"I AM A MUCH BIGGER VERSION OF YOU":

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN BLACK BOYS AND BLACK MALE TEACHERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

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Nicole Kimberly Madu

Black boys in American schools are often subjected to crisis narratives that negatively impact teacher-student relationships, limiting teachers from recognizing the intellectual capability of Black boys. A review of American schools paints a portrait of Black males crowded in special education and nearly absent in gifted education. There seems to be a gap in the available research about Black males in education, especially when trying to identify and review the literature surrounding educational opportunities, positive learning environments, and teacher/student relationships for the youngest learners in American schools. Given previous research findings of positive relationships between Black male teachers and Black male students in Grade 3 and higher, this study

looked at these relationships within early childhood classrooms, as research suggests that relationships between teachers and students play a meaningful role in young children's social and emotional development.

Utilizing interviews, observations, and through the collection of student-created artifacts, in situated ways this study found that Black male teachers perceived their relationships with Black boys in early childhood classrooms as:

- being grounded in providing explicit role models for Black boys;
- empowering young Black boys to see their individual potential and future success in life as Black men;
- focusing on showcasing affection that is often not expressed towards Black boys in early childhood due to implicit biases, through explicit verbal praise, loving gestures, and body language; and
- an understanding that early childhood classrooms should serve as a space for children to learn through their mistakes, as this is a key component in the development of positive feelings towards schooling and learning.

The implications for practice point to the importance of recruiting more teachers who view their teacher identities as being intricately connected to role modeling and the empowerment of Black boys. Additionally, because love is foundational to justice, Black boys need teachers who love them—accepting, caring, displaying respect, defending their right to be children, and regarding the education of Black boys as their responsibility. Finally, young Black boys thrive in classrooms where there is the freedom to make mistakes.

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PREFACE

> *The school year is winding to a close, as the buds on the trees spring into bloom and the warmth of sunrays beam brightly over the corridor of an elementary school nestled on a corner street in the Bronx. A tiny pair of legs brushes by me, running excitedly towards the entrance of the school. This young African American boy, no older than four, has a smile plastered on his face as he darts into the building, his enthusiasm for school still exceedingly high despite the looming conclusion of the semester. I am moved by his energy—that, at this point, has not been tainted by the narrative that depicts school as a space where he, as a Black boy, is an outsider. I am reminded of the innocence of our young Black boys as they enter classroom spaces, eager about learning and brimming with a passion for inquiry that quickly fades as they are (mis)labeled and deemed incapable of keeping up with their peers. I pray that this boy's spirit manages to escape the crushing blow to the soul that so many of our Black boys experience as they traverse the muddy school waters of the American educational system. I'm clinging to the hope that his light never dims….* (McGowan, personal journal entry, May 5, 2016)

This excerpt from my journal highlights the deeply rooted connection I have to the Black boys I have served and continue to serve as a former teacher, mentor, and instructor of preservice teachers. Since my time as a kindergarten teacher in the city of

Detroit, to my current journey as a doctoral student, I have felt an innate calling towards working with Black boys. With each passing year that I taught, I noticed the increasing number of boys being assigned to my classroom—I had earned a reputation of being able to connect with young Black boys in a way that was difficult to describe, yet I believe the connection that people often spoke of was directly related to a feeling, an energy that could be felt when entering my classroom, where movement was encouraged and children practiced counting over the bass of the latest rap songs. There was nothing particularly special about my classroom or instruction that motivated my principal to assign me mostly boys each year; however, it was my commitment to retain my boys in school. I often argued with White teachers about the importance of working with students and families to create action plans that would keep Black boys in classrooms as opposed to suspensions, when my boys' behavior challenged their perceptions of acceptable school manners.

My relationships with Black boys were strengthened through partnerships with parents and serving as advocates for their sons, disputing the myths that Black boys are plagued with learning and behavioral disorders. Relationships continued to build as I sat around Thanksgiving dinner tables, alternated bleacher seats to support students on rival T-ball teams, and attended Sunday morning services alongside students and families. My commitment to all of my students, and my special attention to the needs of my boys, are grounded in my own relationships with the African American men who greatly influenced my childhood and overall outlook on life—through their strength and audacity in spite of the vicious attacks towards their psyche experienced on a daily basis. As a young girl, I would listen to the conversations between my father and brother. I vividly

recall a lesson my dad taught my brother about his interactions with police: “Be polite and answer all of their questions. Don’t talk back. Keep your hands in plain sight.” Even as a child, I understood that this was a lesson that would never be shared with me. As a Black girl (although the reality has now changed), my parents did not worry nearly as much about my safety as it related to police brutality. My father, a man who worked his entire life to provide for his family, had experienced the lacerations and bruises to his flesh at the hands of the police, and it was his experiences that guided his lessons with my younger brother.

It is through those reflections on the invaluable lessons that Black men share with young Black children, and specifically boys, that led to me thinking about the relationships between Black male teachers and Black boys within early childhood education settings; to assess the (potential) value of sharing both the race and gender with our nation’s youngest learners and how this may ultimately impact the trajectory of their lives. My research stands on the foundation of making sure that the light of our young Black boys persists.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

> The silences were imposing—the silence of truth untold and the silence of voices unheard…stories remained shrouded in silence, collected in enduring echoes of Black men socialized to shut up and society shaped not to hear them. (Kirkland, 2013, p. 28)

Sharp pangs pierced my chest as I struggled to catch my breath and process my thoughts, while salty tears burned my cheeks. I was in a complete trance of disillusionment. In a 2-day period, July 5-6, 2016, the world had witnessed the killings of two Black men, men who were sons, fathers, brothers, community members, and, most importantly, human beings. However, their humanity was muddled between bodies pressed against cold concrete, bullets in the chest, and gasps for air as life tragically escaped their bodies with each final breath. The news, although exceedingly disheartening, has become a common narrative for Black Americans in the United States and their interactions with law enforcement (and sometimes vigilantes who inappropriately assume the role of neighborhood watch, killing 17-year-old Black boys without any subsequent consequences). If you are Black and American, you know that this vicious cycle is nothing new; that Black bodies were once beaten, dragged, mutilated, and hung from trees—"Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze, strange fruit

hangin' from the poplar trees" (Holiday, 1939). Even with public recognition of the injustices against African Americans, such as the disfigured body of young Emmett Till displayed in the pages of the September 1955 issue of *Jet Magazine,* this repetitive cycle continues, with one major difference being the technology available to record the brutality.

These tragic injustices towards Black lives, specifically Black men and boys, are not isolated to interactions between civilians and police authority; sadly, many Black boys are fed a similar story when they enter American classrooms, a narrative of self-hatred based on the hidden curriculum of racism taught within too many of our nation's schools. Ladson-Billings (2011) reflected on the perception of young Black boys within American schooling. She highlighted that Black boys are often disregarded as being academically capable; when "Black boys are somewhere between the ages of three and six years they are acknowledged as cute but rarely as intellectually capable" (p. 10). Kirkland (2013) made a similar point, noting that Black males are often ignored in the classroom, and when they are recognized, they are usually being reprimanded for what is perceived as inappropriate behavior. There are many examples of how systems of oppression (Hill Collins, 2000) have affected the trajectory of people of color; the most telling realities are revealed when thinking about the history and current experiences of Black men in the United States. In an attempt to keep Black slaves ignorant of the world beyond the confines of their plantation, an unknown member of the Virginia House of Delegates stated: "We have as far as possible every avenue by which light may enter their minds. If we could extinguish the capacity to see the light our work would be completed" (Webber, 1978, p. 27). Attempts to diminish the ability to see beyond the confines of

special education, imprisonment, and criminality exist today for Black men. Unfortunately, these lessons are being ingrained in the psyche of Black boys before they enter formal classroom spaces.

Marian Wright Edelman (2012), President of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) has worked diligently to shed light on the current reality for our youngest Black male learners. Based on her findings, Black boys have a one in three chance of going to prison in their lifetime. Wright Edelman also noted that the "epidemic of mass incarceration has created one of the most dangerous crises for the Black community since slavery and affects everyone in our nation" (para. 2). More recently, our nation's crisis has shifted from a school-to-prison pipeline to a cradle-to-prison pipeline, which the Children's Defense Fund (2007) attributed to poverty. "Poverty is the largest driving force behind the *Cradle to Prison Pipeline* crisis, exacerbated by race" (p. 25).

"Black children are more than three times as likely as White children to be born into poverty and to be poor, and are almost four times as likely to live in extreme poverty" (CDF, 2007, p. 16). The statistics that pointed out the intersection between race and poverty are unsurprising, as racialized poverty (Wilson, 2009) is not a new phenomenon. From slavery to sharecropping to the creation of zoned (Black) ghettos with limited access to equal housing opportunities and resources, the marginalization of African American people and the crippling connections to poverty are profoundly rooted in American history and economics (Wilson, 2009).

Additionally, when considering the specific impact of conditions associated with poverty (low- and no-income) on young children, the CDF acknowledges that children in the most economically disadvantaged communities are often overcrowded into

underfunded classrooms. Thus, the early childhood nurturing and stimulation that are needed for the brain to develop between the ages of birth and age 7 is severely stunted due to a lack of school-valued resources for children living in extreme poverty (Shonkoff & Phillip, 2000). This misalignment between school and home resources and practices puts economically disadvantaged Black children, and especially Black boys, at a greater risk for failure within American schools, ultimately resulting in more Black bodies behind bars (CDF, 2007). The *cradle-to-prison pipeline* affects the trajectory of young Black male children before they enter classroom spaces. As such, it is imperative that research continue to explore ways to counter this crisis through equitable learning opportunities and continued support within school settings.

The topics of *school-to-prison pipeline* and cradle-to-prison pipeline have received great attention in the field of education, specifically as related to issues of racial injustice and mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010; DuVernay, 2016). School-to-prison pipeline refers to the "growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions, primarily via "zero tolerance" policies, and directly and/or indirectly into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems" (Heitzeg, 2009, p. 1). In contrast to the school-to-prison pipeline that places emphasis on schools and their role in preparing certain children for lives as adults in prison systems, the *cradle-to-prison pipeline* turns the attention towards the social and economic disadvantages that exist from birth, often for children of color compounded by living in poverty, which destines some children to end up in prison or to die a violent death (Chappell, 2008). Wright Edelman added "We can look at children from a very young age and based on any number of factors, predict with alarming accuracy which ones will likely end up incarcerated" (cited in Chappell, 2008, p. 151).

Some of these factors include lack of prenatal care, poverty, abuse, and limited quality early childhood education (CDF, 2007). Given the aforementioned historical links between race and poverty, it is evident that racially minoritized babies in the United States are at risk of being funneled from cradles to prisons.

Statement of Problem

The recent killings of Alfred Olango, Keith Lamont Scott, Terence Crutcher, George Floyd, and countless other unarmed Black men whose lives were prematurely robbed at the hands of police authorities have the nation's undivided attention (Chokshi & Engel Bromwich, 2016) and have led to a public outcry from the Black community. Although there has been extensive news coverage, the media often ignore the source of the Black community's expressed rage. It is evident that race and gender continue to plague the course of Black male lives in the United States. There are some who would argue that this is an issue central to the American policing system; however, the historical mistreatment of Black bodies, the dehumanization of Black people, and the lack of equitable opportunities as these relate to access to resources for people of color, expose how this is much more than merely a policing issue. On a much greater scale, this cycle of neglect of the lives and very humanity of African Americans is a societal issue. America is failing Black men in countless ways: Black men are disproportionately underrepresented in positions of power and images of success; they are overrepresented in roles associated with failure, such as incarceration, unemployment, and early death (Noguera, 2013).

Alexander (2010) posited that there is a correlation between the mass incarceration of Black males and the Jim Crow laws enacted after the Reconstruction Era. "I came to see that mass incarceration in the United States had, in fact, emerged as a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow" (p. 4). Thus, the *War on Drugs*, which was marketed as a set of policies to end the production, consumption, and distribution of drugs, was a neatly packaged system of legalizing discrimination towards people of color, specifically Black men (despite the fact that White people commit drug crimes at a higher rate than people of color), reinstating the Jim Crow laws that were overruled in 1965 and reinforcing Tupac Shakur's (1998) sentiments: "Instead of war on poverty, they got a war on drugs so the police can bother me."

Additionally, a review of American schools paints a portrait of Black males crowded in special education courses and nearly absent in gifted education (Milner, 2007). Coupled with abysmal graduation rates, it appears that the educational system is not proving to be productive for ensuring the success of Black men in the United States. *The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males* (2015) reported that graduation rates of Black males in the United States for 2012-2013 were 59%, compared to the 80% graduation rates of White males. The racial disparity between the graduation rates points to an apparent opportunity gap (Akiba, LeTendre, & Scribner, 2007). Ensuring that African American males have equitable opportunities will assist in eliminating the opportunity gaps that persist. Subsequently, equitable educational experiences have the potential to work towards repaying the *historical component of the education debt* (Ladson-Billings, 2006), which dates back to forbidding slaves access to

education, to the emancipation of slaves and the legal apartheid of schools. Although the apartheid of schools has since been outlawed, the reality for many students, particularly Black boys, is plagued by teachers and school systems that ignore their talents, assets, and potential.

Milner (2007), in his study on the education of African American males in the United States, wrote on the often ignored potential of young Black men: “Black male students can and are succeeding in all types of schools—urban included—and the time has come for those of us in education to stop making excuses and to teach and empower Black males to reach their full capacity” (p. 240). In another study, Milner (2006) interviewed researchers in the field of desegregation in the United States and found that positive academic and social relationships exist for many Black male teachers and Black male student populations. Some of the assets of Black male teachers working with Black boys include culturally responsive approaches, culturally informed relationships, mentoring and role modeling, parental connections, culturally congruent instructional practices, and the Black male teachers’ ability to provide counternarratives on behalf of Black boys. These findings, the similar conclusions of other scholars (Brown, 2009a, 2009b; Hayes, Juarez, & Escoffery-Runnels, 2014; Milner, 2006, 2007), and the impact of the cradle-to-prison pipeline for Black boys encouraged me to look at the relationships between Black male teachers and Black boys in the classrooms of our youngest learners.

