response was to start boxing--in the gym three times a day--my goal was to get bigger, faster, and stronger. I did too.

Except, my brain has always been my most developed muscle. If I was going to meet the man, then I had to be prepared for war both physically and mentally. I learned from Brother Malcolm it is best for one to fight their oppressor with their mental, rather than brute, strength (X, Haley, & Shabazz, 1992).

Social cognitive theory recognizes a student's learning environment as being a determinant of their self-efficacy. However, Bandura argues that the influence of the learning environment on self-efficacy is relative--classroom level variables function as complex contextual factors (Joët, Usher, & Bressoux, 2011). In addition to a child's learning environment, one must also take into account the child's experiences at home and in their communities. Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) propose, "students who perceive themselves as capable of regulating their own activities strategically are more confident about mastering academic subjects and attain higher academic performance" (p. 674). Therefore, when a Black child is forced to go to a school that does not have his best interests in mind, most likely the child will not feel confident about mastering his studies because he is not capable of regulating his own activities strategically. In other words, these children are not taught how to regulate; instead, they learn how to be regulated.

While useful, Ogbu's EC theory completely avoids classic stratification theory briefly mentioned earlier. As Foley (2004) writes, "The other major limitation in Ogbu's theory was how he conceptualized ethnicity or ethnic culture" (p. 386). Ogbu speaks of "secondary cultural practices" that he claims stem from "street" and hip-hop culture. He views such as being unproductive and damaging to the progression of involuntary minorities. Foley (2003) acknowledges the significance of Ogbu's contributions but notes

how contemporary scholars have shifted from finding a grand theory of academic disengagement to the best practices that will lead to the academic success of Black students.

Still, while a few educators devote their time and research to practices that will lead to the academic success of Black students, many of the policies governing school do not. Americans live in a capitalist society where “schools train the wealthy to take up place at the top of the economy while conditioning the poor to accept their lowly status...in short, the social relations of school reflect those of the capitalist mode of production” (MacLeod, 2009, p. 12). An individual sense of self, aspirations and identifications to both race and class, are tailored by the U.S. education system (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). By an early age, children of all races are told through a number of mediums (e.g. school, home and the media) what exactly they should aspire to.

### **2.3 Learning, Culture and Context**

The Declaration of Independence states, “All men are created equal.” The Founding Fathers, who signed this document, did not extend Blacks the same rights. Thomas Jefferson owned slaves. Typically, slave owners viewed Blacks as being only 3/5ths human. They were considered property. It was illegal for Blacks to read and write. As Douglass (2003) writes, educating a slave “was unlawful...unsafe, and could only lead to mischief...learning would spoil the best nigger in the world...it would forever unfit him for duties of a slave” (p. 81). African Americans have been liberated from the peculiar institution of slavery for over one hundred and fifty years and it is no longer illegal to read and write. However a number of indicators suggest the U.S. education system is racially biased and designed for Black children to fail (Anyon, 1980; Cook &

Ludwig, 1997; hooks, 1994; Kozol, 2012; Leary, 2005; MacLeod, 2009; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Seaton, Upton, Gilbert, & Volpe, 2014; B. D. Tatum, 1992, 2007; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). The shackles have been cast off but very few schools provide Black children with an education/skill-set to think reflexively and resist social injustice (Freire & Macedo, 2000).

There is a substantial amount of empirical evidence--by John Obbu and Herbert Simons (1998), Signithia Fordham (2004), Angel Harris (2006), Beverly Tatum (2007), Alfred Tatum (2013), Keith Gilyard (1994), Donald McCrary (2005), Kevin Monroe (2004)--substantiating the effects of oppositional culture theory, which directly correlates with the Black achievement gap. Referring to the Dead Prez song *They Schools* (2000):

“Schools ain’t teachin’ us nothin’/They ain’t teachin’ us nothin’ but how to be slaves and hard workers/For white people to build up they shit/Make they businesses successful, while it’s exploitin’ us/Knowhwati’msayin? & they ain’t teachin’ us nothin’ related to solvin’ our own problems, knowhati’msayin’/? Ain’t teachin’ us how to get crack out the ghetto/Ain’t teachin’ us how to stop the police from murdering us. & brutalizing us/They ain’t teaching us how to get our rent paid, knowhati’msayin’/?/They ain’t teachin’ our families how to interact better with each other...they just teachin’ us how to build they shit up, knowhati’msaying’/?/That’s why my niggas got a problem with this shit/That’s why nigga be droppin’ out that shit cuz it don’t relate...school don’t relate to us...until we have some shit where we control the fuckin’ school system/Where we reflect how we goin solve our own problems/Them niggas ain’t gon’ relate to school, that just how it is/Knowhati’msayin? I love education but if education

ain't elevatin' me & takin' me where I need to be then fuck education/at least *they* shit.

These lyrics reflect much of what Jean Anyon (1980) wrote about in *Social Class and Hidden Curriculum of Work*. School is not empowering to the majority of African-American youth who live in lower to working class neighborhoods. They are taught how to take orders rather than how to become leaders with the ability to problem solve. Black people are being exploited instead of taught how to combat racism, rid the community of drugs and/or stop police brutality. These rap artists are not against education but the current structure of (as well as the purpose behind) compulsory schooling. Again, education should be the practice of freedom.

For students to achieve their absolute best and become productive members of their communities, it is important for their teachers to be setting clear and high expectations. It has been proven that often children perform to their expected level of success. In other words, when teachers set the bar low, their students are much less likely to succeed in school. They are expected to fail, and sadly--as a result--many do.

**a. The education gap.** In 1963, James Baldwin wrote to his nephew, "Never believe that you're what the white world calls a nigger." Fifty years later, black children continue having to combat this notion as institutions like school constantly reiterate ignorance is hereditary and that they are in fact *niggers*, who will never achieve the same as their White counterparts. Although the United States has a black president, our country is far from being a post-racial nation. The American dream is a myth. Meritocracy is a lie. All one needs to do is to examine the way most institutions--and social systems--are structured and/or function (i.e. institutionalized racism). This is especially true for the

institution of schooling. As MacLeod (2009) wrote,

In short, the social relations of the school reflect those of the capitalist mode of production; through its institutional relationships, the system of education in the United States tailors the self-concepts, aspirations, and the social class identifications of individuals to the requirements of the social division of labor.  
(p. 12)

The substantial gap in the educational achievement of black students is because schools have been structured in ways that promote white supremacy. Similar to the vast majority of the existing social systems in our country, public schools are full of invisible barriers that the majority of teachers rarely ever address or take into consideration when developing their curricula (Banks, 1996; Delpit, 1998; Howard, 2006). Regardless of whether or not the Obamas are currently residing in the White House, race still needs to be a central part of the discussion if this country is to ever move forward. In 1966, the U.S. Department of Education published *Equality of Educational Opportunity* including the results from a survey ordered by the commissioner of education two years earlier (Murnane et al., 2006). As Murnane et al. (2006) stated, “to the surprise of many educators and civil right activists, the report found no clear-cut pattern showing that white children attended schools with substantially more of the school resources measured in the survey than did black children” (p. 98). Anyon’s (1980) study on the hidden curriculum of schooling further echoes this sentiment. She stated, “While it is no secret the schools in wealthy communities are far better than those in poor communities, it was shocking to find the vast differences in schools vary more so in teaching methods and philosophies of education than they do in resources” (p. 67).

Barton and Coley (2010) generally define the Black achievement gap as being “the substantial gap between the educational achievement of the White and Black population in our nation” (p. 3). Regardless of an African-American child’s socio-economic status or geographic location, the black achievement gap in the U.S. remains a significant problem. Harris (2006) wrote, “by the age of seventeen, the average black student is four years behind the average white student; black 12<sup>th</sup> graders score lower than white 8<sup>th</sup> graders in reading, math, U.S. history and geography” (p. 977).

**b. Academic disengagement.** Due to systematic exclusions from school, a number of black kids begin equating the notion of being educated with being white and begin to develop an oppositional stance regarding school (B. D. Tatum, 2003). McWhorter (2000) agrees with the notion of anti-intellectualism--or rather the development of oppositional culture--as being a significant factor in the academic disengagement of Blacks. However, the difference between Ogbu’s (1998) theory and McWhorter’s claims are that McWhorter (2000) suggested, “The chief cause is not racism, inadequate school funding, parental education level, or any other commonly cited factor, but a variety of anti-intellectualism that plagues the black community” (p. 74).

Although Ogbu’s theory of academic disengagement has been “generally abandoned [by]...The new wave of American ethnic scholars” his work discerning the Black achievement gap certainly holds “more than a grain of truth” (Foley, 2004, p. 394). Ogbu’s theory stated, “students’ academic success is impacted by community forces and system forces, and that not enough attention has been paid to the ways in which community forces contribute to...student failure” (Foster, 2004, p. 370). The fourth layer, which describes African Americans as having to develop survival strategies like “Uncle

Tomming” and “the emulation of whites” (Foster, 2004), is fitting when considering McWhorter’s arguments.

McWhorter does not write about anti-intellectualism in the same regards as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1992), himself, claimed to be anti-intellectual because of the disdain he had of academics that theorized about the greater world but rarely left academia. This can be seen in a number of education programs across the nation. Some professors instructing our future teachers of America theorize about classrooms they are rarely in with students they have never associated with. As a supervisor of student teaching interns in a secondary-leveled education program, many of the interns often mention how the textbooks they read--and work they do in class rarely--is not anything like their real life experiences. This disconnection from reality is why Bourdieu had a problem with the type of academic who collected their data solely from textbooks and peer reviewed journal articles; rather than incorporating all they read with their lived experiences. McWhorter’s definition of anti-intellectualism is centered on ignorance (opposed to a deeply seeded suspicion of those who have not experienced what they are theorizing about). Whereas McWhorter views anti-intellectualism as being somewhat of an inborn attribute, Bourdieu views it as a reflexive tool that allows one to step out of academia’s socially constructed paradigm.

**c. Language differences.** Black youth are often stereotypes because of the expectations associated with their *language*. In addition to the way these kids speak (/a dialect), their hairstyle, clothes, shoes, mannerisms, ways in which they may even walk, cause the average Black adolescent to be *othered* by society’s gatekeepers. These gatekeepers associate the children they see with the stereotypical images of the Black



people they see in popular culture and in the media. Although a distorted version of such is glamorized in popular music videos, movies, in TV shows and on the radio, the Black vernacular is shunned for the most part in academia--most academics are not allowed to even use contractions. Black students need to learn how to speak, and write, *White*--or rather, in Standard English--if they are to succeed academically.

The National Center for Education shows that 83.5% of teachers in the U.S. are White (Percentage distribution of school teachers, by race/ethnicity, school type, and selected school characteristics: 2007–08. (n.d.). Retrieved February 28, 2016, from [https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009324/tables/sass0708\\_2009324\\_t12n\\_02.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009324/tables/sass0708_2009324_t12n_02.asp)). The majority of these educators who work in predominantly Black communities, lack an emotional as well as an intellectual understanding of how racism functions (Berlak & Moyenda, 2001). The typical White teacher does not share the same beliefs, values and dispositions as their Black students. Their habitus tends to greatly differ. Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to explain individuals' "deeply internalized dispositions, schemas, and forms of know-how and competence, both mental and corporeal, first acquired by the individual through early childhood socialization" (Swartz, 2002 p. 625). This is not to say educators do not value Black students, but it is clear that the system in its entirety does not. Standardized testing clearly views the black vernacular as a language of an inarticulate and uneducated lot of animals that are only 3/5<sup>th</sup> human. On the contrary, McCrary (2005) writes,

Black English is intelligible and intelligent, and just because somebody tells you different, don't necessarily make it so. And that's what I want the academy to

understand. My students don't speak no broken English. They speak a legitimate dialect that conveys legitimate meanings (p. 73).

Echoing McCrary's sentiment, in the famous New York Times' article *If Black English Isn't A Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?* Baldwin (1979) describes how, "People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate" (p. x). Black children growing up in America are not able to fully articulate their experiences through Standard English when speaking or through text. Things *don't* translate the same...*Nah mean?*

It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identify: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have been, and are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal. (Baldwin, 1979, p. x)

Black students who speak Black English are eventually faced with having to battle a war waged against their native tongue. This death of one's native tongue stems from what Gilyard (1996) describes as genopsycholinguisticide ("genocide from a psycholinguistic perspective" p. 31). Similarly, while most students' are allowed to dress and wear their hair as they like, Monroe (2004) also notes how black students are not permitted the use of Black English in the academy. Gilyard (1996), Monroe (2004) and McCrary (2005) all describe having to conform and write in Standard English as being a form of mass-murdering the Black vernacular. If Black kids are not allowed to speak the same language in school as they do at home, then naturally, those who do not speak Standard English are at a disadvantage.

## 2.4 Social Theory

Like many psychologists of his time, Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) work was influenced by cognitivism and relates to what Albert Bandura (1976) writes regarding social learning theory. Both men hold the notion of human agency as being vital to human development. A primary focus of Bourdieu's work is on habitus--which "can be understood as the values and dispositions gained from our cultural history that generally stay with us across contexts" (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002, p. 36). While Bandura does not ever use the word habitus, much of his studies dedicated to agency (and the acquisition of such) relate closely to Bourdieu's notion of habitus.

Bandura's social learning theory suggests "modeling as a pervasive and powerful process governing cognitive, affective, and behavioral forms of learning" (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003, p. 435). This idea of observational learning Bandura refers to is similar to what Bourdieu describes as being habitus--"the partly unconscious 'taking in' of rules, values and dispositions" (Webb et al., 2002, p. 44). Therefore, notions of agency and self-efficacy are embedded in one's habitus. People's rules, values and dispositions affect their aspirations. When the country one is born into--along with one's country men--does not value that individual, often times, that individual learns not to value themselves because it is what is modeled to them. They do not strive for the American Dream because they understand that dream is inaccessible to them--this has long been engrained into their habitus.

Similarly, the social reproduction theory is embedded in Vygotsky's positioning "that 'teaching/learning' occurs long before the child goes to school" (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003, p. 212). While much of Vygotsky's work focuses on the role of language

in human learning, MacLeod (2009) points out how “black working-class children are not socialized to cope with the language patterns used in school and quickly fall into a pattern of academic failure” (p. 19). Often times black children grow up learning/being taught about the world in a different language than is accepted by the main stream and at school. As McCrary (2005) writes, “In the academy, students are told, in a variety of ways, to leave their native language at the door and embrace, instead, standard English” (p. 72). The problem with this is that their native language plays a central role in their emotional and cognitive development. Their language helps them to make sense of the world and when such is not valued, it really puts these kids at an extreme disadvantage by the time they are of school age.

By the time many African American kids enter school they are already at a disadvantage because of the fact they speak a different *language*. They are taught early on that if we do not master their standardized English and score high on their standardized test that we will be perceived as less than. Moreover, if we do speak standardized English, and score high on their tests, our peers begin looking at us like *they out in the field while we up in the big house with massa*. As Beverly Tatum (2007) asserts, “The concept of intelligence as an inborn attribute that determines one's capacity to learn is an idea firmly embedded in our society and our educational system” (p. 3). We have Darwinians (like Charles' cousin) Francis Galton to thank for the idea that “talent [is] more of a result of genetics than environment” (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003, p. 23). Such eugenicists truly believe an individual's eminence stemmed from “their intelligence, zeal, and the ability to engage in hard work” (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003, p. 23). There is no doubt that men like the eugenicist Henry Goddard--an advocate for the

segregation of “mentally retarded” people--felt as if black people were genetically inferior. The eugenics movement cemented the foundation of many stereotypes surrounding black people and their/our lack of intelligence.

Tatum’s research does an exemplary job using psychology as a framework for analyzing problems in education. Tatum (2007) mentions how Goddard describes the notion of intelligence as being a fixed entity. He states the ability to learn is an inborn attribute and labels those who score low on general IQ tests as “feeble-minded.” Piaget (1997), on the other hand, views intelligence as an on-going process that gets more complex over time as an individual learns more. Tatum explains how stereotypical images of black people (being lazy, stupid, and unintelligent) in popular culture and the media have detrimental effects. As a result, many teachers view their students as being feeble-minded; therefore, they have low expectations and disinvest in their students’ education. Tatum stresses the fact that intelligence is malleable and that intellectual capacity is not fixed but expandable through effort. She also notes the importance of teachers’ expectations (the Pygmalion effect). *Think you can, work hard, get smart.*

## **2.5 Similar Research**

There is research focused on the coping strategies of African American males (Allen, 2010; Bridges, 2011; Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Stevenson, 2003; A. W. Tatum, 2006). However, there is very little, if any, research concerning the identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations of African American adolescent males who live and attend school in predominantly White communities. The participants in other studies have been adolescent African American males living in urban communities or African American males attending predominantly White colleges.

Regardless of which educational institution a Black adolescent male is enrolled in, “to be successful...[he] must be able to see [himself] as academically and socially competent, an almost impossible feat in schools that reflect and reinforce societal perceptions of Black male deviance, deficiency, and criminality” (Coleman, 2005, p. 1).

Bridges’ (2011) study shows Black male undergraduate and graduate students often feel stereotyped as “athletically gifted, but intellectually lazy” (p. 160). Bridges (2011) also discussed with participants how they handle stressful situations that are race-related--“The participants were asked to describe a stressful experience, the participants also shared how the stressful situation developed and how they coped” (p. 160). The participants in his study used a number of coping strategies to deal with the stressors of everyday racism. Bridges (2011) states, “One of the most common coping strategies was distancing themselves from Whites, physically or psychologically” (p. 162).

A child’s performance is influenced by the amount of social and cultural capital they possess. Allen (2010) wrote how Bourdieu (1977) was the first to theorize about social capital describing it as, “how individuals of families accrue benefits by means of social networks. Through such networks, parents are able to provide more favorable opportunities for their children, particularly in schools” (p. 127). The phenomenon of acting White is a form of both social and cultural capital. Researchers suggest (Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Foley, 2004; Harris, 2006; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; B. D. Tatum, 2000, 2003, 2007; Tyson et al., 2005) acting White is a means of achieving in schools, yet few studies have focused on the phenomenon itself.

Acting White is also a form of cultural capital. Cultural fields are a “series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles

which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorize certain discourses and activities” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 22). The amount of power one has in relation to a particular field correlates to their cultural capital. Lamont and Lareau (1988) define cultural capital as being “widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (p. 156).

Similar to the idea of acting White, another form of cultural capital is a Black student’s ability to code-switch. The ability to do so is not an easy feat. Young (2009) wrote:

Code switching may be defined as the use of more than one language or language variety concurrently in conversation...Code switching is a strategy whereby black students are taught contrastive analysis--This a method comparing black English to standard English so that they can learn to switch from one to the other in different settings p. 52).

Schools reflect the habitus of the White middle class (Andrews, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Black students have no choice but to acquire the dominant group social and cultural capital if they are to succeed in school--a reflection of larger society.

Furthermore, as Andrews (2014) notes:

To some extent code-switching cedes that the dominant cultural capital of the school is legitimate, or at least it does not challenge the dominance of a particular habitus. By accepting that there are arenas where people have to behave, talk, and dress differently, some Black students are still put at a disadvantage because success in schools requires extra skills other than those who are at home in the

dominant culture sphere. This creates a two-ness reminiscent of Du Bois' double consciousness, an image of the Black student and citizen being pulled in competing directions by virtue of their Blackness. (p. 8)

This study focused on themes of identity, self-efficacy and social theory. Furthermore, it examined the learning, culture and context in which the participants went to school. A goal of this dissertation was to address a gap in the literature and illuminate the intersectional identities of adolescent African American males who live and attend school in predominantly White communities. It also serves as a lens into the participants' sense of human agency and what motivates them to learn. These are important factors for an educator to consider when developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of ALL learners.



## Chapter III: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations of African-American adolescent males living and attending secondary school in a predominantly White community. In addition to illuminating how the participant's perceptions of their racial identity affect their educational aspirations, I am particularly interested in the correlation between the participants' coping strategies and their educational achievement.

This study was based on illuminating the following research questions:

1. What is the participant's sense of their racial identity?
2. What coping skills/strategies does the participant utilize to combat stress correlated with being Black in a predominantly White institution?
3. How do these coping skills/strategies affect the participants' educational aspirations and achievement?

The following chapter discusses the research methodology and the rationale behind it. It also examines the study's goals, conceptual framework, research site and participants, methods of data collection, validity, and the researcher's subjectivity.

### 3.2 Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research focuses more on paradigmatic themes than on constants, parameters, and numbers. As Meadows (1997) suggested, the point of leverage with the most power (in a social system) is the *power to transcend paradigms*. I frame this study

as a critical ethnography because there is no positivist approach to answering the questions I aim to illuminate--the answers are not in numbers, they are in the stories behind the number (Thomas, 1993). Yes, it is fact that the average Black student does not achieve as much as their White counterpart academically. However, shedding light on one indicator--of a much larger problem--does little in distinguishing its fire.

Another note of importance is qualitative research acknowledges social constructs and the ways these constructs influence, or rather, shape the participants' experiences. To best answer the research question I aimed to illuminate, it is important to establish a trustful relationship with the participants. I was interested in the way they perceive their realities and only the participants themselves could give me that insight. It was important the participants viewed me as someone who was authentic and that they could trust. This helped to further ensure the validity of the data.

Framing this dissertation research as a critical ethnography allowed for "a direct style of thinking about the relationships among people, society and political action. The central premise is that one can be both scientific and critical, and that ethnographic description offers a powerful means of critiquing culture and the role of the researcher in it" (Thomas, 1993, p. vii). Ethnography began in comparative cultural anthropology during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by anthropologists such as Boas, Malinowski, Radcliff-Brown and Mead (Creswell, 2013). Ethnographies did not appear in the field of education until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Anderson (1989) wrote, "The work of Cusick (1973), Henry (1963), Jackson (1968), Ogbu (1974), Rist (1973), Smith and Geoffrey (1968) Smith and Keith (1971) Wolcott (1973), and others provided examples of the genre that later educational ethnographers would emulate" (p. 250). Framing this study as

a critical ethnography allowed me to focus on developing a complex, complete description of the participants' high school experiences by centering on the exploration of their beliefs, language, behaviors, and issues they face such as power, resistance and dominance (Creswell, 2013).

Another valuable asset of critical ethnology is it acknowledges positionality and subjectivity. As the primary researcher in the study, it was important to examine the embedded norms, values and morals in predominantly White schools (their positionality) and how these factors affect the participants' experiences. Mainstream research has done little in closing the Black-White achievement gap in education because researchers tend to disengage themselves from the participants of their studies. I regard myself as "a fellow citizen" in this study as I worked in collaboration with the participants rather than studying them from afar (Carspecken, 2015). Culture needs to be articulated from an insider's perspective. It cannot be objectified.