There seems to be a gap in the available research about Black males in education, especially when trying to identify and review the literature surrounding educational opportunities, positive learning environments, and teacher/student relationships for the youngest learners in American schools. Utilizing ProQuest and JSTOR, several keyword

descriptors were used while searching on online databases. Keyword descriptors included: “Black teachers AND Black students”; “teacher race AND expectations for Black students”; “Black teachers AND early childhood males”; and “Black teachers AND early childhood.” Both searches on Black teachers and early childhood males as well as Black teachers and early childhood resulted in zero matches that were specifically on the topic of Black teachers’ influence in the early childhood classroom. In an attempt to broaden the relevant research, the keyword indicators were expanded to include “African American students AND African American teachers.” Changing the vocabulary from Black to African American did not result in any changes in the literature presented. Surprisingly, a large portion of the results during this search focused on the effects of White teachers educating Black students and how to prepare White teachers for how to teach Black children effectively. The literature offered on the relationships between Black teachers and Black male students did not specifically address early childhood education; however, the research assessed the relationship through a broader lens of kindergarten through 12th grade education in the United States. There was little research on the intersection between race and gender in early childhood education, defined for the purpose of this study as the education of children from birth through age 8 (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

In order to explore how African American male students learn in contexts (such as schooling) that have historically oppressed the bodies, souls, and psyches of Black (male) students (Du Bois, 1903), critical race theory (CRT) was employed as a way of grounding new findings in what is already known about the impact of race on daily lived experiences. It was from this perspective that race and gender were explored, with race

compounding issues of inequity in the daily lives of the Black men and boys in the American educational system, given the historical debt of education owed to Black children and particularly Black boys. Also central to this study was the implementation of Black feminist thought, which empowers the voices of the Other, highlights traditionally invisible relationships and experiences, and uplifts the Black woman's position in creating community within African American circles. Understanding that uplifting Black boys empowers them to believe in their personal success solidified my decision to apply Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework for the advancement of Black people and Black communities.

Rationale

Despite educational disparities, there are Black male students who are finding success within their classrooms under the guidance of Black male educators (Brown, 2009a, 2009b; Hayes et al.; Milner, 2006, 2007). As mentioned previously, according to these scholars, successes of Black male teachers working with Black male students include culturally relevant teaching, culturally informed relationships, mentoring/role modeling, *other-fathering* (serving as a surrogate father figure), and the Black male teacher's ability to provide a counternarrative for Black boys. These counternarratives stand in direct opposition to the problematic flattening of their identities, where they are often stereotyped as being intellectually incapable (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Milner (2006) directly reflected on the promise of Black teachers' success with Black students, and it is here where the term *other-father* is derived.

> There was something authentic about these Black teachers. Indeed, they saw their jobs and roles to extend far beyond the hallways of the school…. They had a mission to teach their students because they realized the risk and consequences in store for their students if they did not teach and if the students did not learn. (p. 92)

Milner (2006) noted that shared life experiences contribute to the success of Black teachers with Black students; citing Pang and Gibson (2001), Milner indicated: "Black educators are far more than physical role models, and they bring diverse family histories, value orientations, and experiences to students in the classroom, attributes often not found in textbooks or viewpoints often omitted" (p. 92). The concept of other-fathering does not perpetuate a deficit perspective; instead of focusing solely on what Black boys do not have, as it relates to fathers within the home, or stereotyping all Black men as potential father figures, the emphasis is placed on the ability of certain male teachers (those who possess qualities of care and commitment to teaching Black boys) to positively influence the lives of Black boys by their physical presence within schools as Black men in positions of leadership.

Similar to the findings of Milner (2006), Brown (2009a, 2009b) explored the influence of Black male educators and found that (some) Black male teachers possess specific traits that enhance learning opportunities for Black male students. These traits were divided into three stylistic themes which included: the enforcer, the negotiator, and the playful teacher. Additionally, Brown found that many African American male teachers apply common discourses when educating Black boys, based on a direct understanding of the Black male experience in the United States, which is often impacted by negative societal perceptions, institutional barriers (low expectations, incarceration, labeling), and a potential lack of male representation within the home. Brown's studies

suggested that diversity in the beliefs and practices of Black male teachers has the potential to enhance the education and experiences of Black male students. This connects nicely to the findings of Hayes et al. (2014), where Black male teachers (who taught pre- and post-*Brown v. Board of Education*) were interviewed and noted that the cultural mismatch between White teachers and Black students resulted in more Black boys being suspended from classrooms. The Black male teachers interviewed by Hayes and colleagues believed that the relationships between Black male teachers and Black boys were weakened as a result of the desegregation of schools that bused Black children into White communities and schools.

This research on the positive experiences of Black male teachers educating Black male students has extensively focused on Black male students in Grades 3 through 12, and given the promising relationships described between Black male teachers and Black male students in the primary and secondary grades, I was inspired to look at these relationships in our earliest classrooms. The rationale for exploring the relationships between Black male teachers and Black male students was supported by research that suggested that children come to understand their identity and their perceived ability as related to race at a very young age (Clark & Clark, 1939; Quintana, 1998; Swanson et al., 2009). Evidence has suggested that children's early prejudice and racial attitudes are a reflection of the attitudes of the greater society and that a pro-White bias appears to be highest during the preschool years (Quintana, 1998). The research on how young African American children come to understand race was spearheaded by the work of Clark and Clark (1939), who found that Black preschool-aged boys could distinctly identify themselves as individuals from other groups (Swanson et al., 2009). Clark and Clark's

study on the racial preferences of preschool-aged Black children has been replicated several times with similar results. Considering what is currently known about how young African American boys come to understand themselves as distinctly different from other groups (such as the Black boy in my kindergarten classroom that self-identified as the "bad boy" and labeled his White friend as the "good boy"), and the research that pointed towards Eurocentric perspectives among Black children, the pertinence of studying the potential value of relationship building between Black male teachers and Black boys in early childhood education becomes increasingly more salient.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

Given the aforementioned research findings of the positive relationships between Black male teachers and Black male students in Grade 3 and higher, it is imperative to look at these relationships within early childhood classrooms. After all, research has suggested that relationships between teachers and students play a meaningful role in young children's social and emotional development (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Ostrosky and Jung (2003) added: "In early childhood settings, each moment that teachers and children interact with one another is an opportunity to develop positive relationships" (n.p.). Understanding the importance of relationship building in early childhood settings, this study aimed to explore the relationships between Black men and Black boys, considering implications for the future education of young Black boys, specifically in early childhood education, in an attempt to counter the dangerous single story (Adichie, 2009) that depicts Black men as criminals whose lives are devalued (Kirkland, 2013).

New York City served as an ideal setting for exploring relationships between Black men and Black boys. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, New York City reported the largest number of self-identified Black residents, higher than any other U.S. city, with over 2 million residents within the city boundaries. Additionally, the NYC Department of Education (2017) noted that of the 75,000 teachers in New York City, roughly 8.5% of these teachers are males of color. In New York City, 85% of students are Latinx, Black, or Asian (de Blasio, 2016); while the teacher of color to students of color ratio is indeed imbalanced and disproportional, compared to national statistics where only 2% of the teaching population is comprised of Black men (U.S. Department of Education), Black teachers represent the highest percentage of teachers of color in NYC, at around 20%. This leads one to conclude that the number of Black male teachers in New York City is higher than the national average.

Additionally, several initiatives have aimed to ensure equal opportunities for boys and young men of color have been implemented in the state of New York. Founded in 2011, New York City's Young Men's Initiative (YMI) was created to address disparities in education, employment, health, and justice among Black and Latino boys and young men between the ages of 16 and 24 (NYC Young Men's Initiative, 2016). The Young Men's Initiative, along with the Department of Education, City University of New York, Center for Economic Opportunity, and Teach for America, launched NYC Men Teach in 2015, with the goal of putting an additional 1,000 men of color on course towards becoming teachers in NYC public schools by 2018. In 2014, President Barack Obama established the My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Task Force, which joined forces with YMI in 2015 to align work and priorities. The purpose of MBK is to eliminate the opportunity

gap faced by boys and young men of color, allowing all young people the chance to reach their full potential. New York became the first state to enact the MBK initiative into law, which included a $20 million investment to improve outcomes for boys and men of color through a commitment to the following New York MBK milestones: ensuring access to quality schools; increased prevention and intervention services; differentiated approaches based on culture and need; responding to institutional racism; making coordinated support services widely available; and engaging communities and families in a respectful and trusted way (New York State Education Department, 2015).

New York's commitment to equity and access for boys and men of color presents potential opportunities to learn more about improving the educational experiences for young boys at both the local and national levels. As such, due to the high Black student population, the higher percentages of Black male teachers, and initiatives aimed at helping boys and men of color reach their full potential, I explored student-teacher relationships between Black boys and Black men in New York City. The research questions that guided this study were:

- How do Black male teachers in the greater New York City area perceive their relationships with Black boys in early childhood education?
- How are the educational experiences of Black boys in early childhood classrooms in New York City shaped through interactions with Black male educators?
    - What are young Black boys learning about themselves as both learners and future Black men from their Black male teachers?

These questions were constructed utilizing a critical race theory (CRT) framework (that is elaborated on in the next section).

The main purpose of these specific research questions was to focus on the counterstories of Black boys and Black male teachers regarding their relationships working together in a New York City school. This drew on the tenet of CRT that encourages the “naming [of] one’s own reality” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993, p. 462). The misrepresentation of Black boys and Black men in society as limited to lives of criminality communicates low expectations and society’s inability to see Black males as fully human. As such, I argue that the image whereby Black boys and men see themselves in the media submits to the dangerous, aforementioned, single story—these research questions were written for the purpose of countering single-story prescriptions of Black boys and Black men, purposefully interrupting pathological portrayals of Black men and Black boys by centering their stories and lived experiences.

Theoretical Framework

On my journey of exploring the relationships between Black male teachers and Black boys, CRT was employed because, as Anzaldúa (1990) wrote, “Necesitamos teorías [we need theories] that will rewrite history using race, class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries” (pp. xxv-xxvi). CRT centers and appreciates the value of storytelling, a long-established Afrocentric way of knowing, to counter majoritarian stories of Black men and Black boys as pathologies to be remedied (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). “The field of education needs successful counterstories and testimonies of the past Black

educational experiences to help us understand how we in the present might successfully prepare Black students in today's racially charged society" (Hayes et al., 2014, p. 4).

Moving forward, in order to continue to promote positive educational experiences for Black boys within our nation's early childhood classrooms, an exploration of how the relationships between Black boys and Black male teachers may interrupt negative self-perceptions that young Black boys experience in school is needed. This further supports the importance of utilizing CRT to frame my study; a rewriting of stereotypical narratives of Black boys and men within American schooling is imperative. Similar to the work that has been previously conducted on the relationships between Black men and boys in elementary and secondary education, there needs to be a closer look at these relationships within the field of early childhood education, to investigate if and how gender and race congruence shape the early educational experiences of Black boys.

Ladson-Billings (1998) briefly described some of the major features of CRT, which began as an outgrowth of an early legal movement called critical legal studies. CRT begins with the notion that racism is ingrained in American society, as a "permanent fixture in American life" (p. 11). Second, CRT employs storytelling to analyze myths and calls on *experiential knowledge*, which draws from "a shared history as 'other' with… ongoing struggles to transform a world deteriorating under the albatross of racial hegemony" (Barnes, 1990, pp. 1864-1865). The third feature includes a critique of liberalism, considering it "flawed in that it fails to understand the limits of the current legal paradigm to serve as a catalyst for social change because of its emphasis on incrementalism" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Ladson-Billings outlined the final major component of CRT that argues that the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation

have been White people. An example of this includes the fact that affirmative action policies have primarily benefited Whites, particularly White women.

The first two components of CRT, the ever-present impact of racism and experiential knowledge as it relates to storytelling and counterstories/counternarratives, provided the framework for this study, understanding that Black boys have historically been misrepresented in educational scholarship that often perpetuates their underachievement in American schooling. Moreover, the component of CRT that focuses on the impact of civil rights legislation was used to situate my study within the historical climate of American schooling, which was greatly influenced by the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which desegregated schools and resulted in approximately 38,000 African American teachers and administrators across 17 states losing their positions between 1954 and 1965 (Milner & Howard, 2004). At the crux of my study is Noguera's (2003) suggestion that in order to counter narratives that focus on the underachievement of Black boys, relationships between Black boys and teachers need to be improved. Scholars have argued that these relationships have improved as a result of pairing Black boys and Black male teachers in upper elementary and secondary education—this study aimed to explore these relationships within our early childhood classrooms.

As previously mentioned, one component of CRT is "an assumption that racism is not a series of isolated acts, but is endemic in American life, deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 52). Ladson-Billings (2012) also noted, "One of the hallmarks of critical race theory work is the chronicle. Here, the scholar tells a tale—a moral story or parable—to illustrate a deeper truth" (p. 118). The use of a CRT framework allowed me to delve into the counterstories

that are often unheard, thinking about the experiences of both Black male teachers and the young Black male student populations they serve.

Additionally, CRT was used to examine American civil rights laws and progress (or lack thereof). Delgado and Stefancic (1993) composed a list of major themes concerning CRT scholars, which includes examining why American antidiscrimination laws have been so ineffective in countering racial discrimination. Furthermore, this theme of CRT seeks to examine why the progress of the civil rights movement has been so cyclical in nature, alternating between periods of progress and retrenchment. For example, the election of our nation's first Black president in 2008 led many Americans to assume that we are living in a post-racial society, suggesting that having a Black man in the highest position of power within the United States of America represented a declining significance of race, something that William Julius Wilson wrote about in 1978. When it is suggested that the significance of race has declined, Wilson and others theorized into existence a neoliberal cosmology that featured in its center a postracial illusion, a kind of intellectual color-blindness that dismisses the politics of skin. It is this idea that racism has been obliterated in our current society and, thus, no longer poses a hindrance to the educational advancements of Black students. However, movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, founded by three Black women, Garza, Tometi, and Cullors, in 2013, have shed light on the alarming rate of Black bodies mutilated and murdered at the hands of police enforcement. It is from this CRT approach of questioning progress as it relates to the experiences of Black people, specifically Black men and boys, that I framed my study.

Feminist theory provided a supplementary lens to CRT that guided my study. Madriz (1988) wrote about how feminist scholars have questioned the use of traditional methodologies when studying women, and more specifically women of color. Breaking the mold of traditional qualitative studies, feminist scholars are reframing the construction of the Other. Rather than giving voice to the Other, Madriz reflected on the importance of listening "to the plural voices of those Othered, as constructors and agents of knowledge" (p. 115). Although feminist scholars have focused on reconstructing research with women of color, it is my belief that a feminist perspective, one that calls for the researcher to truly *listen* as opposed to *construct*ing a voice for the Other (in this case, Black male early childhood education teachers and young Black boys), will help build a better understanding of the relationships between Black male teachers and Black boys in early childhood classrooms.

Additionally, Black feminist thought reinforced my participation in this study, rooted in empowering both African American male teachers and African American male students. Hill Collins (2000) explained the origins of Black feminist thought: "the assumption that African-American women have created independent, oppositional yet subjugated knowledges" and "are engaged in the struggle to reconceptualize all dimensions of the dialectic of oppression and activism" (p. 13). Black women have diligently worked to maintain Afrocentric conceptualizations of community. "Through the lived experiences gained within their extended families and communities, individual African-American women…refashion[ed] African-influenced conceptions of self and community" (p. 10). The foundation of my work as an African American female researcher rests on the maintenance of community building among people of the African

diaspora living in the United States. "Black women's centrality in African-American families and communities reflects the both/and conceptual orientation of Black feminist epistemology…. Black women's actions…maintain community integrity through the struggle for group survival" (p. 206). To be sure, "an emphasis on conserving African-derived ideas and practices as a form of resistance" (p. 206) is central to my work on behalf of my community. As such, I see my role as that of a cultural worker as a Black woman working "for Black community development" through "African-derived cultural frameworks" (p. 206). In and through this study, I sought to join a rich legacy of

> U.S. Black women [and] participate in this larger "interrogation and resistance" effort. This dimension of activism undermines oppressive institutions by rejecting the anti-Black…ideologies they promulgate. In the context of U.S. race relations organized via deeply entrenched racial segregation, having access to a Black women's standpoint, especially one dedicated to reproducing African-influenced, gender-specific resistance traditions, is essential. (p. 206)

While CRT was employed as a framework to understand the experiences of Black boys and Black male teachers, Black feminist thought was utilized to understand my position within this field of research, as a preserver of the Black community.

> Traditionally women's activism within Black families meshed smoothly with activism as community othermothers in the wider Black community as "family." In both meanings of family, African-American women worked to create Black female spheres of influence, authority, and power that produced a worldview markedly different from that advanced by the dominant group. Within African-American communities Black women's activities as cultural workers are empowering. (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 210)

Black feminist thought also influenced my assumptions in approaching my work with Black male teachers and students. According to Hill Collins (2000), one of the distinguishing features of Black feminist thought includes how the differences among individual Black women "produce different patterns of experiential knowledge that in

turn shape individual reactions to core themes" (p. 27). The centrality of experiential knowledge is also an element of CRT (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This realization that I enter my work with unique lived experiences as a Black woman in the United States reaffirms my commitment to the social justice calling of exploring ways to promote positive learning experiences and environments for Black boys in early childhood education. I approach my work with a background as an early childhood educator—the intersectionality of being Black, a woman, *and* a teacher shaped my reactions to core themes of oppression and social injustice, as related to the (mis)treatment of young Black boys in American schooling.

Compounded with experiential knowledge, the central purpose of Black feminist thought is to resist oppression and to "empower African American women within the context of social justice" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 22). This study empowered me as a Black woman as I sought to reframe how Black boys experience American schooling, ultimately solidifying the maintenance of Black communities and rejecting the cradle-to-prison pipeline that too frequently funnels our Black boys behind prison bars. Black feminist thought influenced the planning stage of my research study, starting with the unsettling feeling of watching Black boys in kindergarten lined up against the fence during recess as a sentence for perceived misbehaviors, conditioning our boys for standing against prison fences. My lived experiences as a Black female educator guided my interactions with participants, my methodological approaches, my interpretations of literature and data, and my analysis of my findings.

Finally, I must address why I, an African American woman utilizing Black feminist theory, decided to focus my research on Black boys. While Black boys and

Black girls experience similar suspension rates in the preschool years, with Black boys representing 19% of the preschool population and accounting for 45% of boys being suspended and Black girls making up 20% of population and 54% of girls suspended from preschool, the experiences of Black boys and Black girls in Kindergarten through Grade 12 change drastically, with 18% of Black boys receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions, compared to 10% for Black girls (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). It should be noted that although I recognize the great injustices towards Black girls and women, I decided to focus this study on Black boys, understanding that in "New York, almost 120,000 black men between the ages of 25 and 54 are missing from everyday life…black women who are 25 to 54 and not in jail outnumber black men in that category by 1.5 million" (Wolfers et al., 2015). The high prison population of Black men points to an apparent need to disrupt the cradle-to-prison pipeline for Black boys.

Significance of Study

The dominant discourse on Black boys and education affirms a master narrative that further diminishes our capacity to understand how best to educate young Black boys emerging from what Wilson (1987) called "the most disadvantage[d]" circumstances. Though the dominant and public narratives of Black males in education submits to a crisis storyline, the topic of Black boys in education should not have as its central focus what Black boys lack in relation to entering prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms (Haddix, 2009; Kirkland, 2011a; Souto-Manning, 2013). Instead, there must be an investigation of the agency that these young boys bring with them to school from their homes, neighborhoods, and prior experiences, "(re)position[ing] minoritized students as

capable learners in classrooms, in schools, and in society" (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016, p. 3).

Fundamental questions persist as to how to understand the nature of student behavior as shaped by perceived behavioral expectations and teacher responses to Black males within our early childhood education classrooms (Ferguson, 2000). How do young Black boys learn and participate in communities and cultures of learning? How do they move along a theoretical spectrum of development from peripheral participants to more central/expert members of their social and cultural groups (Lave & Wenger, 1991)? And chiefly, there needs to be an understanding/location of what the literature says and fails to say on these critical questions.

The purpose of my research study, asking such questions and considering society's deficit perception of young Black boys, was to motivate Black boys to view themselves from a positive perspective when considering their role and purpose in education, interrupting the cradle-to-prison narrative. Furthermore, the findings of my research study offer the possibility for teachers of all backgrounds to see the brilliance, agency, and cultural assets of Black boys. Finally, it further encourages the field to recognize the importance of Black male teachers, supporting arguments for the recruitment of more Black men within the field of early childhood education.

Currently, there is a disparity between the numbers of Black male teachers in early childhood education and elementary and secondary education. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), in 2013 less than 3% of preschool and kindergarten teachers were men, compared to 19% and 43% male teachers in elementary and secondary education, respectively. Moreover, the *Washington Post*

noted that of the total population of male teachers, no more than 2%, are Black men. Considering the potential impact of male teachers in early childhood education, Bryan and Browder (2013) also found that "the inclusion of more males in the early years has the potential to benefit society, the profession, and children…having more male teachers in early childhood…can help dismantle the hegemonic forces that limit occupational choices for women and men in society" (p. 143).

Black male teachers bring myriad histories and experiences into the classroom, unique to the intersection of being both Black *and* being men. Having once been Black boys and understanding what it means to be a Black boy within the American schooling system allow Black male teachers to empathize with Black boys; they are more likely to understand how it feels to be misread as social deviants and to be attached to images of failure and crime. Looking closely at these relationships in early childhood education offers powerful insights into how young Black boys in the United States view themselves and point toward the need for more research on the recruitment and retention of Black male teachers in early childhood education.

In the following chapter, I review the importance of early childhood education to affirm why this study was needed, provide a closer analysis of the relevant literature on the experiences of Black male students in American schooling, and present the findings on the relationships between Black male teachers and Black male students that serve as the impetus for studying these relationships within early childhood education classrooms.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been well researched that the American educational system often disservices young Black males (Kirkland, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Noguera, 2008). It has also been proposed that merely replacing White teachers with Black teachers will not change the outcomes for African American males, as Ladson-Billings (2005) noted: "If having teachers of color teaching students of color fixed things, then Detroit and Washington, D.C. would be the most exemplary school districts in the nation for African American students" (p. 231). The available data on the success of Black males in American schools reported that Detroit has the lowest graduation rates for Black male students, with a startling 20% of Black males graduating in 2011-2012 (*Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males*, 2015). Although the presence of Black teachers alone does not affect educational opportunities for Black males, several scholars (Brown, 2009a, 2009b; Hayes et al., 2014; Milner, 2006, 2007; Milner & Howard, 2004) have conducted extensive research on African American male teachers' varied teaching methods for Black males as well as their social orientations and cultural understandings, positively affecting learning outcomes for young Black male students.

This literature review analyzed studies on the relationships between Black male teachers and Black male students. Although interested in focusing on this relationship in

early childhood education, the scarce literature available on this exact subject required an evaluation of the research that has been conducted in elementary and secondary school. For this literature review, I utilized ProQuest and JSTOR, using several keyword descriptors during my search of the online databases. Keyword descriptors included: "Black teachers AND Black students"; "teacher race AND expectations for Black students"; "Black teachers AND early childhood males"; and "Black teachers AND early childhood." Both searches on Black teachers and early childhood males as well as Black teachers and early childhood resulted in zero matches that were specifically on the topic relationships between Black boys and Black male teachers in early childhood classrooms. In an attempt to broaden the relevant research, the keyword indicators were expanded to include "African American students AND African American teachers." The literature offered on the relationships between Black teachers and Black male students did not specifically address early childhood education; however, the research assessed the relationships through a broader lens of elementary and secondary education in the United States. There was little research on the intersection between race and gender in early childhood education, which was defined for the purpose of this study as the education of children from birth through age 8 (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

In researching these relationships in elementary and secondary education, the goal was to assess the potential of Black male teachers to address the historical opportunity gap. The opportunity gap is intricately connected to several different types of debts in the educational experiences of African Americans in U.S. schools. Ladson-Billings (2006) explored the *education debt* that relates to the perceived achievement and opportunity gaps between Black and White students. The education debt is comprised of the

historical debt, *economic debt*, *sociopolitical debt*, and *moral debt*, which, for the purpose of explaining how African Americans have experienced school in the United States, is explained briefly.

The historical debt, as mentioned in Chapter I, refers to the oppressive educational history for people of African descent, from the inception of slavery and forbidding slaves the right to formal education, where it was illegal for slaves to possess reading and writing skills, to the legal segregation of schools, where Black children were subjected to underfunding and cast-off textbooks from White schools. In addition to being poorly resourced, the South's need for farm labor decreased the typical school year for rural Black students to around 4 months. The historical debt and economic debt play a major role in the gaps in educational opportunities that persist for African American students.

While the history of funding discrepancies between segregated schools prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate schools is widely understood, differences in funding continued to plague the educational trajectories of Black students. The economic debt in education is pervasive in American schools. The differences often now occur between urban and suburban schools, where the population of students is still very much segregated by race. For example, Ladson-Billings explained how the New York City public schools spend $11,627 per pupil with the student population of NYC public schools comprised of 72% Black and Latinx students. The funding for students in Manhasset, a New York City suburb serving a population of 91% White students, is $23,311 per pupil. "The sociopolitical debt reflects the degree to which communities of color are excluded from the civic process"; today this plays out via, for example, voter suppression and school segregation—who has access to what schools (Ladson-Billings,

2006, p. 7). The historical debt, economic debt, and sociopolitical debt point to a moral debt that cannot be ignored.

The moral debt speaks to the "disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 8). Slavery and its present-day implications and impact on the experiences and livelihoods of African Americans need to be openly and candidly addressed. Reparations are owed to the Black community; this moral debt must be paid:

> No nation can enslave a race of people for hundreds of years, set them free bedraggled and penniless, pit them, without assistance in a hostile environment, against privileged victimizers, and then reasonably expect the gap between their heirs of the two groups to narrow. Lines, begun parallel and left alone, can never touch. (Robinson, 2000, p. 74)

The moral debt will continue to be the elephant in the room—if we cannot have honest conversations about how the historical, sociopolitical, and economic debts contribute to a moral debt that needs to be repaid to the Black community, then the opportunity gap will continue to widen. It is important to situate the following studies within the historical context that led to an education debt that currently disproportionately affects the educational opportunities of Black children.

This literature review delved into:

- what literature says about the importance of early childhood education,
- what is currently known about the educational experiences of Black boys and (possible) correlations to school performance, and
- the cultural capital and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) that Black families have and Black boys bring into the classroom.

In doing so, it considers how educational experiences and cultural capital influence the relationships between Black male teachers and Black male students in K-12 classrooms.

In reviewing this literature, my purpose was to explore the potential affordances of Black male teachers working with Black boys in early childhood education by reviewing the affordances of such connections in elementary and secondary classrooms. Many of the studies presented are grounded in the experiential knowledge of the Black researchers, many of whom are Black men themselves and have experienced schooling from the perspective of both student and teacher. This experiential knowledge, positionality within their studies, and presentation of counterstories of Black boys and schooling build a strong case for the utilization of a critical race theory (CRT) framework for the exploration of similar relationships in early childhood education.

Finally, both of the theoretical frameworks that guided the reading of the literature presented in the following sections (CRT and Black feminist thought) highlight the importance of experiential knowledge. As a Black woman conducting research with Black men and Black boys, it is imperative that I uplift the work of other Black women who paved the way for future Black female scholars. In doing so, I situate the voices of Black women working to maintain positive relationships within the Black community.

Why Early Childhood Education?

With the limited amount of literature available that directly addresses relationships between Black boys and Black male teachers in early childhood education, some may question the importance of exploring these relationships in the classrooms of our nation's youngest learners. In addition to the research that has reported that children

come to understand their identity and their perceived ability as related to race at a very young age (Clark & Clark, 1939; Quintana, 1998; Swanson et al., 2009), the importance of early childhood education has become increasingly more visible. It has been researched that "From the time of conception to the first day of kindergarten, development proceeds at a pace exceeding that of any subsequent stage of life" (Shonkoff & Phillip, 2000, p. 386). The former research also noted that from birth to age 5, children rapidly develop foundational capabilities, essentially the framework for subsequent development, including cognitive and linguistic gains, as well as emotional, social, and moral capacities. In addition to the developmental impact of early childhood education, research also supported that well-designed preschool programs can produce long-term improvements in school success, which includes higher achievement test scores, lower rates of special education and retention, and higher educational attainment (Barnett, 2008). Given what is known about the importance of early childhood education as it relates to the social, cognitive, and academic futures of young children, further exploration of how young Black boys experience school is needed.

Furthermore, several researchers have explored the connection between teacher-child relationships and children's adjustment in early school settings (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Birch and Ladd (1997) found that features of the teacher-child relationship (closeness, dependency, and conflict) impact young children's ability to adjust to school environments. Conducting surveys with a total of 206 kindergarten students and their 16 teachers, Birch and Ladd established links between conflictual teacher-child relationships and academic achievement and performance; further, they reported: "difficulties in the teacher-child relationship may foster feelings of anger or

anxiety in young children, and thus cause children to withdraw from the school arena…or promote alienation, such as loneliness, and negative school attitudes" (p. 63). Similarly, Hamre and Pianta (2001) conducted research with 179 children and 26 kindergarten teachers. The purpose of their study was to determine how teacher-child relationships impacted the trajectory of children's school outcomes. This study suggested that early teacher-child relationships (as experienced in kindergarten) are predictors of behavioral and academic behaviors in elementary school. "Kindergarten teachers' reports of negativity in relation to students uniquely predicted students' grades, standardized test scores, and work habits through lower elementary school" (p. 634). Even more compelling for the purpose of my study, Hamre and Pianta found that high levels of perceived conflict between teachers and male students in kindergarten were related to poorer reading and math grades. These studies showcased the importance of further exploring how to encourage positive relationships between students and teachers in early childhood education, as students' academic performance is related to children's experiential knowledge of their relationships with their teachers during their early school experiences.