Critical ethnography is also an effective methodological vehicle for advancing theories rooted in Marxism. Carspecken (2015) wrote--since the 1980's--the majority of critical ethnographies that have been published focus on "the double-nature of social institutions like education--their role in both advancing system inequalities and producing future citizens capable of changing things significantly" (p. 23). He continued by stating, "Schools still display many of the tendencies critiqued during the 1970's, educating pupils through their hidden curriculums to become consumers and workers needed by the system" (p. 23). As Anyon's (1980) study suggested, "the hidden curriculum is tacit preparation for relating to the process of production in a particular way" (p. 90).

I have previously written school is not designed for Black students (Anderson, 1989; Foley, 2004; A. W. Tatum, 2006; B. D. Tatum, 1992, 2007; Thomas, 1993). There is a hidden curriculum. Very rarely does compulsory schooling relate to the idea of education as the practice of freedom for Black children. Rather school prepares American youth for their future roles in society. Choosing critical ethnography as a methodological approach allowed access to explore theories of cultural production and resistance. It also puts an emphasis on human agency or praxis (Anderson, 1989).

This critical ethnography was a participant observation based study; I immersed myself into the daily lives of the participants (culture-sharing group). In addition to observing the participants in their respective schools, I met with each participant for several semi-structured, in-depth interviews. I also collected artifacts (e.g. high school transcripts, SAT scores, and samples of creative writing, as well as music). These data were collected for an interpretation of shared and learned patterns of values, beliefs, and language. Using an ethnographic approach enabled the most effective analysis of the participants' values around education, what they believe they are capable of achieving academically (as well as where those beliefs stem from), and their language.

The social relevancy of critical ethnography cannot yet be measured in terms of changes made in educational leadership and policy studies but it does heighten and clarify moral-political debates (Bodone, 2005). As Carspecken (2005) suggested, my choice to combine social activism with my research was to make this study more socially relevant. Also, conducting this study as a form of critical pedagogy, while being a participant observer, allowed me to discuss moral and value issues with participants.

American critical ethnographers have been most influenced by Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor* (1977), as well as *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1977) written by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. As Anderson (1989) wrote, the critical ethnography was a way out of structural over determinism--"Following Marx, Bowles and Ginitis's 'correspondence principle' argued that there was a correspondence between schooling and the social relations of production in the work place" (p. 256). I, too, find the two aforementioned texts invaluable. However, the study that has had the most impact on my own work is Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (2009). His references to Bowles and Gintis (1976), Bourdieu (1977), Bernstein (2000), Fordham (1988), Freire (1987), Lareau (2003) and Willis (1981), helped me to construct my own theoretical perspective around the coping strategies of African-American adolescent males living in predominantly White communities.

### **3.3 Conceptual Framework**

I have selected themes, issues and theories to provide an orientating framework for this critical ethnography. While theory from educational psychology and sociology is included, the primary interpretive framework I used to analyze the culture-sharing group in this study is Critical Race Theory (CRT). The reasons I choose CRT as the primary framework in my research are many. Creswell (2007) wrote:

"(CRT's) first goal is to present stories about discrimination from the perspective of people of color...CRT argues for the eradication of racial subjugation while simultaneously recognizing race is a social construct...and CRT (also) addresses areas of difference, such as gender, class, and any inequities experienced by individuals" (p. 32).

The five tenets of CRT--counter-story telling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest conversion and a critique of liberalism--served to assist me in describing and analyzing conditions that shape, mold and/or influence the participants' identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations. In this critical ethnography, approaching identity as being socially constructed was vital in better answering the research questions. Identities are not equal (or equitable) and discursive practices shape an individual's identity--which, in turn, can have a dramatic effect on one's educational aspirations.

Racism has been routinized in America--it is a part of our everyday lives. Police are street-level bureaucrats--"lynching" who they want (e.g. Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Tony Robinson, Anthony Hill, [the list goes on...]). CRT does not comply with notions that class trumps race and racism is declining (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). As Delgado and Stefancic (2012) suggested, "by every social indicator, racism continues to blight the lives of people of color, including holders of high-echelon jobs, even judges" (p. 11). Blacks in the U.S. live shorter lives, receive worse medical care, complete fewer years of school and occupy more menial jobs than their White counterparts. I want to know how the aforementioned coincides with the experiences of the participants. Using the CRT framework is particularly useful when examining the idea of Blacks completing fewer years of schools and the barriers they have to overcome while in school.

### **3.4 Research Goals**

Current policies concerning curriculum design and standards based testing have been implemented with specific intentions and are working as designed. Their fidelity is easily measured. The intended consequences are to keep Whites at an advantage and

Blacks at a disadvantage--“Mainstream school systems [are] endemically and unalterably racist” (Andrews, 2014, p. 7).

The racially biased curriculum found in most schools is purposeful. Intended consequences are to keep Black youth docile and manageable--incapable of making any significant societal changes. Bodone (2005) wrote, “Schools still display many of the tendencies critiqued during the 1970’s, educating pupils through their hidden curriculums to become consumers and workers needed by the system” (p. 23). Although it is inherent in the *grammar of schooling* described by Coburn (2003) that the school system is Eurocentric and biased, both administrators and teachers have the ability of working together to shift the current paradigm.

The participants in this study were viewed holistically and not as a statistic on a graph or chart. The answers I sought could only be found in analyzing the participants’ stories about their perceptions of race and having to attend school as a Black adolescent male in a predominantly White institution that is overtly designed for the dominant group. The only way I was able to understand their sense of racial identity (how they cope and how these coping strategies affect their educational aspirations) was to interview them several times.

My goal was to further the awareness that there is need for a paradigm shift in education. Statistics show the systematic exclusion of Black children in schools is intentional. The majority of African American youth learn school is not designed for them to succeed at a young age. This is evident when statistically, 54% of African Americans graduate from high school (compared to more than 75% of White students); and the average Black student in twelfth-grade reads at the same level as the average

White student in eighth-grade; only 14% of African American eighth graders score at or above proficient level (Too Important To Fail, n.d., Retrieved June 4, 2015 from <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/tsr/too-important-to-fail/>). Unless education policy makers begin to change the “grammar of schooling” Black people have very little chance of succeeding as a whole group. This research aimed to add to the national conversation in order to continue fighting against the injustice Black children are faced with daily.

### **3.5 Research Site and Participants**

This study was conducted in the Northeastern part of the U.S. where the government census lists the population of the region being less than 5% Black. The participants of this study are two adolescent African American males. One participant recently graduated within months of beginning the research. The other is in his senior year of high school. Although they live in the same state, the participants live in different counties and have never met each other. The state is small. However, there is a severe drug issue that even the governor calls a “crisis.”

It was difficult recruiting participants for this study. One reason is it is hard to recruit Black students as participants in counties that are less than 1% Black. Another reason is that there was a Black Lives Movement protest outside one of the participant’s schools. Protestors claim schools in the state are a “pipeline to prison.” Community members and students alike responded in a number of ways. A few joined the protestors. Others reacted by driving by with Confederate flags hanging from their trucks. One group of students pretended to shoot imaginary guns at the protestors. Most notably, one community resident claimed he is not racist but felt “the Black man has brought a lot of misery on himself.” He said Black people have “this big chip on their shoulder and



they're just daring someone to knock it off" ("A racist response at St. Albans prejudice rally," 2015). Although his community is less than 1% African American, he felt the White man is "now the lowest on the totem pole."

The protesters did not live in the neighborhood where they protested. Calvin is the participant who attends the school where there was a protest. He said, "I have never seen those people. They're not from here." He continued to explain that while he did not want, or have anything to do with the protest, he suffered its backlash. When asked directly how he felt about the protest, Calvin answered, "It's like someone coming into your backyard, terrorizing a hornet's nest and then running back to their house, while the hornets are all pissed off and trying to attack you." This is important to note because there are community members who think I am part of the state's Black Lives Matter movement/group in the state due to the fact I am a Black man. While I do not condone any type of social inequality, I am not affiliated with the group.

Access to the participants required a gatekeeper. I contacted two different high school principals (in different counties) with the goal of setting up a meeting to propose the research once the University's Internal Review Board cleared my proposal. Approximately one month before the protest, I met with the principal of the high school (where the protest happened) to propose my study. Although everyone in the room was White (except for myself), they were all welcoming and receptive. This could be due to the fact I am a doctoral student with a social capital everyone in the room was aware of. After hearing a few alarming statistics about the education gap between White and Black students and how Black students are more likely tracked into lower level classes, the principal immediately asked someone on the board for their school's statistics (to see if

students of color were being tracked to lower levels). He said, “I never knew about this. If it’s something happening here at this school. We need to know and it needs to be changed.” The meeting with the school board lasted approximately one hour. The principal and board were happy to have their school as a research site once I had assured everyone the research was ethical and would not be harmful to any prospective participants.

I met with the chair of the guidance department to discuss potential participants the following week. All male students who identified as being African American in the school’s data base (a survey the student fills out) were given a letter from the principal on school letterhead to bring home and share with their parents (or legal guardians). The letter explained the principal and school board members both understood and condoned the study. Prospective participants were also given a consent/assent form. I received responses from two prospective participants. I spoke to both their parents. The two young men seem excited to be part of the study but one stopped contacting me after the Black Lives Matters protest. I do not know if this had anything to do with him choosing to withdraw from the study.

I did not originally intend to collect the amount of data I did. After the initial interview with the first participant, it was clear I would need to follow up with several more to get a holistic sense of the participant’s experience. One participant would have sufficed; however, I wanted the perspective of at least one other participant. The second participant, who chooses to be referred to as The Lil Homie, had recently graduated from high school. I had to recruit him in a different manner. The Lil Homie is a recording artist, we had met prior and I am familiar with his music. Although I was aware he was

transitioning into professional/college life, I contacted him via email asking if he was willing to participate in the study. He was given a one-page summary describing the study, along with a consent form.

The initial interview served as both an icebreaker and the cornerstone to follow up questions. The initial conversation I had with Calvin's mother was somewhat of an informal interview. I explained who I was, my connection to the community and the research I would be doing. Our phone conversation lasted approximately twenty-minutes. A few days later I spoke with Calvin to set up our first interview.

Neither participant had much opportunity to discuss what it is like for them being Black and/or living in a predominantly White community before. It is important to acknowledge the awkwardness of the first interviews. One participant especially did not want to discuss certain instances of racism he had experienced because I had not yet established myself as being credible and actually invested in his experience(s). It can be assumed that he was not yet sure he would not suffer any backlash for being honest. It helps I too am a Black man and attended a high school where the Black population was less than .5% (in both my high school and in the neighborhood I lived in). This is information I shared with the participants.

### **3.6 Methods of Data Collection**

The guiding philosophy behind the research in this study is epistemological. It was important to conduct this study in the "field," where the participants went to school. As Creswell (2011) writes, "these are important contexts for understanding what the participants are saying" (p. 20). The use of an epistemological paradigm in this critical ethnography acknowledges that the evidence from participants is subjective. An

epistemological framework is also effective because it allows the researcher to lessen the distance between the participants and themselves. Spending time with the participants allowed for more of a collaborative study, where I was viewed as an insider. The epistemological framework also relies on quotes from the participants as evidence (Creswell, 2013). Most importantly, my goal was to approach the two participants as “an advocate, as someone interested in understanding and supporting who they [are], regardless of what they [are] labeled to be” (Coleman, 2005, p. 3).

I conducted four interviews with each participant spanning a three-month period. Each interview lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes. I met with one participant on site at his high school and the other at a coffee shop less than a mile away from his high school. I had the opportunity to observe both participants during a normal school day. In addition to speaking with Calvin’s mother, I collected high school transcripts from both participants. The Lil Homie also provided me with a hip-hop collection of six songs that he wrote and preformed. Furthermore, I made a point to take observations of how the two participants interacted with those around us during our time together as well.

Data was stored on the UVM computer/server to ensure all information and collected data remained confidential. Also, only the given pseudonyms for participants were used when recording. Furthermore, each interview was erased after being transcribed. Once each interview was transcribed, I developed a master list with themes for coding. I used themes found in the transcriptions to develop follow up questions. This allowed for me to get a holistic view of the participants’ experience(s) and to fill any gaps I felt were missing.

### 3.7 Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study was concurrent with the data collection. As Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) suggested, it is a healthy corrective for built in blind spots. I began with First Cycle coding, then Second Cycle and the process of coming to other general themes through jottings and analytical memoing. In the first cycle of coding, the process ranged from single words to entire paragraphs. The second set of codes were longer, analytical memos about data. A reconfiguration of the codes themselves was also necessary at times (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014).

Coding was approached through the following methods: descriptive, in vivo, values and holistic coding. Descriptive coding allowed data to be summarized in a word or short phrase such as the participants feeling “different” or how they were often “stereotyped.” In vivo coding used words or short phrases from the participants as a source of data as well. One example is when a participant described a racially motivated incident that happened to him as “not being a big deal.” Another example is one participant who mentioned, “that’s just the way it is.” Values coding reflected the participants’ values, attitudes, and beliefs (also known as one’s habitus). The aforementioned examples also reflect the participant’s values regarding racism. Another example of this is how both participants believed in education as being the primary means of economic mobility. Lastly, holistic coding “applies a single code to a large unit of data in the corpus, rather than line-by-line coding to capture a sense of the overall contents and the possible categories that may develop” (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014, p. 77). A single code, or rather theme, that emerged (which represents holistic coding) is the fact both participants experience overt racism and neither high schools

reportedly approach curriculum from a multicultural lens. Neither participant said this verbatim but it was evident when transcribing their interviews and through what I observed on-site.

Themes were finalized into three categories: Identity, Coping Strategies and Educational Aspirations. Coding the data this way made it clear that there is a significant correlation between the participant's identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations--each affects the other.

### **3.8 Implications for Policy, Curriculum and Practice**

The research in this study aimed to help the participants develop a sense of reflexivity, knowledge and appreciation of self. Another important implication of this study is that it will help teachers to understand how Black adolescent males (living in predominantly White communities) perceive race and how their perceptions of race relate to their academic aspirations. Furthermore, this study also illuminates how the participants cope with going to school in a community less than 5% African-American.

I understand discussing race can be a sensitive topic for many people--especially during an interview. Protocol questions were created in a manner to promote self-analysis and/or self-reflection so the interviews were more empowering rather than intrusive. The data collected in this study will help further the conversation in how to provide young Black men the necessary educational skills they need to flourish in U.S. society. Teachers cannot be blamed if they too lack the reflexivity to understand how institutionalized racism shapes the views and aspirations of their students. The average teacher expects little of the average black student therefore the average Black student is not given a fair chance--if given any chance at all. As Horney (1991) writes,

The human individual, if given a chance tends to develop his particular human potentialities. He will develop then the unique alive forces of his real self: the clarity and depth of his own feelings, thoughts, wishes, interests; the ability to tap his own resources, the strength of his will power; the special gifts or capacities; the faculty to express himself and to relate himself to others with his spontaneous feelings. (p. 17)

Furthermore, it is my hope the participants viewed me as a model; someone who exemplifies to them--if they did not already know--the power of resiliency and how education can be the practice of freedom.

### **3.9 Subjective I**

I am a thirty-three year-old, bi-racial, able-bodied, heterosexual man living in the U.S. I have lived in both urban (Brooklyn, NYC) and rural (St. Albans, VT) areas. My mother is a White woman of French descent and my father was a Black man, whose family is from Mississippi. Other than his name, I do not remember much about my father. He is dead and was never a part of my life. Both of my parents were enlisted in the Army and I was born in Stuttgart, Germany, on a military base. Due to a number of reasons, my maternal grandparents adopted me when I was in fifth grade.

My grandfather was a source of economic, social and cultural capital that I had available to me that many young Black males will never have. Finances aside, he is a White man with more cultural and social status than the majority of his peers. Furthermore, he actually *pulled himself up from the bootstraps* (which unfortunately led me to an individualistic way of thinking that took much work to deconstruct). My grandfather was born a “blocker”; poor and lived below the train tracks. And although he

was blinded at an early age, he never let his “disability” deter him from accomplishing more than most men with 20/20 vision. My relationship with my grandpa had no effect on the structure of school, or how I was constantly being stereotyped and discriminated against by my teachers, athletic coaches and other staff. However, when in my relationships with community authority figures--like the high school's headmaster or the city's mayor--I was treated exceptionally because they were family friends (who viewed me as one of their own rather than the other). My grandfather's status did not save me from being called nigger though. I was called “nigger” a lot growing up, and with my temper, very rarely would I hesitate physically attacking whoever chose to spew the verbal epithet.

Until going to graduate school in NYC, everywhere I attended school--from Kindergarten through undergrad--was a predominantly White institution. I was the only Black student in my grade school and there were about four or five (maybe six of us) in my high school (which is one of the largest in the state). The college I received a Bachelor's degree from was statistically similar. There were very few Black students. In addition, the majority of Black students on campus were African not African-American. As I work on this dissertation, I continue having to deal with being called a nigger on a regular basis. Two days before submitting the final draft of my dissertation proposal, my neighbor told me, "I am going to blow up your car and burn your house down nigger." Approximately four months before that, he and his brother told me, I was going to get "stomped down like white men do to niggers all the time." Back in high school, I would have physically retaliated, knowing no matter how severe I hurt either one of these young men, I would not have to worry about facing any repercussions because of who my



grandfather is (and that I was a minor then too). The two men I am describing are White but they do not have as much economic, social or cultural capital as I do. (I do not think they have any training in boxing, and/or martial arts, either).

Through my academic studies, I have developed a critical, systemic way of thinking. The White people I encounter, who threaten my life and call me “nigger” will never get this opportunity. The experiences I have had growing up in a predominantly White community have shaped my habitus--they influence my attitude, dispositions, and the paradigms in which I operate. However, writing is a major coping strategy of mine (it can be both an emotion and problem based response). Through my love of writing, I developed a sense of reflexivity. It is this critical awareness that allowed me to collect and analyze the data for this study objectively.

I identified as being Black before I could truly conceptualize race because of how often I was called “nigger.” Although I identify as being Black culturally, I understand race is socially constructed. In Kindergarten, I used to wish I was the same color as my mother because this girl in my class that I liked did not feel the same way. She said, “Your skin is the same color as Mud. It’s ugly.” Most of the teachers treated me the same as if they shared her sentiments.

I did not expect the participants to have the same experiences I did. I had no expectations. I am simply interested in sharing their story in a larger context. When I was younger, I figured I would get a Master’s of Fine Arts (in creative writing) before pursuing a career trafficking narcotics--if I were to get caught, I would simply write books in jail to kill time. My plans changed once I started teaching English courses as a Graduate Teaching Fellow, and later an adjunct instructor. I hated being in middle school,

junior high school, and high school. I also had an extremely difficult time during my time as an undergraduate. If I were not able to write poetry--I was a recipient of the University's Robert Frost award for a manuscript produced during that time--I do not think I would have ever made it through college. It was hard and I struggled. Like a number of young Black males, I associated success in school with being White. I equated getting good grades in school with being a house nigger (and even though I am light-skin I have always preferred being in the field with the rest of my folk). The school work was not engaging, did not teach me anything relevant and was clearly designed for students whose skin was not *the same color as mud*.

## Chapter 4: Journal Article

### *TAMING THE ELEPHANT: AN EXAMINATION OF THE IDENTITY, COPING STRATEGIES, AND EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF TWO ADOLESCENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES WHO LIVE AND ATTEND SCHOOL IN A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE COMMUNITY*

When president Barack Obama launched the Department of Education's Race to the Top (RTT) program in July 2009, "A major premise of the RTT was that piecemeal reform would not help the nation improve student achievement or eliminate achievement gaps between student groups" (Manna & McGuinn, 2013, p. 13). This being the case, another quantitative study regarding Black adolescent achievement looking merely at numbers will do little in furthering research around ways Black students either engage or disengage in the acquisition of their education. I do not equate compulsory schooling with notions of intelligence or as a valid measurement of one's education (and critical consciousness). The average Black child is forced to attend an institution designed to keep them mindless, docile, and 3/5<sup>th</sup> of a human being. In the U.S., "Mandatory education serves children only incidentally; its real purpose is to turn them into servants" (Gatto, 2003, p. 159). Furthermore, African American children are stereotyped as being lazy, ignorant, and incapable of performing as well as White students academically (B. D. Tatum, 2007). The U.S. education system has a number of roadblocks put in place to stymie Black students from developing a sense of praxis (which would better their situations). The racially biased curriculums that exist in schools are intentional (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Downey, 2008; Fisher, 2005; Harris, 2006; B. D. Tatum, 1992, 2003, 2007).

The average African American student is underachieving because of two reasons: A) most curriculums are racially biased; and B) the majority of teachers expect little if anything from the disenfranchised (Anyon, 1980; Gatto, 2003; MacLeod, 2009; B. D. Tatum, 2007). Far too few educators have the cultural awareness to respond effectively to the educational needs of Black students (Berlak & Moyenda, 2001). America has stigmatized African American youth through stereotypical images of laziness, stupidity and ignorance in the media and through popular culture--as a result, this is often how the typical educator views their Black students. The dehumanization of Black people in society leads to many misconceptions. Unfortunately, most educators still operate as if the notion of intelligence is a fixed entity (B. D. Tatum, 2007). Therefore, these teachers have low expectations and a disinvestment in the education of the African Americans in their classroom.

Students have varied reactions to these low expectations. For instance, if one takes what Bourdieu (add year for citation) refers to as an “anti-intellectual” stance toward education, from which an oppositional identity occurs, they will not succeed academically. That individual does not view school as a vessel of social mobility. Instead, they equate schooling more with ideas of immobility. More often than not, those governing the classroom lack a critical-consciousness and are not interested in the enlightenment of their students (hooks, 1994; B. D. Tatum, 2000). Unfortunately, this type of teacher does not approach education as a practice of Freedom (Freire & Macedo, 2000). Many school districts use a one-size-fits-all approach when developing curriculum (Walls, 2014). Due to a lack of cultural responsiveness and self-actualization, the average American educator stereotypes the already marginalized students in the classroom.

In response to this, students develop coping strategies. While the number of different coping strategies is many, the Centre for Studies on Human Stress (CSHS) describes coping strategies as being in two different categories-- problem-focused strategies and emotion-focused strategies (Coping Strategies. (n.d.). Retrieved June 4, 2015, from <http://www.humanstress.ca/stress/trick-your-stress/steps-to-instant-stress-management.html>). Examples of problem-based coping strategies include: individuals analyzing a situation, working harder to improve a situation, and applying learned knowledge or speaking to someone who directly affects the situation. Brooding, fantasizing/imagining a different reality, seeking social support, blaming others and/or choosing to avoid/deny the situation are examples of emotion-focused strategies.