Further, a study conducted by researchers at the Yale University Child Study Center asked 135 preschool teachers (66.7% White and 22% Black) to observe video clips of children in classrooms. The teachers were prompted to look for challenging behavior. According to data generated through equipment that tracked their gaze, teachers spent more time looking at Black children. Unbeknownst to these teachers, the children were actors and the clips did not show any challenging behaviors. The teachers

spent much longer looking specifically at Black boys in anticipation of trouble (Brown, 2016).

Taken together with the aforementioned research on the correlation between perceived teacher-student conflict and lowered academic performance, the racial biases of the teachers of the Yale study encouraged me to explore the relationships between Black boys and Black male teachers in early childhood education, and these relationships' influence on Black boys' experiential knowledge and ability to construct their own stories and counterstories.

In this section, I reviewed shared cultural beliefs and values between teachers and Black students. In the following section, I review research portraying teachers who engage in leveraging Black and Brown students' cultural backgrounds and linguistic practices as academic tools.

Assets-Based Teaching in Early Childhood Settings

Although not focusing on Black teachers and Black boys in particular, scholars have highlighted how cultural assets can benefit young children's in-school learning (Moll et al., 1992; Souto-Manning, 2010). Moll and colleagues (1992) conducted an ethnographic study between a classroom teacher and an anthropologist, detailing how a visit to the household of a student influenced the teacher's development of instructional activities based on their observations. Their research approach included considering the *funds of knowledge* of the families participating in the larger study of several households. Funds of knowledge refers to the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning"

(p. 133). This research study made visible the importance of bridging the gap that often exists between classroom spaces and children's homes, highlighting the value of forging relationships with families and utilizing children's funds of knowledge to inform curriculum. This can be seen in the teacher's development of a candy-themed study based on her newly gained knowledge that her Mexican American student Carlos sold candy to neighbors in his life outside of school.

Souto-Manning (2010) found similar findings about the importance of connecting home, cultural assets, and school in her study of a Head Start teacher, who, through discourse analysis, blurred the roles of student and teacher, and worked to unpack the lines that often separate in- and out-of-school literacies for Black and Brown children. In doing so, William (the teacher in the study) was able to create a more inclusive classroom. In changing his perspective that children enter classroom spaces with language barriers that needed to be fixed, William was able to recognize the brilliance of his students, which included the language diversity represented in his classroom, thus problematizing discourse of privilege and (mono)cultural approaches to teaching which encouraged him to have conversations with his students about linguistic differences. Having these types of conversations with his young learners helped the children understand how assumptions about multiple ways of communicating were hindering their friendships. The students engaged in reflection on how they could honor multiple perspectives and ways of communicating, further solidifying how forging students' cultural and home backgrounds is critically needed in American schooling.

Due to the limited research on Black boys specifically in early childhood education, in the following section, I review prominent portrayals of Black boys in

Grades 3 through 12 in extant research. I do so as Black boys go from being infantilized (in the early years) to being criminalized (Grade 3 and above). Ladson-Billings (2011) explained: "This notion of little Black boys as cute does not last long.… Their childhood evaporates before they are eight or nine-years-old when teachers and other school officials begin to think of them as 'men'" (p. 10).

Black Boys and "Underachievement"

> Black boys may be especially likely to feel outside of the school culture, to feel that they are not expected to do well and that it is not acceptable to their peers for them to work hard and do well in school. (Hansen & Jones, 2010, p. 977)

Scholars (Hansen & Jones, 2010; Noguera, 2003) have agreed that there seem to be some deficits in the educational experiences of Black boys, and as mentioned in Chapter I, these deficits in educational experiences begin prior to Black boys entering third grade. Due to their commonalities in perspectives, these authors' research studies are discussed to explore what the literature currently says about Black boys in 3rd through 12th grades as a way of drawing parallels to the experiences of Black boys in early childhood classrooms. Although the authors do not explicitly condone the social inequities that exist for Black boys, they do recognize that a deficit persists. These realities are further explored in the following section.

Noguera (2003) began his study on the trouble with Black boys from a crisis perspective: "All of the most important quality-of-life indicators suggest that African American males are in deep trouble" (p. 431). He drew parallels between the experiences of Black men in greater society and the educational performance of Black boys in American schooling. Black men lead the nation in homicides, have the fastest growing

rate of suicide, and are contracting HIV and AIDS at a faster rate than any other population in our country. In our schools, Black boys are more likely than any other group to be suspended or expelled and are more likely to be placed in special education; their presence in advanced placement classrooms is much lower than other populations. Within this context, the focus of Noguera's multiple methods research was to explore "the possibility that the academic performance of African American males can be improved by devising strategies that counter the effects of harmful environmental and cultural forces" (p. 433). According to Noguera, if we can find ways to increase the number of effective schools, the field of education might be able to address some of the risks confronting Black males.

Noguera (2003) concluded that while a large percentage (90%) of the Black male students studied viewed school as important, a much smaller portion (18%) felt that they were treated fairly by their teachers. Noguera related this discrepancy to the negative perception of Black males in society that is translated to low expectations from teachers of Black male students. Noguera suggested that in order to counter the crisis narrative, the negative relationships between Black male students and their teachers need to be improved. Similar to Noguera's crisis perspective, Hansen and Jones (2010) viewed Black males and education as being a dilemma that needs to be addressed.

Hansen and Jones (2010) sculpted the educational scene of English Black boys, explicitly addressing why Black boys "underachieve." According to these scholars, it is important to highlight the challenges Black boys are having in schooling in order to address these issues in our teaching practices. One interesting argument presented was the lack of male role models in early education or in their homes. Hansen and Jones noted

that nearly half the Black children in their study were living in a single-mother household, compared to “18% white children, 11% Pakistani and Bangladeshi children and 7% of Indian children” (p. 975). The lack of fathers in the home pointed to a direct connection to the 1.5 million missing Black men (Wolfers et al., 2015), which in the United States is a result of mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010; DuVernay, 2016). Unlike other races and ethnicities, not only are Black boys lacking positive male role models in the classroom, but this study suggested that there is also an absence of resident father figures. Hansen and Jones’s research findings established a direct correlation between the academic performance of Black boys and the presence of male role models both in school and at home.

Both Noguera (2003) and Hansen and Jones (2010) discussed social implications that influence the education of Black boys. Both research studies addressed solutions to educating Black male youth by critiquing the experiences of Black boys through a deficit lens. While Noguera argued that environmental hazards and negative teacher perceptions affect learning, Hansen and Jones noted the lack of positive male role models as a reason for academic underachievement. The following section reviews research that challenges the crisis perspective.

Beyond the Crisis Perspective

Unlike the studies in the previous section, the authors of the following research approached educating Black males from a perspective that highlights the assets of Black boys entering classrooms across the nation. These assets are seen as learning tools rather than deficits. Kirkland and Jackson (2009) identified a literacy skill that was grounded in the language interactions of the Black male students in their study. For these students, the

use of *Ebonics*, a term that refers to the mix of West African and European languages (Smitherman, 1998), was a way of identifying with their culture, and when utilized and recognized in the academic pursuits, it helped the students work to reject racism and form "self-dignified expressions of masculinity" (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009, p. 294); it allowed them to perform socially relevant identities. Kirkland and Jackson found that through the use of personal narratives, students were able to recognize their own potential and individual form of literacy, which acted as agents for positive self-identity. Unlike Noguera and Hansen and Jones, the Kirkland and Jackson research study was not grounded in the discrepancies between Black boys and students from other racial groups. Instead, the study was modeled on the idea that Black male students enter classrooms with a set of skills that often does not get recognized in dominant school settings.

Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2006) also reflected on the assets that Black students bring into the classroom, which were studied through their *Hip Hop Project*. Opposed to taking a deficit perspective, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade utilized an asset-based approach, noting that their work was grounded in "a sociocultural framework that views all students as learners and users of language and literacy as participants in local cultural communities" (p. 274). Similar to Kirkland and Jackson's work, Black students were seen as readily capable of learning and succeeding through the acknowledgment of the cultural tools they brought with them from home. "Our students tell us, in their dress, in their actions, and in their words that they want to be taught. But, if we listen carefully, they will also tell us what we can use to teach them" (p. 278). In their research, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade concluded that dominant teaching populations "have made it [their] personal mission to separate that which [students] already know from that which we feel

they must know" (p. 278). They acknowledged this as being the greatest flaw of educators. From the profit perspective of Kirkland and Jackson as well as Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, teachers are provided a narrative that focuses on how to view Black male students' cultural backgrounds as an academic tool rather than a hindrance.

In this section, I sought to move beyond the crisis narrative of Black boys, reviewing studies that centered the richness and possibility of Black children's linguistic and cultural practices. In the following section, I explain the impact of *Brown v. Board of Education* on Black families and Black boys, which resulted in iatrogenesis.

***Brown v. Board of Education*: Iatrogenesis**

In order to fully understand the impact of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the conversation must start with a review of the history of the case. Although *Brown v. Board of Education* is often regarded as an act of progression of race relations in the United States, Ladson-Billings (2004) outlined the history of the case, shedding light on why the court case failed to carry out the expectations of Black families (the promise of equitable learning opportunities for their children). Ladson-Billings explained that the decision to desegregate American schools was a ploy to improve the reputation of the United States regarding foreign relations, with the United States attempting to prove to the world that free democracy is the most civilized form of government.

In the wake of the Cold War and the spread of communism, America was forced to face its own issues regarding the civil liberties of Black people. Additionally, the United States's position in fighting against the racial superiority argument of Adolf Hitler further prompted the United States to take a closer look at how to clean up its image. Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (2004) noted that *Brown v. Board of Education* was

implemented as a catalyst to improve the American economy, which was experiencing a transition from a rural, plantation economy to the sunbelt.

> Thus, the *Brown* Case could be positioned as serving white interests—improving the national image, quelling racial unrest, and stimulating the economy—as well as Black interests—improving the educational condition of Black children and promoting social mobility. (p. 5)

Milner and Howard (2004) described iatrogenesis as a medical concept where an intervention that was intended to cure an ailment actually results in a more detrimental impact than the original issues. In their study, Milner and Howard conducted interviews with prominent educational researchers who closely studied the (supposed) desegregation of American schools and its effects on Black students. The interviews revealed interesting perspectives on the effectiveness of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954. Much like iatrogenesis, the researchers found that the intervention to desegregate schools, as a way of providing Black students with equitable educational experiences, instead resulted in a detrimental shift in not only the education of Black students but also their communities as well.

Prior to the desegregation of schools, teaching was considered a prestigious profession within Black communities. Teachers of Black children were considered integral members of the community, often acting as "other mothers" and "other fathers" (Milner, 2006). The educational researchers interviewed all agreed that the decision to desegregate schools depleted entire communities and severely changed the educational experiences of Black children.

During desegregation, Black children were bused to White schools. This shift of student population resulted in approximately 38,000 African American teachers and administrators across 17 states losing their positions between 1954 and 1965 (Milner &

Howard, 2004). Black leaders who were highly esteemed within the community found themselves unemployed, draining the community of not only resources but also a sense of pride. One educational researcher in the study noted: “There is a nexus between families, neighborhoods, and schools…. A change in one disrupts the equilibrium of the system” (p. 8). Desegregation negatively impacted many communities that were once grounded in Black excellence.

Initially, many Black families supported desegregation, expecting their children to be exposed to the “secret learning in White Schools” (Milner & Howard, 2004, p. 9). However, Black children were often bused into schools with White teachers who did not support desegregation; thus, the experience for Black students was plagued with animosity from teachers, parents, and White students. Although the expectation was for Black students to have equitable learning opportunities, the outcome was a decrease in teachers who understood the historical background and cultural needs of Black students. Black principals who were able to obtain jobs in White schools were demoted to assistant principals of discipline for Black children; thus, the American schooling obsession with controlling Black bodies (Ladson-Billings, 2011) began as a direct offset of busing Black children to White schools.

Additionally, in their review of several studies conducted on teacher-student relationships, Irvine and Irvine (1983) found that the desegregation of schools influenced the interpersonal relationships between Black children and their White teachers. Their review of literature highlighted the importance of teacher expectations as related to the academic achievement of Black students. According to Irvine and Irvine, “The outcomes seem to be that desegregation may have significantly altered the pupil-teacher

relationship which has historically been the foundation for Black student achievement" (p. 415). Understanding that teacher-student relationships are connected to young children's social and academic achievement (as outlined previously in *Why Early Childhood Education?*), exploring how relationships between teachers and students were affected by the *Brown* decision emphasizes the need to further study relationships between students and teachers in early childhood education, particularly looking at the relationships between Black boys and Black men, as these relationships have historically played an important role in the achievement of Black students.

Hayes et al. (2014) further analyzed the effects of Black teachers (specifically male teachers) of Black students in their study. Through listening to the narratives of Black male teachers whose careers included teaching pre- and post-*Brown v. Board of Education*, the researchers found similar sentiments about the effects of desegregating schools. One of the participants, Mr. Crenshaw, expressed how the ruling of 1954 influenced his teaching practice: "See, when they desegregated schools, we lost some of this ability to 'educate' our kids [Black youth]. I mean really educate our kids in a way that they can make an informed decision and to learn that what White says is not always right" (p. 5). Both male teachers in the study agreed that the cultural mismatch between White teachers and Black students resulted in more students, predominantly Black males, being ejected from classrooms. Black male teachers, however (from the perspective of the participants), better understood the importance of listening to their Black male students, "[r]ecognizing and affirming the challenges that Black students, particularly Black male students face in the classroom…attempts to break the cycle of Black youth being funneled out of school and into the streets and into prisons" (p. 7).

The research of Milner and Howard (2004) and Hayes et al. (2014) argued that the effects of desegregation have had a detrimental impact on the education of Black students, chiefly among young African American males who are often tracked from schools to prisons (Hayes et al., 2014). As such, in the following section, I turn to research on the value of Black male educators.