A child's performance is influenced by the amount of social and cultural capital they possess. Allen (2010) wrote how Bourdieu (1977) was the first to theorize about social capital describing it as, "how individuals of families accrue benefits by means of social networks. Through such networks, parents are able to provide more favorable opportunities for their children, particularly in schools" (p. 127). The phenomenon of acting White is a form of both social and cultural capital. Researchers suggest (Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Foley, 2004; Harris, 2006; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; B. D. Tatum, 2000, 2003, 2007; Tyson et al., 2005) acting White is a means of achieving in schools, yet few studies have focused on the phenomenon itself.

Cultural fields are a "series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorize certain discourses and activities" (Webb et al., 2002). The amount of power one has in relation to a particular field correlates to their cultural capital.

Lamont and Lareau (1988) defined cultural capital as being “widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (p. 156). Schools typically reflect the habitus of the White middle class (Andrews, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Black students have no choice but to acquire the dominant group social and cultural capital if they are to succeed in school--a reflection of larger society.

There is research focused on the coping strategies of African American males (Allen, 2010; Bridges, 2011; Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Stevenson, 2003; A. W. Tatum, 2006). However, there is very little, if any, research concerning the identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations of African American adolescent males who live and attend school in predominantly White communities. The participants in other studies have been adolescent African American males living in urban communities or African American males attending predominantly White colleges. Regardless of which educational institution a Black adolescent male is enrolled in, “to be successful...[he] must be able to see [himself] as academically and socially competent, an almost impossible feat in schools that reflect and reinforce societal perceptions of Black male deviance, deficiency, and criminality” (Coleman, 2005, p. 1).

This research illuminated the intersectional identities of being an adolescent African American male who lives, and attends school, in a predominantly White community. It also served as a lens into the participants’ sense of human agency and what motivates them to learn. These are important factors for educators to consider when developing a curriculum that meets the needs of ALL learners.

This study was based on illuminating the following research questions:

1. What is the participant's sense of their racial identity?
2. What coping skills/strategies does the participant utilize to combat stress correlated with being Black in a predominantly White institution?
3. How do these coping skills/strategies affect the participants' educational aspirations and achievement?

## **Review of Literature**

### **Identity Theory**

Often times, Black kids equate being educated with being white. The field work of John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham, Tatum (2003) explained that "Certain styles of speech, dress, and music, for example, may be embraced as 'authentically Black' and become highly valued, while attitudes and behaviors associated with Whites are viewed with disdain" (p. 61). She continued to write, "During the encounter phase of racial identity development, when the search for identity leads toward cultural stereotypes and away from anything that might be associated with Whiteness, academic performance often declines" (Tatum, 2003, p. 62). One way to combat this oppositional culture would be to take more of a constructivist approach to education and start flipping classrooms as a means of better promoting academic aspirations and attainment. Post-modern approaches to developing curriculums seem more inviting to students of color.

Black children are "invisible (simply omitted from discussion) or represented in ways that are based on negative stereotypes" (B. D. Tatum, 1992, p. 331). Research suggests, while the concept of "acting white" may not be universal, "it can be an influential force in African American peer groups" (B. D. Tatum, 1992, p. 332.). Unlike Ogbu, Tatum did not place blame on the victims. She recognized the development of

oppositional identity as being an adaptive response to one's environment. Tatum urged educators to begin understanding the role environmental factors (such as Black role models) play in the identity development/shifts of Black youth.

McWhorter (2010) argued the Black achievement gap is a result of anti-intellectualism. Like, Ogbu, he too suggested Blacks equating the notion of school with being White, therefore reject such. He claimed that Blacks' poor academic performance is not due to racism, inadequate funding, class status or the level of education a child's parents may have. McWhorter is insulted by how he claimed Blacks are "underestimated." McWhorter suggested educators' interests must lie in shedding the "shackles of anti-intellectualism" (p. x) if we are ever to close the achievement gap. He felt "secondary schools should urge black children to form study groups," (p. x) and that "Minority students should also be given standardized tests on a regular basis in school" (p. 92). Furthermore, McWhorter opposed affirmative action because it obstructs Blacks "from showing that they are as capable as other people" (p. 92).

### **Self-Efficacy**

Fisher (2005) examined differences in self-concept, academic behavior and self-reported personal experiences between Black students, who are high-achieving, and those who are low achieving. Fisher critiqued Ogbu's oppositional culture theory by stating it relies too heavily on historical contexts. Ogbu neglected to take into consideration the effect "current relationships in the school between Black students and teachers; the impact peers and family have on student achievement; student self-concept; and socioeconomic issues" (p. 208). While Fisher had a number of relevant theoretical claims, this study was limited in terms of generalizability due to the ethnic split among



Blacks in this research. It was also unclear what factors had contributed to the achievement of these students. Fisher suggested further research be done that focuses on teacher perception and treatment of native born Black students in comparison to Black immigrants. A shortcoming of Ogbu's Ecological Culture (EC) theory does not consider environmental factors as contributing to the achievement gap. While Africans and African Americans may be considered *Black*, the latter have spawned from the *peculiar* institution of slavery.

Social cognitive theory recognizes a student's learning environment as being a determinant of their self-efficacy. However, Bandura argued that the influence of the learning environment on self-efficacy is relative--classroom level variables function as complex contextual factors (Joët et al., 2011). In addition to a child's learning environment, one must also take into account the child's experiences at home and in their communities. Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) proposed, "students who perceive themselves as capable of regulating their own activities strategically are more confident about mastering academic subjects and attain higher academic performance" (p. 674). Therefore, when a Black child is forced to go to a school that is does not have his best interests in mind, most likely the child will not feel confident about mastering their studies because they are not capable of regulating their own activities strategically. In other words, these children are not taught how to regulate; instead, they learn how to be regulated.

Americans live in a capitalist society where "schools train the wealthy to take up place at the top of the economy while conditioning the poor to accept their lowly status...in short, the social relations of school reflect those of the capitalist mode of

production” (MacLeod, 2009, p.12). An individual sense of self, aspirations and identifications to both race and class, are tailored by the U.S. education system (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). By an early age, children of all races are told through a number of mediums (e.g. school, home and the media) what exactly they should aspire to.

Tatum’s research does an exemplary job using psychology as a framework for analyzing problems in education. Tatum (2007) mentioned how Goddard describes the notion of intelligence as being a fixed entity. He stated the ability to learn is an inborn attribute and labels those who score low on general IQ tests as “feeble-minded.” Piaget (1997), on the other hand, viewed intelligence as an on-going process that gets more complex over time as an individual learns more. Tatum explained how stereotypical images of black people (being lazy, stupid, and unintelligent) in popular culture and the media has detrimental effects. As a result, many teachers view their students as being feeble-minded; therefore, they have low expectations and disinvest in their students’ education. Tatum stressed the fact that intelligence is malleable and that intellectual capacity is not fixed but expandable through effort. She also notes the importance of teachers’ expectations (the Pygmalion effect). *Think you can, work hard, get smart.*

### **Similar Research**

As Bridges (2011) stated, “there is limited research that examines coping strategies used by African American males” (p. 155). Similarly, Seaton (2014) wrote, “Although sparse, there is a growing literature examining coping strategies and racial identity as mediators and moderators for perceptions of racial discrimination among Black youth” (p. 883). A number of studies have illuminated ways the institution of school alienates Black males but the majority of these studies (Allen, 2010; Foley, 2004;

MacLeod, 2009; Noguera, 2003; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Seaton et al., 2014; Seaton & Yip, 2009) do not focus on how the participants deal with the stress inherently caused from attending a racially biased school. Furthermore, the participants in most of the studies focused on the coping strategies of African American males living in homogenous urban communities (Chandra & Batada, 2006)--those studies interested in the coping strategies of African American males in predominantly White institutions consisted of college-level participants (Bridges, 2011; Hayworth, 2014).

Bridges' (2011) study examined the impact being Black had on the development of psychologically healthy coping strategies among African American males at a predominantly White university in the southeastern United States. He concludes by stressing Black males "need and seek greater self-awareness, self-understanding and appreciation" (p. 164). He also noted the relationship the participants in his study had with "with other African American males, African American women and their families allowed them to cope with being a small minority at a major White university" (p. 164). His findings were insightful but the coping strategies utilized by the participants, when they were in secondary school, were not mentioned--let alone examined. The relationship between racial discrimination, racial identity and coping strategies are complex. Seaton, Upton, Gilbert, and Volpe (2014) found that "Black youth mainly utilize avoidant coping strategies, which are negatively linked to mental health" (p. 888).

This study sought to address gaps in the literature by examining the identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations of African-American adolescent males living and attending secondary school in a predominantly White community. In addition to illuminating how the participant's perceptions of their racial identity affect their

educational aspirations, this inquiry focused on the correlation between the participants' coping strategies and their educational achievement.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design and Rationale**

Qualitative research focuses more on paradigmatic themes than on constants, parameters, and numbers. As Meadows (1997) suggested, the point of leverage with the most power (in a social system) is the *power to transcend paradigms*. I chose to frame this study as a critical ethnography because there is no positivist approach to answering the questions I aimed to illuminate--the answers were not in numbers, they were in the stories behind the number (Thomas, 1993).

Another note of importance is qualitative research acknowledges social constructs and the ways these constructs influence, or rather, shape the participants' experiences. To best answer my research questions, I had to develop a relationship with the participants wherein I was trusted. It was important the participants viewed me as someone who was authentic. This ensured credible data.

Framing this study as a critical ethnography offered "a direct style of thinking about the relationships among people, society and political action. The central premise was that one can be both scientific and critical, and that ethnographic description offers a powerful means of critiquing culture and the role of the researcher in it" (Thomas, 1993, p. vii). Ethnography began in comparative cultural anthropology during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by anthropologists such as Boas, Malinowski, Radcliff-Brown and Mead (Creswell, 2013). Ethnographies did not appear in the field of education until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Anderson (1989) wrote, "The work of Cusick (1973), Henry

(1963), Jackson (1968), Ogbu (1974), Rist (1973), Smith and Geoffrey (1968) Smith and Keith (1971) Wolcott (1973), and others provided examples of the genre that later educational ethnographers would emulate” (p. 250). Framing this study as a critical ethnography allowed me to focus on developing a complex, complete description of the participants’ high school experiences by centering on the exploration of their beliefs, language, behaviors, and issues they face such as power, resistance and dominance (Creswell, 2013).

Another valuable asset of critical ethnography is that it acknowledges positionality and subjectivity. I examined the embedded norms, values and morals in predominantly White schools (their positionality) and how these factors affect the participants’ experiences. Mainstream research has done little in closing the Black-White achievement gap in education because researchers tend to disengage themselves from the participants of their studies. I regarded myself as “a fellow citizen” in this study as I worked in collaboration with the participants rather than just studying them from afar (Carspecken, 2015). Culture needed to be articulated from an insider’s perspective. It cannot be objectified.

This critical ethnography was a participant observation based study; I immersed myself into the daily lives of the participants (culture-sharing group). In addition to extended observations and multiple interviews, artifacts (such as high school transcripts, SAT scores, and samples of creative writing) were collected for an interpretation of shared and learned patterns of values, beliefs, and language. Ultimately, using an ethnographic approach allowed for the most effective analysis of the participants’ values

around education, what they believe they are capable of achieving academically (as well as where those beliefs stem from), and their language.

American critical ethnographers have been most influenced by Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor* (1977), as well as *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1977) written by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. As Anderson (1989) writes, the critical ethnography was a way out of structural over determinism--"Following Marx, Bowles and Gintis's 'correspondence principle' argued that there was a correspondence between schooling and the social relations of production in the work place" (p. 256). I, too, find the two aforementioned texts invaluable. However, the study that has had the most impact on my own work is Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (2009). His references to Bowles and Gintis (1976), Bourdieu (1977), Bernstein (2000), Fordham (1988), Freire (1987), Lareau (2003) and Willis (1981), helped me to construct my own theoretical perspective around the coping strategies of African-American adolescent males living in pre-dominantly White communities.