The Value of Black Male Educators

In his 2006 study, Milner recognized the dangers of assuming Black teachers possess all the knowledge, commitments, and skills needed to teach African American students successfully (p. 90). However, through interviewing researchers in the field of desegregation in the United States, Milner gained more insight into the positive academic and social relationships that exist for many Black teachers (specifically male) with Black male student populations. Milner found that certain traits of African American teachers enhance the overall success of their Black students when compared to teachers of different backgrounds. These traits included culturally responsive approaches, culturally informed relationships, mentoring and role modeling, parental connections, culturally congruent instructional practices, and Black teachers' ability to provide counternarratives on behalf of Black students. The counternarrative allows for the advocacy of Black students in educational spaces where others may misunderstand their realities, experiences, and worldviews. For example, Peggy, a researcher and participant in Milner's study speaking on the Black teacher's ability to establish culturally informed relationships, stated:

> It comes in subtly [or through the hidden curriculum]; it comes in the talks that they [Black teachers] had with students. It comes up in club activities…so the hidden curriculum was to explain what it means to be Black [and] American, to

> [be] role models…. And I would add this deep understanding of culture. It's not just that I have high expectations of you and…believe in your capacity to achieve, and they're [Black teachers] willing to push you [Black students]. The teacher also had an intuitive understanding of the culture because they lived it. I [the teacher] live in the community. (p. 98)

Conducting two separate surveys, Brown (2009a, 2009b) explored the influence of Black male educators. Like Milner, Brown agreed that specific traits enhance learning opportunities for Black male students. Brown's (2009a) study summarized three stylistic themes identified through observations of successful Black male teachers. Observing nine teachers, Brown gained a better sense of the teaching strategies that Black male teachers employed that were most successful among their African American male student population. These strategies included "enforcer," "negotiator," and "playful" styles of teaching.

The "enforcer style" of teaching relies heavily on defined expectations of behaviors both within the school and throughout the school. Black male teachers utilizing this strategy maintained that in order for African American males to succeed, they need to have a clear understanding of discipline and order. For example, Baba Gossett (a teacher participant in this study), drawing from his military background, enforced a clear sense of rules, responsibilities, and expectations such as making sure all students had their learning materials visible and ready at the beginning of a lesson.

In contrast, the "negotiator" method was used to include Black male students in the creation of expectations that the students would reasonably follow—e.g., Baba Parker and his interaction with his male student who was having difficulty with his 8th grade writing assignment on the topic of the Harlem Renaissance. Noting the student's frustration, Baba Parker proceeded to engage him in conversation about this topic,

prompting the student to talk about the Harlem Renaissance as if it was just a question a person might ask him in an informal setting, as opposed to as an evaluation or test of his knowledge. After engaging in a lively discussion about the Harlem Renaissance, Baba Parker pointed out that the student was indeed an expert on the topic and acknowledged that the student could indeed complete the task of writing his paper, negotiating enthusiastically: “Now go write me a paper about the Harlem Renaissance!” (p. 431). Patience and spending significant time individually with students were common attributes of Black male teachers utilizing the negotiator strategy, with the teachers patiently sitting back and observing their students’ disposition to learning rather than feeling the need to correct or resolve the students’ conflict.

Laughter and playfulness were common approaches among the teachers in the study, enacting teaching rooted in the belief “that African American males needed a space to laugh, joke and vent their accomplishments and frustrations” (p. 428). For example, Baba King engaged his male students in an animated, student-initiated conversation, comparing the qualities of “old school” versus “new school” basketball players. Between laughter and friendly banter, the group of Black boys was implicitly engaging in critical deliberation while also building a positive rapport with Baba King.

These three teaching approaches did not occur in isolation, and could, at times, be used together to support relationships between Black male teachers and Black boys. Most importantly, Black male participants understood that different contexts required flexibility in teaching methods. According to Brown, African American male teachers, having similar educational experiences, understood the importance of implementing the three described teaching styles to better meet the needs of their students.

In another study, Brown (2009b) utilized an instrumental case study to examine the discourses of social justice used by African American male teachers when teaching African American male students. He found that Black male teachers applied three common discourses (Black functionalism, Black liberalism, and Black nationalism) when educating Black male students. A Black functionalist orientation assumes "that African Americans must master the normative technical and linguistic codes of the dominant culture, without negating their own cultural identities" (p. 479). For example, several teachers in this study argued that African American boys must learn the value of work, as well as how to *code-switch*, the ability to act and speak in culturally acceptable ways across various social settings. Baba Greene stated that

> one thing about a Black male is that they have to understand how to interact in both worlds. And we try to teach them that they're supposed to speak proper English, dress a certain way, so, with quotes around it, to 'act White', you know and that's how they perceive it. And you know at the same time, we understand that they have to live where they live and they still need to interact with the people on their block, within their houses and so forth. You know that's something that's real difficult because we have to teach that. (p. 480)

Similar to functionalism yet ideologically different is the Black liberalist orientation, which again concerns the Black males' ability to adapt to society; however, Black liberalists maintain that African Americans must be able to see themselves as a part of the "history, development, and maintenance of the American nation" (p. 481). A common approach of the Black liberalist is to reclaim one's identity as an American; this is the point Baba Gossett made when stating:

> I teach these children that this is our country! This is our country and everything practical that you use…you can almost go back in history and see how we contributed to the conveniences that we have today…this should be our Promised Land. (p. 482)

Unlike Black liberalism, Black nationalism takes the position that Black Americans can only solve their problems through self-sustaining communities that do not depend on White America's inclusion of African Americans in the greater public sphere. Drawing on the metaphorical idea of American citizens striving for a piece of the *American pie,* Baba Newton explained:

> You know, they've [other African Americans] really got real comfortable in living this lifestyle that, you know; even this teaching thing is just one-step to the *American pie*. The *American pie* is not a pie I want to taste…I'm cool on that. I want to get my own type of pie. (p. 483)

The three distinct frameworks are developed through a direct understanding of the Black male experience in the United States. According to Brown, some of the problems Black males may endure include: negative societal perceptions, institutional barriers (low expectations, incarceration, labeling), and home settings with few positive male representations. As a result of these challenges, Black males may experience opposition to authority, which proves to be detrimental to their social and educational progress. Brown's case study revealed the diversity in beliefs and practices of Black male teachers that enhances the educational opportunities and social experiences of Black male students. Hayes and colleagues' aforementioned arguments resonated in Brown's conclusion—cultural congruency helps teachers make informed teaching decisions within the classroom based on shared cultural, historical, and educational experiences.

Additional studies reviewed included Kirkland (2011a) and Phalen (2013); mentorship is mentioned in both texts. Kirkland (2011a) discussed student involvement in a mentoring program, My Brother's Keeper (MBK), which aims to "provide early social and academic intervention for Black boys, preparing them for college and life" (p. 374). In his study, Kirkland explored how Black boys understand literacy "deeply and

intimately through other young Black men" (p. 374). He told the story of Rashad and his older brother Damon, and how Rashad's literacy practices were influenced by how his brother engaged in literacy, often emulating his brother's voice in his own writing and writing on topics and themes that were important to Damon; as Kirkland noted, Rashad's "'critical' literacy was a performance of Damon's life" (p. 377). For example, Rashad wrote, "*Life is this way: you either a pimp or a ho and some people be both…. They be wanting us to go to these colleges, taking out loans so yall can pay yall pimps. See, in this life you got two kinds of people…*" (p. 376). Rashad's piece was highly influenced by the lived experiences of his brother Damon and also reflective of Damon's views of the world. This study illustrated how Black boys come to co-construct experiences and worldviews.

> For Black males, such literacies live through others and in relation to real events…. His [Rashad's] appropriation of their echoes [other Black men] …suggests a culturally and socially sensitive model for literacy that emphasizes the importance of the experiences of Black males that are shaped in the company of other, respected Black males. (p. 377)

Although Damon was not a formal teacher role model for Rashad, the example of their relationship further supported the value of Black males as educators of Black boys, particularly Black men who are "prepared to serve as examples for which students can model themselves and with whom students can identify" (McDougal, 2009, p. 439).

Another key element of mentoring is a heightened sense of self-identity. Kirkland (2011a) addressed the topic of self-identity, grounding the discussion of the concept on Freire's (1995) ideas on praxis, which "seeks to empower the individual to knowledge of self, other and one's surroundings by introducing the substances of those things from where they are best found" (p. 377). Kirkland (2011a) argued that Black men need to be

given the opportunity to integrate aspects of their home lives into the classroom and their curriculum, as a way of valuing the knowledges and practices Black children and youth have and of breaking the habit of silencing Black children, youth, and men in schooling.

Phalen's (2013) research was an extension of a previous mentoring program in a low-income neighborhood in Boston. Phalen, along with other students from Harvard's Black Student Association, started a nonprofit organization dcalled Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL), a summer program aimed at helping their scholars improve their reading, writing, and math skills. Phalen told several stories collected over a 20-year period of how the work affected the lives of African American males in the program. Although the mentors and teachers in BELL were both men and women, the stories provided by former scholars in the program highlighted the importance of building relationships with Black adults, who helped them come to see themselves as capable learners. One example is the story of 9-year-old twins who were known as the "terrible twins" in their school. After their experience in the BELL program, working closely with mentors who consistently complimented the boys, the boys' mother noticed a tremendous change in their behaviors due to positive affirmations. Both scholars agreed that mentoring and positive role models are essential in the academic and social success of adolescent Black males.

There seems to be interconnectedness among several of the pieces reviewed that speaks on the importance of cultural capital, culturally relevant/culturally responsive teaching, and critical pedagogies. Across both studies on teaching adolescent Black men, the key point was to seek to understand Black male students and the diverse experiences they carry with them to school.

Conclusion

Critical race theory (CRT) provided a lens for reviewing the outlined literature. In thinking about the features of CRT, I started by considering how young children come to understand their identities specifically as related to race and how these perceived identities and relationships with early childhood teachers (who also harbor biases about students based on race) influence children's academic achievement and social development. CRT encouraged me to think about the intersectionality of young children's identities, race, *and* racism because of the deeply ingrained effects of racism on everyday life. I then reviewed the literature on the promises of *Brown v. Board of Education* and how the decision to desegregate schools was masked in promoting equitable learning opportunities for Black children, but instead worked in favor of White people and the reputation of the United States in foreign affairs. CRT's critique of civil rights legislation as benefiting the White community influenced my understanding of the *Brown* case. Finally, CRT's emphasis on counternarratives and counterstories, and listening to the voices and experiential knowledge of historically marginalized peoples, helped me see how experiences and counterstories are co-constructed between Black boys and Black male teachers. These counterstories highlight the brilliance of Black boys and Black male teachers—perspectives too often ignored in the media's portrayal of Black boys and Black men.

Ladson-Billings (2011) noted that "in many schools, the primary focus of Black male children's educational experience is maintaining order and discipline rather than student learning and academic achievement" (p. 7). Schools appear to be preoccupied with governing and controlling Black male bodies. In light of findings from existing

literature, in this dissertation study, I sought to add to the current literature on the relationships between Black boys and Black male teachers by exploring these relationships in early childhood education settings, acknowledging that children come to understand their identities and perceived ability according to race at a very young age, and the influence of teacher-child relationships in early school experiences in predicting children's academic performance and sense of belonging in American schools.

In addition to CRT, I also relied on Black feminist thought as I reviewed the literature on relationships between Black male teachers and Black boys in American schools. In many ways, my reading of the literature was informed by my experiences observing relationships of Black boys and Black men growing up in a family where generational ties were closely formed, with Black men who were both members of my biological family and greater community family. "As black women we have the right and responsibility to define ourselves and to seek our allies in common cause with black men against racism" (Lorde, 1978, p. 35). With this commitment in mind, much like the work of Evans-Winters (2019), I questioned and interpreted findings from a Black feminist's interpretation of the social world, yearning for qualitative research that "is reflective of my own personal experiences or the experiences of those around me, or those whom I have come in contact with at some point in my life journey" (p. 2).

Black feminist researchers (e.g., Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000) have underscored the importance of the experiences of Black women and Black researchers more broadly, as we seek to maintain Black community. Further, hooks (2000) highlighted the necessity of having a love ethic, stating: "To heal our wounded communities…we must return to a love ethic, one that is exemplified by the combined

forces of care, respect, knowledge and responsibility" (p. 4). Thus, I read the presented literature with the understanding that there is a great deal of responsibility for Black researchers to share *our* lived experiences, to present research that focuses on empowerment and uplifting the Black community.

Further, Black feminist thought afforded me the understanding that

> There can be no love without justice. Until we live in a culture that not only respects but also upholds basic civil rights for children, most children will not know love. In our culture the…institutionalized sphere of power…can easily be autocratic and fascistic…. Unlike women who can organize to protest sexist domination, demanding both equal rights and justice, children can only rely on well-meaning adults to assist them if they are being exploited and oppressed. (hooks, 2000, p. 18)

This is important as "there are not many public discussions of love in our culture right now" (pp. xvii-xviii). Nevertheless, Black feminist thought reminds us that if we render love irrelevant, we deem justice unattainable. Racism has been deeply interconnected to the young Black boys' doubts of whether love exists. As young Black boys are suspended in preschools at racially disproportionate rates, they experience "unkind and/or cruel punishment meted out by the grown-ups" (pp. 17-18) tasked with their education, leading Black boys to believe that love does not exist. To be sure, love is "acceptance, care, knowledge, and responsibility" (pp. 214-215) all rolled into one, but hooks cautioned that love should not be regarded as a noun (that exists or does not) but as action toward justice. This understanding guided my study.

I began this chapter with an examination of the importance of early childhood education, followed by what the literature currently says about the experiences of Black boys in American schools, and concluding with a review of the success that scholars have found between Black male teachers of Black male students, specifically in elementary/

secondary education. The results for this specific field of study were limited. However, through an exploration of the realities of Black boys in early childhood classrooms, improving preschool programs, teaching young students social justice, reviewing the limited number of studies on teaching young Black boys, and considering the transferability of effective instructional methods in teaching adolescent Black males, I sought to move in the direction of discovering how to improve the educational experiences of our young Black boys. The conversation cannot end here, specifically in considering the relationships between Black boys and Black male teachers in early childhood education, which is currently missing from the education scholarship. There is clearly a need for more focused research in this field; in-depth research on what is working well within early childhood classrooms is still needed to maximize Black male students' educational experiences. This will better prepare student-teachers as well as support in-service teacher development, thus engaging the tools and skills needed to enhance the academic and social experiences of young Black boys in schools and schooling. By taking a proactive stance in establishing what works best for Black boys, I sought to dismantle narratives of deficiencies and underachievement, replacing such stories with limitless possibilities.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I describe the design of my study. I include an overview of my methodology, review lessons and preliminary findings from my exploratory study, outline data collection and data analysis methods, and finally consider issues of soundness and positionality. Given the aforementioned research findings of the power and importance of positive relationships between Black male teachers and Black male students in Grades 3 and higher (see Chapter II), it is imperative to look at these relationships within early childhood classrooms. This is particularly significant in light of early childhood research findings, which underscore that relationships between teachers and students play a meaningful role in young children's social and emotional development (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Understanding the importance of relationship-building in early childhood settings and of Black male teachers and Black male students in Grades 3 and higher, this study aimed to explore the relationships between Black men and Black boys within the context of early childhood education, offering important implications for the future education of young Black boys.

Overview of Design

My research questions guided the methodological approach undertaken in my study. They were:

- How do Black male teachers in the greater New York City area perceive their relationships with Black boys in early childhood education?
- How are the educational experiences of Black boys in early childhood classrooms in New York City shaped through interactions with Black male educators?
    - What are young Black boys learning about themselves as both learners and future Black men from their Black male teachers?

Due to the open-ended quality of studying and making meaning of relationships, I employed a qualitative research design (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Drawing on critical race theory (CRT) and Black feminist thought, my goal was to illustrate *other people's stories* given the rich tradition of storytelling within the African American community (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As Hill Collins (2000) noted, "Black feminist thought's identity as a 'critical' social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and that for similarly oppressed groups" (p. 9). I employed critical race methodology as an act of resistance, to share stories too often ignored. Solórzano and Yosso defined critical race methodology as a research approach grounded in CRT, which "pushes us to…recognize silenced voices in qualitative data" (p. 38). Critical race methodology was well suited for my study, for at the root of this methodology, "[f]rom developing research questions to collecting, analyzing, and presenting data, critical race methodology centers on students of color"

(p. 37). Both of my research questions were constructed with the purpose of centering the experiences of Black boys in American schools, understanding how they "experience and respond to the U.S. educational system" (pp. 36-37).

Too often, Black boys are presented as vilified characters within our nation's classrooms and educational research that paints portraits of academic failure and cultural deficiencies. Such was the case when Hart and Risley (2003) suggested that children from welfare families experience a 30-million-word gap by the age of 3, when compared to same-aged children from wealthier families. Their research suggested that children from impoverished homes experience a lag in development during their formative early childhood years. Although well-known, the study is deeply flawed. This finding came from a single study, which began decades ago. It only involved 42 families, therefore being statistically insignificant; statistical significance requires a minimum number of 50. The study contained a built-in racial bias. Of the 42 families, seven out of 10 of the families classified as "working class" were Black, and nine out of 10 of the families categorized as "professional" were White; therefore, class in effect indexed race. Further, researchers fully embraced the cultural deficit paradigm, a prevalent feature of the War on Poverty deployed by the Johnson administration in the 1960s, which posed that children of color and of no-/low-income families lacked adequate home environments to develop optimally. Finally, a replication of the study failed to produce similar results (Sperry et al., 2019). Yet, due to the prevalence of pathological portrayals of Black boys and Black families, these deeply flawed findings have become part of the dominant story of Black boys and Black families in the United States. The issue with stories such as the word gap is that they further privilege students from certain backgrounds, typically

children from White and affluent families, while ignoring the cultural assets and funds of knowledge that children of color possess.

Admittedly, the Children's Defense Fund (CDF, 2007) noted that "Black children are more than three times as likely as white children to be born into poverty and to be poor, and are almost four times as likely to live in extreme poverty" (p. 16), yet it is important to understand the intersectionality between systems of poverty and racism as a result of the historical, educational, sociopolitical, and moral debts owed to communities of color in the United States. This notion of a gap in language development paints a deficit storyline, further perpetuating a majoritarian story of racial privilege and disregarding the "[i]ntercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25).

An affordance of employing a critical race methodology is that it works in opposition of these crisis narratives that uphold Black boys as pathologies and plague many teacher education programs, which "draw on majoritarian stories to explain educational inequity through a cultural deficit model…pass[ing] on beliefs that students of color are culturally deprived" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 31). Another affordance of critical race methodology is its focus on counterstories centering the lived experiences of racially and ethnically minoritized individuals and communities in hopeful and powerful ways, which reject the all-too-pervasive centering of whiteness and ethnocentrically scaling and rating the practices, experiences, and ways of communicating of communities of color against dominant stories (Souto-Manning, 2010).

Counterstories are rooted in ways and systems of knowing of communities of color. They offer a number of affordances:

> (a) They can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice, (b) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems, (c) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position, and (d) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone. (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36)

Challenging dominant ideologies and majoritarian stories of Black children as being filled with deficits, an example of a counterstory to the dominant story of the word gap can be found in the work of Delpit (2012). In reviewing data from pediatrics studies on the development of infants, Delpit found that in African countries such as Uganda and Kenya, Black babies reached milestones earlier (4-day-olds smiling and 6- to 7-week-olds crawling) and develop faster than White babies in the United States. In doing so, she offered a counterstory to the majoritarian story of Black children lagging behind and affirming that "there is no achievement gap at birth" (p. 3).

My focus on counterstories, which unapologetically positions "experiential knowledge…as a strength and draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26), influenced my construction of the research questions, such as the specific language regarding Black male teachers' *perceptions* of their relationships with Black boys. Ultimately, through my exploration of the relationships between Black boys and Black male teachers in early childhood education, I constructed counterstories of Black men and boys that challenged deficit perspectives, committing to justice. These counterstories were constructed through a combination of

the data gathered from interviews with teachers and students and their experiences teaching and learning together, as well from observations of their interactions, where I served as the narrator of other people's stories, relaying their experiences "in a third person voice" (p. 33).

Exploratory Study

Prior to my dissertation study, I conducted an exploratory study to ascertain the feasibility and value of my proposed study. Exploratory research studies are typically conducted when the problem being studied is original; that is, it has not been studied before. In my exploratory study, I sought to determine the best research design, data collection methods, and participant selection to address my research questions. Overall, my exploratory study sought to improve the research design of my dissertation study. It led to important changes to my initial plans.

Piloting Interviews

During the spring semester of 2015, I had the opportunity to pilot my interview protocol and observation methods. The research was conducted over the course of one semester and included two interviews and two observations. I utilized a snowball technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) to recruit participants. A total of four Black male educators who participated in my exploratory study. I confirmed that the participants self-identified as Black men prior to the interviews and observations. I observed the classrooms of Mr. F. and Mr. W., both of whom taught at the same school in Brooklyn, teaching kindergarten and Grade 2, respectively. I piloted my interview questions with

two Black male educators, Chris and Bryce. Both the interviews and observations were 45 minutes to an hour in length.

I developed the interview questions deductively, inspired by the scholarly research on the relationships between Black male teachers with Black male students in elementary and secondary education (discussed in Chapter II), to document and understand the experiences of Black male teachers and Black boys in early childhood education. These questions included:

- Can you describe your current role and your teaching experiences?
- Could you describe your relationships with Black male teachers in your own schooling experiences?
- (Follow-up if the participant didn’t have Black male teachers): How do you think your schooling experiences would have been affected through interactions with Black male teachers?
- Could you tell me about your relationships with Black boys in your class?
- Is there anything in particular that you do with your Black male students to build relationships with them?
- Can you give me an example when sharing the race and gender of your students worked in the students’ favor?
- Is there a difference between how you interact with your Black male students and the interactions of your colleagues with Black male students?
    - Could you give me explicit examples of the differences that you observe?
- Do you have a network of Black male teachers who you share experiences with?

- When you're talking to other Black male teachers, how do you talk about your role as a teacher?
- How did you become interested in teaching our youngest learners?
- Are there other Black males in ECE that you would recommend for this study?
- Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything we haven't touched on?

The interviews were not limited to the previous questions, as I wanted them to feel more like conversations and less like structured interviews.

Interview questions were piloted with Chris and Bryce (pseudonyms have been utilized to keep the identities of the teachers confidential). The first participant, Chris, taught 1st grade at a school in Brooklyn. The second interview was conducted with Bryce, an assistant principal at an elementary school in Long Island. Prior to his work as a principal, he taught physical education in an elementary school setting. Currently, he supervises teachers at his school and conducts observations and debriefs with the 2nd through 4th grade teachers.

My exploratory study emphasized the importance of interviewing both Black male teachers and Black boys, as my findings felt insufficient in addressing how the educational experiences of Black boys are shaped through their interactions with Black male teachers. Although I had an understanding of the importance of the *adult consciousness* (Paley, 1984) as a way of interpreting the experiences of children, I had no child-informed experiences to analyze through an adult mindset, making my data set feel incomplete. Finally, there were moments in my exploratory study interviews when I

missed opportunities to ask the participants to elaborate, which reinforces the need to conduct follow-up interviews with my participant as a way of thinking about "what is being said, and not being said" (Dilley, 2000, p. 134).

Observations

Although I only conducted two observations (lasting between 45 minutes and one hour) in my exploratory study, in both settings, I noted the deep interconnections of purpose, love, and mattering as I observed Black male teachers interact with Black students in their classrooms and within the larger context of the school. Through a variety of ways, they communicated that Black boys in their classrooms mattered. In my observations, I noticed the importance of nonverbal gestures that communicated a sense of love towards Black boys, noting fist bumps, pats on the back, and looking Black boys in the eyes as ways of not only expressing love but overall acknowledging Black boys within schools, communicating that they are seen, that they matter. As such, I centered the importance of noticing and noting nonverbal interactions between Black male teachers and young Black boys in the early childhood classroom.

In my observations, I noticed that the pejorative glances that Black men experience in a multitude of spaces were replaced with smiles and head nods which acknowledged hard work and active participation within the classrooms of the Black educators participating in this study. Quietly sitting on the carpeted reading area of a Black male teacher's kindergarten classroom, I focused my attention on the tiny learner sitting next to me on the colorful rug. Throughout the 15-minute reading lesson, with bright eyes and a beaming smile, he closely followed the movements of his teacher as they sang a song on long and short vowel sounds. I let my gaze follow the student's and

found a smiling face looking back at him. This was pivotal to my decision to focus my observational gaze on one Black boy, so that I could pay close attention to his actions and reactions to his Black male teacher. Although it may be argued that this student would have responded in a similar fashion to any teacher expressing a loving glance, all of the teachers I interviewed mentioned the importance of these actions being shared between Black men and boys as it gives them positive images of love related to Black masculinity, with hopes of shaping the type of men these Black boys will become.

Overall Learnings from Exploratory Study

As I read and reread across interviews and observations conducted as part of my exploratory study, the common thread I identified as I engaged in weaving together the experiences of the Black male educators previously interviewed and observed was their deep commitment to *loving on* Black boys. One teacher noted the influence his presence had on his Black male students, as he often communicated to his boys, "I am a much bigger version of you." The possible benefits of shared love between Black male students and Black male teachers move beyond the academic benefits of Black male educators in early childhood classrooms. The value in being seen as fully human, as possessing self-worth, in being acknowledged, counters the "dominant discourse...fed to young Black men, who yield easily, readily relate, and therefore produce and consume their own hatred" (Kirkland, 2013, p. 94).

This idea of recognizing Black boys' presence within classrooms and the value of being noticed as human beings with real feelings and desires are often overlooked; this is present in research and came to life in my exploratory study interviews with Chris and Bryce. The potential ability to understand the reality of Black boys, having shared

common experiences of being Black and male and balancing delicate spaces where nonverbal gestures are often disparaging, appeared to be a potential benefit of matching Black male teachers with Black male students in early childhood classrooms, much as I observed during my exploratory study.

This blossoming theme of love was mentioned in every interview and was witnessed in classrooms—*loving on* Black boys refers to a type of reciprocated love that moves in silence through hugs, handshakes, and high fives. The love that was expressed was unique in that it was so deeply connected to the intersectionality between race and gender, rooted in the ways that Black men express love to each other utilizing nonverbal loving actions that allow them to show love in a way that aligns with unspoken codes of Black masculinity.

Because studies seeking to understand the relationships between Black male teachers and young Black boys in early childhood education have—to my knowledge—not been conducted and/or published, I paid particular attention to my exploratory study. That is, prior to engaging in my dissertation study, I made several changes informed by my exploratory study's experiences as a researcher and my findings prior to moving into collecting data for my dissertation. Conclusively, the lessons learned from my exploratory study helped me design a stronger research study, highlighting the importance of providing multiple opportunities to listen to the voices of my participants.

Research Site and Participant Selection

In this section, I focus on my dissertation study, explaining my selection of research site and participants. In considering an optimal location to pursue these research

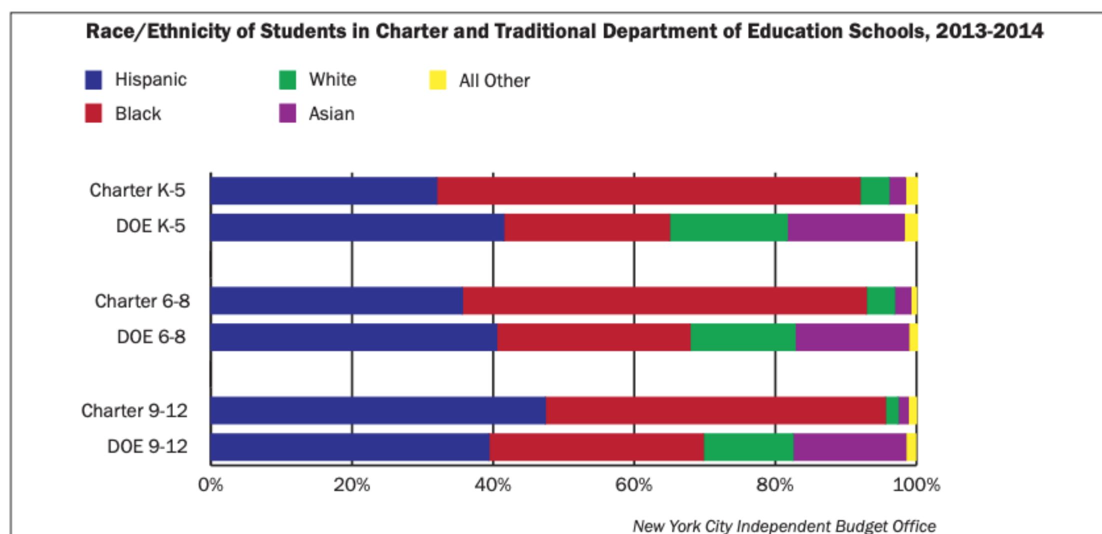
questions, I purposefully selected New York City (NYC) as an ideal setting for exploring relationships between Black men and Black boys. As previously stated in Chapter I, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, NYC reported the largest number of self-identified Black residents than any other U.S. city, with over 2 million residents within the city boundaries. Additionally, the NYC Department of Education (2017) noted that of the 75,000 teachers in New York City, roughly 8.5% of these teachers are males of color. In New York City, 85% of students are Latino, Black, or Asian (de Blasio, 2016), while there is great disproportionality between the number and percentages of teacher of color to students of color, compared to the national statistics, where only 2% of the teaching population is comprised of Black men (U.S. Department of Education), which may lead researchers not to study these relationships, NYC was a site where my dissertation research was rendered possible. This is because Black teachers represent the highest percentage of racially minoritized teachers in NYC at around 20%, leading one to conclude that the number of Black male teachers in New York is higher than the national average. Additionally, several initiatives have been implemented in the state of New York aimed at providing equitable opportunities for boys and men of color (My Brother's Keeper, NYC Men Teach, Young Men's Initiative), making New York an apt location to explore the relationships between Black boys and Black male teachers.