### **Conceptual Framework**

I have selected themes, issues and theories to provide an orientating framework for this critical ethnography. While theory from educational psychology and sociology is included, the primary interpretive framework I use to analyze the culture-sharing group in this study is Critical Race Theory (CRT). The reasons I choose CRT as the primary framework in my research are many:

(CRT's) first goal is to present stories about discrimination from the perspective of people of color...CRT argues for the eradication of racial subjugation while simultaneously recognizing race is a social construct...and CRT (also) addresses

areas of difference, such as gender, class, and any inequities experienced by individuals (Creswell, 2009, p. 32).

The five tenets of CRT--counter-story telling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest conversion and a critique of liberalism--served to assist me in describing and analyzing conditions that shape, mold and/or influence the participants' identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations. In this critical ethnography, approaching identity as being socially constructed is vital in better answering the research questions. Identities are not equal (or equitable) and discursive practices shape an individual's identity--which, in turn, can have a dramatic effect on one's educational aspirations.

Racism has been routinized in America--it is a part of our everyday lives. Police are street-level bureaucrats--"lynching" who they want (e.g. Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Tony Robinson, Anthony Hill, [the list goes on...]). CRT does not comply with notions that class trumps race and racism is declining (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). As Delgado and Stefancic (2012) suggested, "by every social indicator, racism continues to blight the lives of people of color, including holders of high-echelon jobs, even judges" (p. 11). Blacks in the U.S. live shorter lives, receive worse medical care, complete fewer years of school and occupy more menial jobs than their White counterparts. I want to know how the aforementioned coincides with the experiences of the participants. Using the CRT framework is particularly useful when examining the idea of Blacks completing fewer years of schools and the barriers they have to overcome while in school.

Current policies concerning curriculum design and standards based testing have been implemented with specific intentions and are working as designed. Their fidelity is

easily measured. The intended consequences are to keep Whites at an advantage and Blacks at a disadvantage--“Mainstream school systems [are] endemically and unalterably racist” (Andrews, 2014, p. 7).

The racially biased curriculum found in most schools is purposeful. Intended consequences are to keep Black youth docile and manageable--incapable of making any significant societal changes. Bodone (2005) wrote, “Schools still display many of the tendencies critiqued during the 1970’s, educating pupils through their hidden curriculums to become consumers and workers needed by the system” (p. 23). Although it is inherent in the *grammar of schooling* described by Coburn (2003) that the school system is Eurocentric and biased, both administrators and teachers have the ability of working together to shift the current paradigm.

### **Research Site and Participants**

This study was conducted in the Northeastern part of the U.S. where the government census lists the population being less than 3% Black. The participants of this study are two adolescent African American males. One participant recently graduated within months of beginning the research. The other is in his senior year of high school. Although they live in the same state, the participants live in different counties and have never met each other.

While recruiting participants for this study, there was a Black Lives Movement protest outside one of the participant’s schools. Protestors claim schools in the state are a “pipeline to prison.” Community members and students alike responded in a number of ways. A few joined the protestors. Others reacted by driving by with Confederate flags hanging from their trucks. One group of students pretended to shoot imaginary guns at



the protesters. Most notably, one community resident claimed he is not racist but feels “the Black man has brought a lot of misery on himself.” He says Black people have “this big chip on their shoulder and they’re just daring someone to knock it off” (True, 2015).

The protesters did not live in the neighborhood where they protested. One participant, who attended the school where there was a protest said, “I have never seen those people. They’re not from here.” He continued to explain that while he did not want, or have anything to do with the protest, he suffered its backlash. When asked directly how he felt about the protest, the participant’s response was, “It’s like someone coming into your backyard, terrorizing a hornet’s nest and then running back to their house, while the hornets are all pissed off and trying to attack you.”

Access to the participants required a gatekeeper. I contacted the principal of one of the high schools with the goal of setting up a meeting to propose the research once the University’s Internal Review Board cleared my proposal. Approximately one month before a Black Lives Matters rally took place at the high school, I met with the principal, as well as the school board, to propose my study. Although everyone in the room was White (except for myself), they were welcoming and receptive. After hearing a few alarming statistics about the education gap between White and Black students, and how Black students are more likely tracked into lower level classes, the principal immediately asked someone on the board for their school’s statistics (to see if students of color were being tracked to lower levels). He said, “I never knew about this. If it’s something happening here at this school. We need to know and it needs to be changed.” The principal and board were happy to have their school as a research site once I had assured

everyone the research was ethical and would not be harmful to any prospective participants.

I met with the chair of the guidance department to discuss potential participants the following week. All male students who identified as being African American in the school's data base (a survey the students filled out) were given a letter from the principal on school letterhead to bring home and share with their parents (or legal guardians). The letter explained the principal and school board members both understood and approved the study. Prospective participants were also given a consent/assent form. I received responses from two prospective participants. I spoke to both their parents. The two young men seem excited to be part of the study but one stopped contacting me after the Black Lives Matters protest. I do not know if this had anything to do with him choosing to withdraw from the study.

After the initial interview, it was clear I would need to follow up with several more interviews to get a holistic sense of the participant's experience. I also wanted the perspective of at least one other participant. The second participant, who chose to be referred to as The Lil Homie, recently graduated from high school. I had to recruit him in a different manner. The Lil Homie is a recording artist, we had met prior and I am familiar with his music. Although I was aware he was transitioning into professional/college life, I contacted him via email asking if he was willing to participate in the study. He was given a one-page summary describing the study, along with a consent form.

The initial interview served as both an icebreaker and the cornerstone to follow up questions. Neither participant had much opportunity to discuss what it is like for them

being Black and/or living in a predominately White community. It is important to acknowledge the awkwardness of the initial interview. One participant especially did not want to discuss certain instances of racism he had experienced because I had not yet established myself as being credible and actually invested in his experience(s). It helps I too am a Black man and attended a high school where the Black population was less than .5% (in both my high school and in the neighborhood I lived in).

### **Methods of Data Collection**

The guiding philosophy behind the research in this study is epistemological. It was important to conduct this study in the “field,” where the participants went to school. As Creswell (2011) writes, “these are important contexts for understanding what the participants are saying” (p. 20). The use of an epistemological paradigm in this critical ethnography acknowledges that the evidence from participants is subjective. An epistemological framework is also effective because it allows the researcher to lessen the distance between the participants and themselves. Spending time with the participants allowed for more of a collaborative study, where I was viewed as an insider. The epistemological framework also relies on quotes from the participants as evidence (Creswell, 2013). Most importantly, my goal was to approach the two participants as “an advocate, as someone interested in understanding and supporting who they [are], regardless of what they [are] labeled to be” (Coleman, 2005, p. 3).

I conducted four interviews with each participant spanning a three-month period. Each interview lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes. I met with one participant on site at his high school and the other at a coffee shop less than a mile away from his high school. I had the opportunity to observe both participants during a normal

school day. In addition to speaking with Calvin's mother, I collected high school transcripts from both participants. The Lil Homie also provided me with a hip-hop collection of six songs that he wrote and preformed. Furthermore, I made a point to take observations of how the two participants interacted with those around us during our time together as well.

The participants had a chance to choose a pseudonym before I began any type of observation. One participant chose the moniker "Calvin," and the other "The Lil Homie." Confidentiality is important because I did not want them to feel as if they could not be honest out of fear of repercussions. Interview questions were created in a manner to promote self-analysis and/or self-reflection so the interviews were empowering rather than intrusive.

At times, I do not specify which participant is being quoted in the findings. This is intentional. I did so to further protect the participants' confidentiality. This allowed them to speak honestly without fear of repercussions. Although the participants use pseudonyms, I obtained permission from the high school's administration to work with one participant (which potentially makes that participant easier to identify to some).

### **Data Analysis**

Formal analysis consisted of coding data (from each of the interview transcripts as well as the analytical memos) and generating a list of themes. The analytical memos were written during the interview and transcription. These memos helped to generate themes. This tool was also useful in identifying coping strategies and educational aspirations. The next step was to group these themes together categorically in relation to identity, coping strategies or educational aspirations. Themes regarding self-efficacy, social capital, and

social reproduction, as well as social cognitive theory, social learning theory and identity theory emerged in all categories (suggesting an interdependency). The last step was using the data to answer the initial research questions.

The research in this study aimed to help participants develop a sense of reflexivity, knowledge and appreciation of self. Another important implication of this study is that it helps teachers to understand how Black adolescent males (living in predominantly White communities) perceive race and how their perceptions of race relate to their academic aspirations. Furthermore, this study also illuminates how the participants cope with going to school in a community less than 3% African-American.

### **Subjective I's**

I identified as being Black before I could truly conceptualize race because of how often I was called “nigger.” Although, I identify as being an African American, I understand race is socially constructed. In Kindergarten, I used to wish I were the same color as my mother because this girl in my class said, “Your skin is the same color as Mud. It’s ugly.” Most of the teachers treated me the same (as if they shared her sentiments). I did not go into this study with expectations that the participants’ experiences were similar to mine. I was simply interested in sharing their story in a larger context.

### **Findings**

Upon completion of the data analysis, it showed the participants’ sense of identity is interconnected with the coping strategies they use to combat being treated “different.” It also suggests the participants’ educational aspirations are reflective of their identity.

The findings presented below first examine participants' identities then explore how their identities intersect with coping strategies and educational aspirations.

## **Identity**

The data showed that participants' identities were impacted by the environmental climate of where they lived, their socioeconomic status, the stereotypes and expectations of others, and their connection to African American culture through hip hop.

**Environmental climate.** The participants reside in a northeastern state where the African American population is less than 3%. The participants mentioned a few other students of color that attend the same school but neither had classes with any other African American students. The majority of classes taken by the participants are advanced placement courses. These courses are optional in both schools. Calvin said in his school, "students need to be recommended for AP courses and then [they] had the option to choose if [they] wanted to take it."

There is a significant drug problem (which the governor has labeled a "crisis") in this state. One participant's community is known as the drug-hub of the state. He said, "crack, oxy, heroine...pretty much most drugs you can think of," are readily available at his school (although he has never tried any of the aforementioned). It is interesting to note the same participant mentioned that there is a "correlation" between the Black people he sees in his neighborhood and the drug problem. He thinks the majority of Black people he sees in his city are not from there but there to traffic drugs. He said, "there isn't a lot of crime but the stuff that happens (robberies and vandalism) is usually connected to drugs. Our city definitely has a drug problem."

The participants both live in cities--*Northtown* and *Southshore*. It takes over an hour to drive from one to the next. The participants had not spent time in the other's community, unless for a short period during a sporting event. The participant who lives in *Southshore* describes *Northtown* as being "rough around the edges. There's a lot of drug use and the people are lower income. At least that's how the news makes it sound. Anytime you hear about *Northtown*, it's always bad. Either something about a meth-lab bust or robberies. I never go up there." The participant who lives in *Northtown* said he was not "too familiar with *Southshore*." He had not "been up there a whole lot."

Members of both the participant's communities are overtly racist. The confederate flag is seen all over the state--both in and outside of school. Some schools have dress codes banning such attire, while others do not. One participant mentioned a classmate who wore a hat with a confederate flag in class "basically everyday." One teacher eventually asked the student to not wear the hat but the participant did not think this was a school-wide restriction. When asked how he feels when seeing the confederate flag, the other participant answered, "It doesn't really bother me. Unless the person's saying something to me directly. I don't think most kids with a confederate flag knows what it means. My friends wouldn't wear anything like that or have a flag as a license plate or decal on their car."

There was a Black Lives Matter rally outside *Northtown* High School one afternoon shortly after I began conducting research. The protesters claimed White students at the high school use the "n-word" in class and teachers laugh as a response. They also said there are students who bring confederate flags to school to torment the

African American students. Furthermore, protesters said Black students are not given enough educational support and they are expelled more often than their White peers.

As a researcher, I do feel there are members in both communities who use the confederate flag (which happens to be designed by my late, great uncle Pierre Gustant Tountant Beauregard--a southern civil war hero) as a sign of hate, disgust and intimidation. I felt welcomed in the more affluent sections of the two communities but I often had similar experiences as the participants did. The climate in the schools was similar to the surrounding communities. However, I found the administration from both schools to be welcoming and I was not patronized, looked down upon, or treated any differently due to the color of my skin. One member of the school board actually thanked me. He continued on to say, "If nothing else, you should be proud that you've even got the school board to ask themselves, 'are we best serving the needs of our Black students? If not, how can we?'" Although it cannot be said about every classroom teacher, it was evident (even with the protesting that happened) the administration--as well as the school board--at one of the research sites was devoted to meeting the needs of every student in regards to both safety and education. When reflecting on his high school experiences thus far, the participant who attended this school said, "Overall it's been an ok experience. I got what I was looking for, which was a good education and the environment is good."

**Economic status.** When describing his family, one participant said, although his "mom and dad are hard workers...they don't make a lot of money." People who live in his "blue collar" community are often stigmatized. His observations were:

There's this saying, there's below the tracks and above the [train] tracks. Above the tracks is considered middle to upper class--people who have higher income.



Below the tracks is obviously the opposite. I live below the tracks but it's not like people say. It's a nice neighborhood. Mostly White. But below the tracks is the only place you ever really see people of color. That's why it's considered the ghetto.

The participant continued to say the only Black people he sees outside of school tend to be involved in the drug scene his city is notorious for. Although this is the case, he has never felt threatened in his community. He said, "People aren't really violent in my neighborhood. Sure there's crime but nothing like murder or stuff like that."

The other participant described himself as being "upper class." His step-father is a surgeon. He realizes his socio-economic status has enabled him to flourish in ways many of his White peers (who come from families with less money) have not. He acknowledged the fact he is privileged. However, his family's economic status did not change how he is often discriminated against because of his skin color. As noted by Farganis (2011), the participant's economic positionality "does not bring power and prestige because [of his family's] high income" (p. 164).

**Stereotypes and expectations.** The participants mentioned consistently being stereotyped by their peers and teachers. The Lil Homie said, "I don't feel like I grew up with my own identity. I feel I grew up with people treating me the way they think I should have been treated (because I'm African American)." Similarly, Calvin stated, "Attending a predominantly White school is weird. Kids always come up to you because they're curious, because there's not a lot of students of color in the school." The Lil Homie, echoed that statement when he said:

They ask you about shit in a way that's like, 'Oh, are you black?' Or expect you to say...some street colloquialism, or some shit like that. I didn't really grow up on a block or in the hood so I've never conducted myself like that but I feel like that was always expected of me as being some type of token. I don't know if you're familiar with the term token...especially in a state like [this] where a lot of people are sheltered. There's not a lot of African Americans so they have no example of what it means to be African American and they look to you...or treat you...like the culture tells them you should be treated...meaning in terms of my experience people made jokes about basketball or stuff like that. People impose the fact I'm Black on to me.

The participants also mentioned their peers telling them at times they were not Black because they did not "act Black." Calvin said, "I don't follow those [Black] stereotypes because I have White parents and I don't act that way." When asked what his peers mean by "you don't act Black," Calvin's response was, "I mean I don't talk with a Black accent I guess and just the way I act. I'm not really sure."

The participants both described being thought of as and/or treated different. Calvin said being Black was "something that's just there. Everyone's aware of it. Sometimes you get treated differently. That's just how it is." Furthermore, neither participant has any Black male friends their age. One participant said he does have one Black friend but that his friend is from a different country and more attuned to his native culture rather than African American culture.

**Connection to African American culture through Hip Hop.** The primary connection to Black culture for both participants was through hip hop. Calvin says his

exposure to African American culture had “been mostly through music. I’ve also had exposure through movies.” Although he is a fan of rappers like J. Cole, Drake, and Kendrick, as well as the movie Straight Outta Compton, Calvin said rappers and athletes are “who most people of color look up to. It feels like people try to be like them.” When asked whom he tried to be like, Calvin responded, “I’m just me.”

The Lil Homie’s primary connection to Black culture is also through hip-hop. However, the Lil Homie is an aspiring rap artist. He described his passion for the art form in the following:

When you grow up Black, you’re automatically at a disadvantage in a lot of places. There’s a lot wrong with hip-hop but it’s also a savior in a lot of ways. Conscious rap can teach you a lot about Black culture--about what it means to be Black and powerful. To quote Common, “she was teaching me in a method that was leisurely so easily I approached/she liked my raps & that’s how we got close.” He’s saying hip-hop taught him a lot about Black culture. For me, it’s like someone was able to speak to me about what it meant for them to be Black. I felt part of something bigger than me. To quote another line--this time from 2Pac, “Marvin Gaye used to sing to me/had me feeling like Black was the thing to be.”

The Lil Homie’s primary connection to Black culture was through music. This had an incredible influence over his identity and how he chose to cope with being Black in a predominantly White community.

### **Coping Strategies and Educational Aspirations**

The participants used a number of coping strategies to combat having to live and attend school in a predominantly White community (which at times was overtly racist).

These coping strategies were both problem based and emotion based. Many of the “culturally specific coping mechanisms--such as behaviors as acting tough, failing to retreat from violence, avoiding self-disclosure and dissociating from school” (Tatum, 2006, p. 44)” were exhibited by the African American adolescent males in this study.

**Analyzing the situation.** The Lil Homie was the more analytical of the two participants regarding race. In one song he wrote, “Smokin spirits, Black, wondering if my spirit Black.” This signifies how living in a predominantly White community, where one has to adhere to the cultural norms to succeed academically, affects the participant’s identity. Both tended to identify being Black with a person’s actions as well as their physical features. In another song he stated,

I am what I am, baby/you can’t make me/fuck what you thinkin, you can’t make me/fuck Bill Orielly, you can’t make me/fuck FOX news, baby you can’t make me/White American, you can’t make me/minimum wage you can’t make me/& you can’t BREAK ME down.

The Lil Homie uses his music as a way to respond to the fact he is a Black man living in a predominantly White community where race leaves him at a disadvantage. He understands this is an issue for Black people living in other areas of the country as well. He said music allowed him to “put what [he] feels about what [he] experiences. Like for anybody who’s ever wanted to say some shit to [him] about the way [he] is. Regardless if they’re White or Black. Now [he] can put that into music.” It gives him his own “cultural lens.” For example, in another one of his songs he said, “Uncle Sam pointing his finger is starting to look like a burner [gun]...living these Double Fantasies, what up John Lennon? If there’s trouble in the seas, I don’t give a fuck I’m swimming.” When asked to

describe the lyrics he said he was having “fun with it.” The song is about “positivity and reaching your dreams.” The Lil Homie said the song does not have much to do with John Lennon but he used one of Lennon’s past album titles as a metaphor for “life’s ups and downs.” He noted that when “things get tough you have to keep your goals in mind so you don’t stray off the path.”

**Work harder.** The problem based *work harder* coping strategy directly correlates with each of the participant’s educational aspirations. Calvin exemplifies the power in hard work as a coping strategy. He said in middle school he was a jokester and did not do well academically until high school because he “didn’t try that hard.” Calvin mentioned he liked a few of his teachers but felt most of them “had it out” for him. There were times he was punished for the same behaviors some teachers encouraged in other students (e.g. practical jokes in class). His high school GPA is close to a 4.0 and the majority of his classes have been AP courses (e.g. AP U.S. History, AP Statistics, Engineering, Physics). Calvin described it as “just effort. I realized I needed to make a certain standard in order to get into college and be successful for the rest of my life so I realized I needed to buckle down. Do my work and good on just about everything.” He said he needed scholarships in order to pay for college and “make [his] way.” Calvin also described his classes as being “really hard.” He said he had to “push” himself to get such good grades. Calvin’s parents have also played a role in his academic success. In addition to being supportive of his studies, there has always been the expectation he will go to college.

The Lil Homie was also an exceptional student. Similar to Calvin, his GPA was close to a 4.0. He attributed his academic success to how he “had the right people to tell [him] what’s important and to drive [him] to certain levels.” He too has taken a number

of AP courses. In addition to his parents modeling the importance of school, The Lil Homie said “talking White” (which he equates with speaking Standard English) has helped him to succeed in school. Although he does code-switch when speaking to some friends outside of school, and/or in his music, The Lil Homie does not use the Black vernacular inside any classroom (the only time I observed him code-switching was in his music). He said some people “expect you to say some street colloquialism or some similar shit. I didn’t grow up on the block or in the hood so I’ve never conducted myself like that.”

**Avoid or deny the situation.** In addition to the problem-based coping strategies mentioned above, the participants utilized a number of emotion-based strategies. Neither participant had spoken much about race before agreeing to be in this study. In the first few interviews, one participant said racism was not a problem in his school. He did not understand the motive of the Black Lives Matter protestors. He felt “there was nothing really for it to affect in the first place. It wasn’t really a big problem here. People kinda blew it out of proportion so nothing really changed. They didn’t do anything.” In later interviews, the participant began to acknowledge race being an issue in school. It seems the first coping strategy employed was for the participant to avoid or deny the situation.

The same participant had never been in any racially motivated altercations with any of his peers inside of school. During a hockey game, he was told “niggers don’t play hockey.” He chose to ignore that as well but the kid on the other team was ultimately reprimanded because one of their teammates had told his parents (who in turn said something to the coach). As the study progressed, this participant acknowledged race being a problem at times in his high school. However, his observations were his

“department is pretty good.” He did not want to “brag” but explained how he is “in smarter classes with smarter people, who are more mature and I think that’s what made the difference for me.” This participant felt his peers in AP courses were not threatened by his skin color (unlike White students on lower academic tracks).

The participants had different strengths academically but both view college as being their path to success. This inquiry supports Coleman’s (2005) research stating “that in a supportive environment, young Black boys will exhibit motivation, engagement and a willingness to learn that is at odds with the expectation of maladaptive reactions” (p. 5). The participants in this study were given safe spaces in their respective high schools to flourish as the individuals they are and not a caricature of others’ stereotypical expectations.

### **Discussion**

A number of reports have found African American students to be suspended more than White students (“Fact Sheet,” n.d.). Similarly, reports specific to this state “found [African American] students were two to three times more likely to be suspended than white students” (Diaz, 2014, p. 14). On the contrary, the participants in this study had excelled in school. Furthermore, they had been accepted into accredited Universities.

Although the participants excelled academically, they were treated differently because they are African American. This was evident in their interactions with peers, teachers and even police. Calvin mentioned being in a fight with another junior high student when he was twelve years old. During the scuffle, Calvin was tackled by a police officer, twice his age and size. The officer hurt him more than the other student he was fighting with did. Calvin laughed after describing the incident. He said, “It isn’t a big

deal. Just the way things are. It was pretty embarrassing being arrested and getting thrown into the back of a police car though.” Despite these experiences, Calvin was able to focus on educational attainment.