Research Site

The research study was conducted in a public charter school in New York City. My exploratory study yielded teachers from both Brooklyn and Long Island; however, for my research study, I focused solely on schools servicing children in New York City. I did not limit my research site to a particular type of school; NYC Department of

Education (DOE) Pre-K centers, DOE district schools, NYC Early Education Centers, and charter schools were welcomed. The limited population of Black male teachers in early childhood education influenced my decision to include teachers from diverse classroom settings, as opposed to relying on a particular type of school.

It is unsurprising that a charter school served as the setting of my research study; according to the NYC independent budget office, there are many more Black students in the earliest grades in New York City's charter schools than in DOE public schools. The chart below (NYC Independent Budget Office, 2015, p. 14) illustrates this discrepancy:



(NYC Independent Budget Office, 2015, p. 14)

Figure 3.1. More young Black students are enrolled in NYC charter schools

Further, a national study found that student-teacher racial match is more likely to occur in charter schools than in traditional public schools (Gershenson, 2019). As such, the setting offers a pertinent situated representation of a phenomenon. As in all case studies, I sought to offer a situated representation of a phenomenon in hopes of offering a

counterstory to the majoritarian story that problematically defines Black boys in schools and schooling.

Participant Selection

Potential participants represented a broad range of teaching experience, from second-year teachers to veteran educators with over 15 years of teaching experience. I found phone communication to be the most effective way to reach potential participants, as many of the teachers have mentioned feeling bogged down by email correspondence from work. In order to observe at the school, I made sure to receive consent from the school's administrators and from families of the children in the classrooms I observed. In my exploratory study, I found many principals interested in my study and eager for their teachers and students to participate. I introduced myself to administrators through email and followed up with a formal letter describing my study; I also conducted an informal visit to the school to meet administration. This was the point at which many administrators either declined being part of the study or stopped responding to my attempts to communicate with them.

After the teacher and school administrators agreed to participate in the study, I conferred with the teachers to help identify a Black boy who might be interested in participating. In order for a child to participate in this study, (a) the child/child's family must have self-identified as Black; (b) the child must have self-identified as male; (c) the child must have given assent; and (d) the family must have returned the written consent form, completed and signed, granting permission for their child to participate.

I identified a pool of teachers who were interested in participating in the study; the participants of my exploratory study referred me to many of these teachers.

Therefore, I engaged in purposive sampling (focusing on participants that met the aforementioned criteria) and were located in New York City. Participant recruitment happened via *snowball sampling*; that is, exploratory study participants referred other Black male teachers (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), playing an important part in my participant selection.

There was a total of three participants in this study, which included two Black male teachers and one Black boy who was a student in one of the classrooms observed. In order to participate in this study, the teacher must have: (a) self-identified as Black and male; (b) been teaching in an early childhood setting (PreK-2nd grade); (c) been teaching a student population that includes Black male students; and (d) returned a completed and signed written consent form. Interviews and observations began once I collected all of the preceding consent forms from the school.

Data Collection Methods

I addressed my research questions through the use of observational case studies (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), which served as counterstories to dominant stories which oppress and marginalize the schooling experiences of young Black boys. Data collected included participant observations in two 2nd-grade New York City classrooms over the course of 16 weeks as well as two individual interviews with two Black male teachers and two interviews with one Black male student. Interviews were conducted at the beginning of the observation period, and again during the last week of observations. Each teacher-interview lasted between 40 minutes to an hour, and the two student-interviews were approximately 10 minutes each, in an attempt to maximize the student's classroom

instructional time. The purpose of the interviews was to listen to the voices of the participants as they described relationships between Black male teachers and Black boys in early childhood education. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) noted that observational case studies typically focus on a particular organization or some aspect of the organization, and the New York City classrooms where a Black male was a teacher and the student population included Black boys served as my site of interest. My attention was focused on Black male teachers and Black male students' interactions.

Due to scheduling restraints at the school, there was a 50-minute break in the morning schedule where students physically moved to another classroom for art, science, or physical education, under the guidance of a different teacher. Both teachers generously allowed me to stay in their classrooms during their prep period, and I tried to honor their break period by silently reflecting in an attempt to avoid disrupting their workflow. I would switch classrooms once students returned from their elective course. Alternating the order of the classroom observations, each observation lasted 90 minutes. During the morning period, both classrooms followed the same schedule of literacy, guided reading, and math occurring before lunch.

Observation notes were recorded on a three-column form (see Appendix E), which included columns for Date/Event, Implications/Questions, and Observation Meaning/Interpretation. These notes were then used to construct memos of potential themes and were also coded, and the same codes were used for coding the interview transcripts.

In addition to observations and interviews, I also collected a student-created artifact as a way of utilizing triangulation because "many sources of data [are] better in a

study than a single source because multiple sources lead[s] to a fuller understanding of the phenomena you [are] studying" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 107). The artifact was a drawing of Mr. Gomis that Malik drew at the beginning of an interview as a response to my prompt (Appendix D). The artifact was analyzed for evidence to support Malik's reflections on his interactions with Mr. Gomis. For example, in Malik's drawing, Mr. Gomis is smiling, supporting Malik's claim that Mr. Gomis is a kind and caring teacher. A table of the research questions and the accompanying methods that were utilized to explore each question is provided below.

Table 3.1. *Research Questions and Methods of Data Collection*

Research Question	**Methods Used to Collect Data**
How do Black male teachers in the greater New York City area perceive their relationships with Black boys in early childhood education?	● Interviews with teachers
How are the educational experiences of Black boys in early childhood classrooms in New York City shaped through interactions with Black male educators? ● What are young Black male students learning about themselves as both learners and future Black men from their Black male teachers?	● Interviews with student ● Observations and kidwatching ● Artifact collection

Interviews

My first research question, which deals with the perceptions of Black male educators pertaining to their relationships with young Black boys in early childhood education, was researched through the use of an unstructured interview with each of two focal teachers. The purpose of unstructured interviews is to understand complex

behaviors without imposing categories that could potentially limit the field of inquiry (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Through the use of unstructured interviews, my intent was to again listen to the stories of Black male early childhood education teachers because, as Bogdan and Biklen noted, “Good interviewing involves deep listening” (p. 98).

I wanted to learn more about how teachers perceive the relationships between Black male teachers and Black male students through reflections on their educational experiences, factors that influenced their decision to enter the field of early childhood education, and current classroom interactions between teachers and students. Although the interviews were unstructured, I employed Spradley’s (1979) interview questions to guide my conversations with participants. I included the protocol for Interview #1 in Appendix B.

The overarching goal of the interviews was to situate and determine the focus on the counterstories presented in Chapter IV. That is, interviews served to contextualize counterstories (first interview) and to focus my analysis and construction of counterstories. Through interviews, I sought to chronicle Black male teachers’ experiences teaching Black boys in early childhood classrooms. My research was rooted in critical race theory and listening to the voice of the Other.

All interviews were voice-recorded (with the participants’ consent) and transcribed for further analysis. Upon the completion of the observation period, I conducted exit interviews with the teachers to follow up on the themes I had identified in my analysis of the initial interview. I presented the themes to the teacher and asked for feedback on my preliminary findings, while also encouraging each teacher to expand on any of the ideas from the first interview or themes that were not initially revealed during

the 16-week observation period, as a way of determining if additional observations are needed. Furthermore, the data collected (illustrated pictures) from interviewing the child participant was shared with his teacher. The goal was to read the artifacts from another perspective, that of the teacher closely working with the child on a daily basis. This produced another reading of the text utilizing the *adult consciousness*, explored further in the following section.

I interviewed two Black male teachers (Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson) and a Black male student (Malik) in one of these teachers' classes in order to hear both adult and child perspectives. It was my assumption that listening to two participants who actively engaged and interacted within the same story setting would give me an even deeper understanding of the relationship building between Black male students and Black male teachers and how this shapes the experiences for both individuals. My assumption was rooted in Vivian Paley's (1984, as cited in Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005) point:

> Children as young as two and three can both express preferences and opinions about gender relations. However, they have a limited ability to articulate what they mean about the significance of gender…. There cannot be an adult consciousness within which to give shape to a particular experience. (p. 56)

My hope was to read the two separate conversations together to identify themes and similar experiences, as well as to ground the experiences of the student with the perceptions and adult consciousness of the teacher. Too frequently, society mistakenly assumes that young children are incapable of making sense of what is happening within the greater community. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) noted "…that the acts of children are rarely interpreted within the discourse of resistance the way the acts of adolescents are" (p. 18).

In her research of learning *from* Black boys and their experiences with being "made bad" in and by schools, Ferguson (2000) found that children possess the ability to engage actively in forms of resistance: "I came to see kids…as resourceful social actors who took an active role in shaping their daily experiences. I began to recognize…the strategies they devised for negotiating and maneuvering within the structures of power" (p. 15). These insights deeply informed my commitment to listening to a Black boy, including his voice and experiential knowledge in my research study.

I conducted two interviews with one Black boy. In order to engage with younger participants, I created an interview protocol (Appendix C) to guide my initial interviews, which were conducted at the beginning of the 16-week observation period. The student was prompted to draw a picture of his teacher as a way of initiating the conversation and was asked to tell me about his teacher. I took a photo of the picture to keep as a part of my data collection, honoring the child's request to keep his drawing. The second interview was an exit interview, and I asked the student to reflect on his classroom. During this time, the student was prompted to draw a picture of his classroom (Appendix D) and answer the following questions, to further understand Black boys' interactions with Black male teachers:

- Tell me about your class and classroom.
- If someone doesn't follow the rules in class, what happens?
- What happens if you don't follow the rules in class? How does {teacher} handle it?

Deciding to conduct interviews as my method for collecting data was intentional in that I was searching for the often-ignored stories of the Other, while also seeking to

construct knowledge about the experiences of both Black male teachers and Black boys from these stories.

On the purpose of qualitative research, Kvale (2007) noted that interviews are a "construction site for knowledge" (p. 7). Thus, I was not passively listening to the stories of Black male teachers and students, as I sought to listen deeply, I actively worked towards constructing meaning and knowledge from what I heard, engaging in "an interchange of views" (p. 5) that occurred in my conversations with each of the participants. Kvale's descriptions of the purpose and usefulness of interviews reinforced my decision to implement interviews: "The qualitative interview is a key venue for exploring the ways in which subjects experience and understand the world…[and] is a powerful method of producing knowledge of the human situation" (p. 9). Interviews are a common source of data in the construction of counterstories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

In identifying interviews as a site of knowledge construction, my role as a researcher aligned with Kvale's *traveler metaphor*, in that I was the traveler wandering together with my participants, asking questions, and listening to counterstories. As a traveler, I understood that "The potentialities of meanings in the original stories are differentiated and unfolded through [my] interpretations in the narratives [I bring] back to home audiences" (p. 20). My personal and professional experiences informed the construction of the counterstory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). From this perspective, my role as a researcher was rooted in the idea of knowledge as socially constructed. It was also informed by my *cultural intuition* (Delgado Bernal, 1998), "a complex process that is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic" (p. 568), accounting for the role of my personal and professional experiences and the unique

viewpoint as a Black woman, sister, daughter, and mother that I bring to the research process. As such, I drew on "ancestral wisdom" taught intergenerationally in Black families (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994). Cultural intuition and ancestral wisdom informed my observations.

Observations

Observations were utilized to examine the relationships between Black male teachers and the educational experiences of Black boys in early childhood education. Working with a very young student population and informed by the power of observations conducted in my experimental study, I thought it would be best to serve as an observer of the students' interactions with their teachers. I paid close attention to the language used towards Black male students, nonverbal gestures (such as smiles on the students' faces), and students' enthusiasm when learning as an additional way of exploring the interactions between Black boys and Black male teachers from my perspective as an observer.

Observations were conducted over a 16-week period (accounting for school breaks and weeks when the observation schedule did not work for the respective teachers), starting in November 2018 and concluding in April 2019. I wanted to engage observations after the classroom community and culture had already been established so that my research focus would not determine these. Further, I wanted to observe prior to the end of the school year, which is marked by a set of demands which include having to pack classrooms while children are in the classroom.

I observed each classroom once a week spending 90 minutes in each classroom. In order to engage fully with the collected data, I kept a journal where I tracked my

feelings throughout the process as a way of monitoring my prejudices and eventually generating understandings of my research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). While conducting classroom observations, I used my journal to record my observations and reflected on and analyzed my field notes immediately upon leaving the school setting, utilizing Corsaro's (1981) three frameworks for categorizing field notes—methodological, theoretical, and personal reflections.

Kidwatching

As an observational tool, I practiced *kidwatching*. Owocki and Goodman (2002) defined kidwatching as the act of taking note of what students know and can do, attempting to understand how children construct and express knowledge, and using the data to inform curriculum and instruction. My intention was to use kidwatching as a way of thinking about how young Black boys think and learn, especially as related to their understanding of themselves as learners and future Black men. Although kidwatching is predominately used by teacher-researchers to inform curriculum and teaching, it is my belief that this strategy provided a useful lens for *revaluing* children (Owocki & Goodman, 2002), considering the knowledge they have on issues of race, power, and relationships. Unlike traditional kidwatching, I did not interact with children during their instructional time in an attempt to be as unobtrusive as possible (Mertler, 2009). I did, however, interact with children in their "free" spaces, during their lunch periods, recess, and during dismissal. During these moments, I used *interpretive probing* (Mickleson, 1990) to "discover what [young Black boys] know and why they think the way they do" (Owocki & Goodman, 2002, p. 6). I focused my kidwatching on one Black male student (the same child participant who was interviewed) in one of the focal classrooms, and used

kidwatching more broadly in the other classroom, observing the actions of all of the Black boys in the class. I logged my observations on a note-taking form, adapted from Owocki and Goodman's form (Appendix E). I compiled the forms in a three-ring binder so that they were easily accessible.