The findings from this study suggest that an individual’s concept of self-efficacy is closely related to their aspirations in life. Easterlin (1976) wrote how behavior is influenced by the interplay of a person’s aspirations and the resources that allow them access to these aspirations. Similar to Downey, Ainsworth and Quinn’s (2009) claims that Blacks ultimately have positive attitudes toward school, the positive attitudes the participants had in this study directly correlates with how they viewed school as being a cornerstone of success.

In further comparison to previous research, the participants in this inquiry had to deal with external factors such as “structural racism, community patterns, parents’ education attainment, and socioeconomic status” (Tatum, 2006, p. 4). The participants lived in communities that are “high-risk” regarding drug-use especially. Furthermore, their teachers had never taken a culturally responsive approach to the work they had done in any of their classes. The Lil Homie mentioned never learning about Black culture in school (outside of “learning about slavery in Social Studies one day”). This is also important to note because while both participants are African American, neither felt their school curriculums were biased. Regardless, they have done well academically. The idea of education as being a vessel of mobility had been instilled in both boys by their parents.

The participants in this study have done much better than national data suggests the average Black student does. It is highly likely both participants will graduate from high school. They are able to read at, or above, their grade level. Their academic success



could be attributed to both participants living in nuclear homes with “White parents.” The boys describe their parents’ expectations as driving them to do their best in school (it did not have anything to do with the fact their parents are White). However, having White parents--who only speak Standard English (opposed to an African American vernacular)--gave them a sense of social capital. Talking, as well as acting White, has helped them navigate their way through a school system many others in the state claim is a “pipeline to prison.”

The participants in the study are intelligent, resilient and goal oriented young men. They have excelled in an environment where they are clearly at a disadvantage. It is disheartening to report neither participant had any Black male positive role models in their lives. In closing, The Lil Homie said,

It’s different growing up in a state like [this], especially not knowing any of your family members that are Black. Growing up with White parents is...[pauses], like I recently got in contact with my biological dad & understood there’s this cultural void. You know what I mean? I was like, Oh...I have Black family members that could give me game in terms of what could have been models for me that chose not to be there. You know what I mean?

The Lil Homie acknowledged how his biological father’s absence in his life kept him from acquiring a different kind of cultural capital--more closely aligned with Black culture. The Lil Homie felt this affected his identity. He thought his experiences might have been different if he were to have grown up with his father in his life.

## **Conclusion**

The data collected in this study helps further the conversation in how to provide young Black men the necessary educational skills they need to flourish in U.S. society. As Horney (1991) writes,

The human individual, if given a chance tends to develop his particular human potentialities. He will develop then the unique alive forces of his real self: the clarity and depth of his own feelings, thoughts, wishes, interests; the ability to tap his own resources, the strength of his will power; the special gifts or capacities; the faculty to express himself and to relate himself to others with his spontaneous feelings (p.17).

The results from this study have the potential to impact policy, practice, and curriculum. Hiring a different school superintendent, principal and/or teacher is not going to address the problem of racially biased curriculums and the ways students of color cope. A paradigm shift is needed and studies like this will assist in beginning that transition. The education system does not need to evolve; it is time for a revolution.

## **Chapter 5: Implications/Significance**

As we have seen in this research, scholarship on the purpose of schooling shows that most curriculums are biased. Students of color are left at a disadvantage. One must assimilate in order to be academically successful. The participants in this study did not feel any of their teachers took a multicultural approach toward curriculum. However, this did not affect their performance. The participants both received As in the majority of their courses (which were also AP courses). Neither took what Bourdieu referred to as an “anti-intellectual” stance toward education. While acknowledging systemic injustices, the participants in this study viewed school as a vessel of economic mobility.

### **5.1 Conceptual, Scholarly, and Theoretical Implications**

A possible reason for the academic success of the participants in this study could be due to the social and cultural capital they have acquired while living in a predominantly White neighborhood with White parents. A child’s performance is influenced by the amount of social and cultural capital they possess. As described by Bourdieu (1977), social capital is “how individuals of families accrue benefits by means of social networks. Through such networks, parents are able to provide more favorable opportunities for their children, particularly in schools” (p. 127). The phenomenon of acting White is a form of both social and cultural capital. Similar to past studies, this research also suggests that acting White is a means of achieving in schools.

Acting White proved to be a form of cultural capital in this study. The participants had been successful in school because they shared similar attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge and behaviors as their White peers (Lamont & Lareau, 1998). The amount of power one has in relation to a particular field correlates to their cultural capital, therefore

these two were able to navigate their way through a school system that was overtly Eurocentric. Both high schools reflected the habitus of the White middle class (Andrews, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this study, the participants acquired the dominant group social and cultural capital to succeed in school (a reflection of larger society).

## **5.2 Implications for Instructional Practice, Policy and Organizational Leadership**

The participants described the educators in their respective high schools as taking the one-size fits all approach to education in regards to race. As a result, this educational model affected the participants' identity, the coping strategies they used while attending a predominantly White school, and their educational aspirations. This approach does not acknowledge and/or empower people of color. Indeed, it does the opposite. The positive effects of educators taking a multicultural approach to designing curriculum would be three fold. First, it would teach young Black men like the participants in this study about African American history and that Black people are much more than the stereotypes portrayed by the media. Second, those in the community adorning the Confederate flag (whether it be on a t-shirt, trucker hat, or hanging from the back of a Ford F-150 truck) would also begin to look at the few African Americans who live in their community holistically. Third, developing a culturally relevant curriculum that encourages all students to think reflexively would appease those involved in the Black Lives Matter protests.

Although the student body in both schools is less than 3% Black, it is important for educators to start taking a multicultural approach when developing their curriculums or the current racial unrest that exists between some people in the community is going to continue to get worse. It is to the utmost importance that educators at these two high

schools begin to put more of an emphasis on celebrating diversity. This research suggests the educators at the two participating sites need to approach a multicultural curriculum reform through what Banks (1998) described as being the transformative approach or the decision-making social action approach. From the interviews, it seems neither participant went to school where the curriculum “enables students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from several ethnic perspectives and points of view” (p. 38). There is no “infusion of various perspectives” (*Beyond Heroes and Holidays*, 1998, p. 38). If there were, the Confederate flag would not be seen so regularly. When he discussed the decision-making social action approach, Banks (1998) mentioned an example that would prove effective if it were to be used at *Northtown* High School and *Southshore* High School. Banks (1998) framed the approach with a question asking, “What actions should we take to reduce prejudice and discrimination in our school?” (p. 38). He then described how this methodological approach would allow students to “gather pertinent data, analyze their values and beliefs, synthesize their knowledge and values, and identify alternative courses of action, and finally decided what, if any, actions they will take to reduce prejudice” (p. 38).

This dissertation has provided evidence that the participants were forced to deal with a multitude of micro-aggressions, overt-racism, and curriculum that is culturally biased. This is not to say this is something intentionally perpetuated by school staff. The administration of one of the participating sites did seem genuinely invested in changing the way things currently were. It cannot be said teachers in this school were on board with the administration. In an interview, one of the people at the Black Lives Matter rally claimed, “there were several instances where racial slurs were used in classrooms, and

allegations that a teacher laughed when a student used one. There is also a student who insists on bringing a Confederate flag to ‘torment’ and ‘harass’ black students at the school” (True, 2015). To protect the participants’ confidentiality, I intentionally did not interview or speak with any faculty (regarding the study) outside of the school board and administration. Therefore, I did not have the opportunity to raise questions about these concerns.

One of the Black Lives Matter rally organizers said racist incidents in the school have been “ignored, or worse, abetted by school officials and other adults in positions of power” (True, 2015). This is untrue from what I have witnessed. Furthermore, although some protestors at the rally may have felt “the problem is officials do not have a good understanding of racism and how it can be manifested,” the administration was very welcoming to me and willing to be a participation site for the study (as a means to continue improving things). I know the racial climate in this area and this is why I provided African American adolescent males in this community with a platform to be heard. Every Black male in the school was invited to participate. Ultimately, only one current student chose to go the distance. I am grateful for the participation of both Calvin and The Lil Homie. I applaud, admire, respect and thank them. They should be extremely proud of the young men they are now, as well as the men they will become.

In closing, it is important to note how this research suggests African American males who attend these schools were forced to assimilate in order to become academically successful. On the contrary, this is a skill the participants acquired while simultaneously being stereotyped by their peers, teachers, and other members of the community. Teachers at these schools reportedly do not promote justice. Furthermore,

they do not seem to be working toward developing a culturally relevant pedagogy even after the protest. As one participant mentioned, it did not seem like anyone (the teachers or students) paid much attention to the rally. In his words, “no one cared. It was over a day later.” In this instance, it is understandable how one may choose to avoid or deny the situation (racism in school) because they are not receiving any support from their teachers or peers. If anything, for days after the protest students would mockingly chant, “Black lives matter,” when walking past a student of color in the hallway.

Sadly, both participants described going to a predominantly White school, as being different and constantly having to combat racism. While other Black males experiences may differ, they can relate (just as the two participants were able to relate to each other’s experiences). It is important that educators begin supporting all students--not just those with the same skin color and/or dispositions they may have. No child should be forced to attend an institution that regards them as “less than” and promotes slavery (through the acceptance of students adorning the Confederate flag).

Similar to how any system functions, the participants’ identity, coping strategies and educational aspirations were nested and dependent upon each other. This included a number of balancing and re-enforcing feedback loops. For instance, the participants coping strategies were directly correlated with their identity, which in turn affected their educational aspirations. The Lil Homie identified as a young Black “conscious” rapper, which directly correlated with the emotion-based coping strategy of analyzing a situation (which he did through music). Another example was how Calvin avoided (or denied) the amount of racism he faced in his community because of his educational aspirations. His primary goal was to do well in school.

In Conclusion, the elephant in the room can be tamed by being acknowledged. The participants, as well as the Black Lives Matter rally members, need a platform where their voice is heard. Although, this study is qualitative and cannot be generalized, the experiences of the participants were similar. As the Lil Homie said regarding Calvin's experiences (and vice versa), "I can relate. The same things have happened to me." The difference is in their coping strategies.

The prominent culture that currently exists in a number of communities and educational institutions is deeply embedded in racism. This is systemic. This study is a testament to how in these small Northeastern communities--in 2016--the Black man remains to function "in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations" (Baldwin, 1992, p. 8). It is time *all* institutions move forward and embrace diversity. Similar to the earth's resources, race relations must be sustained if we are to create a prosperous world for future generations.



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## Appendices

### **Appendix A: One-on-One Interview Protocol for First Interview**

- 1) Describe what it's like going to a school with a student body with a population less than 3% Black?
- 2) How do you define academic success?
- 3) How do you intend to reach your professional goals?
- 4) Who's someone in your life that's been helpful and supportive (in relation to school)? In which ways has this person been helpful and supportive?

## Appendix B: Research Question Matrix

<i>Research Questions</i>	<i>What does researcher want to know? Information needed?</i>	<i>Method</i>
1. What is the participant's sense of their racial identity?	Participants' perceptions, and or beliefs, about being a person of color, and the societal effects of such.	Interviews, & analyzing artifacts (e.g. writing samples)
2. What coping skills/strategies does the participant utilize to combat stress correlated with being Black in a predominantly White institution?	The different coping strategies used (which will be identified as being either problem or emotion based).	Interviews, analyzing artifacts (e.g. writing samples), & on-site observations
3. How do these coping skills/strategies affect the participants' educational aspirations and achievement?	Ways identity and coping strategies affect participants' educational aspirations and achievement.	Interviews, & analyzing artifacts (e.g. grades, transcripts and SAT scores)