Artifacts

To supplement data collected through observations and interviews, I gathered artifacts from the focal student as a way of portraying the beliefs of the child participating in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The participant was prompted to draw a picture of his teacher and describe his interactions with the teacher during the initial interview. I took a photograph of the picture to save for further analysis. In the second interview, the participant was asked to tell me about his classroom and his interactions with his teacher. The photographs of artifacts were paired with the interview transcripts to provide a closer look into the child's beliefs about himself as a learner, as a Black boy, and a future Black man.

Data Analysis

Critical race theory influenced how I analyzed my data. "Critical race analysis allows for…researchers to work towards the elimination of racism through understanding the multiple ways People of Color experience subordination" (Perez Huber, 2008, p. 165). It is through a lens of educational equity and positive teaching and learning experiences for Black boys and Black men that I read my data, centering my analysis on people of color and analyzing my data with the sole purpose of eventually drafting counterstories. In completing the analysis of my data, I utilized Horvat's (2013) methods

on *making sense* of what I saw. This included reflecting on my data throughout the duration of my collection and also upon its completion.

In order to analyze my data in the moment, I paid close attention to any questions and hunches that came up as I collected data by recording these thoughts in field notes and note-taking forms for further analysis. These ideas were then translated into memos, which Horvat explained as “a procedure used by qualitative researchers for explaining or elaborating on the observations made in the field” (p. 109). One key aspect of the memo is that it is typically written to oneself and is used to further push one’s thinking and bring the data into conversations with analytic thoughts (Appendix I provides an example of a memo from my exploratory study). These hunches turned into talking points for future interviews and informal conversations with my participants.

In addition to utilizing memos, as someone who processes information better through visual/concrete aides, I also created physical space to place data into “buckets” (p. 117) based on inductive and deductive codes used to organize data, upon transcribing each interview. Some of these codes became apparent as I read through the transcripts from my exploratory interviews (Appendix F). Some of the codes that evolved (these themes were mentioned at least three times in the first interview) included: love, *being,* shared language, fathering, role modeling, and leaving the field (Appendix J). I coded the transcript utilizing the same codes and found overlaps between the two exploratory interviews.

Analyzing my field notes, I noted love as the most common theme connecting the findings from the interviews and the observations. As I read through my interview transcripts, I created a *codebook*, a list of all the codes used for my analysis, which

included the names of the variables that each code represents, and a list of the types of items that would be coded for each variable (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 85). From my exploratory study, I had found that merely coding data, and dropping it into "buckets" or categories, felt incomplete. Once I established *categories,* groupings of codes that represent patterns that emerged from my data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), I then drafted *themes,* declarations of insights from my data and categories (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Organizing my codes by category, then generating themes helped me support my findings with rich data.

Another key aspect of my data analysis was conducting member checks, which allowed my participants the opportunity to correct errors, challenge my interpretations, assess my findings, and (re)focus my analytical gaze. This happened at several points during my research study, including after the transcription of interview recordings, as I generated initial themes, and doing the final write-up stage of my research. Working closely with participants aligned with critical race methodology. Through this collaborative work, the researcher and participants document, analyze, and interpret experiences (Perez Huber, 2008).

Finally, I engaged in ongoing analyses of my data; this began with the conceptualization of my research questions, the theoretical framework of my study, and the strategy for research design which "provide[d] preliminary foreshadowing of [my] analysis" (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 228). While utilizing a deductive approach towards analyzing my data, referencing some of my previous findings, accounting for trials and errors of my exploratory study, and planning to analyze through the use of memos, visual aids, coding, and member checks, I also approached my data from an

inductive stance; my approaches towards my analysis changed as my data collection evolved.

Positionality

To address my research questions, I needed to be attentive to my own subjectivities to consider "where self and subject [may become] joined" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). As a Black woman, I understand that I do not possess the ability to fully comprehend the intersection of race and gender as it relates to Black men within the United States. Indeed, there may be similarities based on racial discrimination; however, my desire to teach has never been questioned, particularly within a kindergarten classroom. Therefore, as a female within early childhood education, I had to consider the power and agency that I possess which eliminates barriers to entering the field that Black men experience. For example, being raised in a predominately Black neighborhood, my desire to teach, particularly in an early childhood setting, was often supported.

When my younger brother considered teaching, he was often encouraged to rethink his decision. As my family struggled with accepting his aspirations, it was communicated that men teach high school, while women are expected to "take care of the babies." It was generally accepted in my community that the teaching of young children was a highly feminized endeavor. Understanding this perspective challenged me to think critically about Black masculinities and how they affect the number of Black men entering into the field of early childhood education.

Recognizing my subjectivities reinforced the need to conduct qualitative research; as Luttrell (2009) pointed out, "qualitative research is defined by an effort to highlight the

meanings people make and the actions they take, and to offer interpretations for how and why" (p. 1). As a Black female, I understand how my subjectivities position me as an outsider to the Black male experience in early childhood education. However, shared experiences as educators of Black children, my cultural intuition, and ancestral wisdom helped narrow this gap.

Additionally, I must acknowledge that I approached this work from a perspective that was heavily influenced by the findings of previous studies that noted the positive relationships between Black male teachers and Black male students. My exploratory study also reaffirmed some of these findings by highlighting beginning themes surrounding Black male teachers' ability to construct counternarratives for young Black boys, the unique lessons they shared on Black masculinity and Black love, and the overall role modeling that occurred between teacher and student. Despite these initial findings, I had to be conscious of this bias, making sure to approach my research from a stance that did not impose my expectations of what to find in my data. This particularly impacted how I structured my interview questions in a way that did not lead the participants to respond to the questions according to what they assumed I wanted to hear.

Similarly, when recruiting participants, I found that the framing of my study directly influenced the responses and behaviors of my participants. At one point, a participant in my exploratory study noted that he was "nervous" about interviewing because he was afraid his answers would not support my research. After this realization, moving forward, when I recruited participants, I made a conscious effort to frame the study as an exploration of relationships between Black male teachers and Black male

students in early childhood education, without discussing previous research findings on the topic.

Soundness

During my early stages of reflecting on the topic of Black male teachers and Black male students in early childhood education, I was hypercritical of my ability to do the research justice. Indeed, I spent several years working in kindergarten classrooms, teaching Black boys in a city that is predominately Black. I had grown up very close to both my African American dad and brother, and felt deeply connected to issues of race and the racialization of American schooling. Yet, as a woman, I wondered if I had the agency or the right to delve into research that revolves around the intersection of race and gender. From the beginning, I toiled over the idea of presenting research that was not only sound but also authentic, in a sense, that the narratives and experiences presented through my research are not my own constructions of what I thought was important.

Using the work of Fine and Weis (1996) as a framework, I turned my attention away from "constructing life narratives spiked only with the hot spots" (p. 260) and focused on the concerns of those most closely related to the cause—the Black male educators serving as participants in my research. As I analyzed my data, I communicated with my former participant, utilizing Horvat's (2013) idea of "phoning a friend," as "critical friends suggest different ways of making sense of the data that are being collected" (p. 108). It is through this process of melding "*writing about* and *working with"* (p. 263) that I was able to check my interpretations. Further, the multi-voiced nature of counterstories allowed me to put into conversation (a) prior research findings,

(b) my personal and professional experiences, and (c) the primary data (interviews, observations, artifacts), complicating simplistic and essentialist findings and allowed for me to better account for my positionality in this research study.

Limitations

A major limitation of this research study was that as a Black woman, I was unable to understand fully the intersectionality of race and gender as related to being Black and male within the United States. I constantly reminded myself that my positionality affected my interpretation of the data. I was also concerned that participants, both children and adults, would be focused on providing what they thought were the "right" answers to my questions. This was an issue I ran into during my exploratory study, when I conducted a phone interview with a Black male teacher who had been referred to me by another participant. The interview was not included in my initial findings as the conversation lasted under 10 minutes. The teacher stated several times that he was nervous about being interviewed and feared he was giving me the wrong answers. However, changes to my protocol, such as starting the conversation by asking the teacher to recall his own experiences as a Black boy in school, eased some of the tension regarding giving the "correct answer." Further, I foresaw this being a potential issue with the child I interviewed, as my experiences as a classroom teacher have proven that children often want to impress adults. I tried my best to assure *all* participants that there were no right or wrong answers, and that we would be working alongside each other to check the data for errors and revisions after interviews were transcribed.

Additionally, from my exploratory study, I found that not including the voices of children had been a limitation to my understanding of how Black boys' educational experiences were shaped through their interactions with Black male teachers. Realizing this limitation, I thought it was crucial to conduct interviews with a child-participant. One foreseen challenge was that I had not piloted my interview templates with children. Also, research has indicated that interviewing children presents different limitations when compared to interviewing adults, such as shorter attention spans, slower response time, and greater difficulty understanding the questions (Amato & Ochiltree, 1987). Although these were limitations, my background in early childhood education aided me in the creation of a protocol that was engaging to young students. I created prompts that incorporated drawings to spark conversation and consciously planned activities that did not exceed 15 minutes in length.

Another limitation was comprised by the fact that due to my personal scheduling commitments of picking my daughter up from school, I was unable to conduct observations after lunch. As such, I do not know if the interactions in Mr. Gomis' and Mr. Richardson's classes changed or were distinct in the latter part of the day, when social studies and writing were taught. Observing Malik writing may have enriched my sources of data and influenced my findings.

Presentation of Findings

Focusing on the chronicle and the voices of the Other, as rooted in both critical race theory and Black feminist thought, my data are presented through counterstories, bridging together the stories of both student and teacher to showcase each relationship

from two different perspectives. These counterstories were created "from (a) the data gathered from the research process itself, (b) the existing literature on the topic(s), (c) [my]…own professional experiences, and (d)…[my] own personal experiences" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 34).

In the counterstories I created, "the first form of data came from primary sources," interviews and observations (p. 34). I sought to offer an analysis of the experiences of Black male teachers and a young Black boy within the context of early childhood education classrooms "in relation to U.S. institutions and in a sociocultural context" (p. 33). To do so, after identifying themes, I "searched and sifted through these data for examples" that re-presented key themes, selecting examples that illustrated complexities (p. 34). Following the counterstories (Chapter IV), I conclude with possible implications for teaching, teacher education, research, and the future education of Black boys in early childhood education (Chapter V).

Chapter IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I offer counterstories that reject and talk back to research that—albeit decentering or dismissing the voices, values, and experiences of people of color—justify the marginalization and pathologization of Black boys. Employing critical race methodology to interrupt deficit discourses and racist ideologies pervasive in majoritarian stories of Black boys, I sought to recognize silenced voices in qualitative data "as a strategy of survival and a means of resistance" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 37). Unlike majoritarian stories about Black boys in American schools that too often focus on crisis perspectives, the series of counterstories presented here serve as a window into the dynamic and complex relationships built between Black male teachers and Black boys in two early childhood classrooms.

During the time of this study, Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson taught in adjacent 2nd grade classrooms at a public charter school in Harlem. This school site utilized a co-teaching model, and both Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson co-taught with Black female teachers. This Harlem charter school had been open for almost two decades and serves the greater Harlem community. According to New York State Education Department, during the 2017-2018 school year, around 400 students were enrolled in Kindergarten-Grade 5. There was an almost even split between boys and girls represented in the school

population, over 60% of students identified as Black or African American, and around 35% of students identified as Hispanic or Latinx. The school is majority-minority, with a very small population (less than 2%) of White students. Almost 90% of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged, and 15% of students were homeless during the school year during which this study took place. A very small percentage of students (less than 10%) were listed as English Language Learners.

At the school, students were organized into three different age groups, which determined the color of their uniform shirts. Kindergarten students wore maroon shirts, 1st and 2nd grade students wore navy shirts, and 3rd through 5th grade students were easily identified by their dark green uniform shirts. The classroom demographics of Mr. Gomis's and Mr. Richardson's mirrored the racial demographics of the school.

Each 2nd grade classroom consisted of around 30 students, with 90 students spread evenly over three classrooms. The classrooms were similarly situated, with the majority of the classroom occupied by large tables where students sat during whole-group instruction in groups of four or five. Both classrooms included a carpeted whole-group space for read-alouds and class meetings. Literacy instruction, prior to guided reading time, often occurred on the carpeted area. Additionally, in the back corner of each classroom was a small library space that was also carpeted, and contained books that were organized by reading level as well as hardcover books displayed on the tops of bookshelves. Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson were both intentional about the types of books that were on display, with images of Black children prominently visible.

The school day started at 8:15 a.m. and concluded at 3:30 p.m. for all students. In the morning, teachers greeted students in the cafeteria and proceeded to the classroom.

Morning meeting was the first activity of the day, although during my observations, I noticed that Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson usually used morning meeting time to introduce a literacy skill prior to guided reading, which occurred immediately after whole-group carpet time. The reading block is 90 minutes long and is followed by art, science, or physical education, each taught by different teachers in separate classroom spaces. Students then returned to the classroom and engage in math instruction until recess and lunch. Due to my personal scheduling commitments of picking my daughter up from school, I was unable to conduct observations after lunch. In the afternoon, writing and social studies were taught by the homeroom teachers.

Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson, two Black male early childhood teachers, recognized the brilliance of their young Black boys. Having once been Black boys in classroom spaces, they understood the abundance of potential and talent of these young Black boys who, like most children in early childhood classrooms, yearned for positive attention and affection from their teachers. In analyzing my field notes, interviews, and artifacts, I identified several themes that informed my construction of counterstories. It is my hope that these counterstories “challenge the perceived wisdom of those from privileged backgrounds, transforming established belief systems” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36).

This chapter is divided into three sections that correlate with major themes identified during data analysis. These themes were influenced by the codes used to classify data and included both deductive and inductive codes. The deductive codes (role modeling and teacher identity) were derived from prior research on relationships between Black male teachers and Black boys in elementary and secondary education, and the

inductive codes (affection and making mistakes) were based on reoccurring observations and topics introduced in interviewing participants. Each theme includes a brief introduction of how the theme was conceptualized based on its utility for this study. Following the introduction are the counterstories that are written in a couple of different formats; there are anecdotes of classroom observations, recounts of conversations between researcher and participants, and interview snippets that have been converted into monologues. The goal was to provide robust perspectives and narratives about relationships between Black male teachers and Black boys, stories that are often neglected in conversations about Black boys and men in relation to American schooling.

The counterstories presented herein result from a dialogic process whereby I purposefully and intentionally put the data I gathered over the course of 16 weeks in conversation with existing literature (via deductive coding categories); with my personal experiences and associated understandings (e.g., being encouraged to teach young children while my brother was discouraged); and my professional experiences (as an early childhood teacher committed to the education of young Black boys). Through this dialogic construction of counterstories, I engage elements of critical race theory to make meaning and make sense of beliefs, interactions, and experiences.

The counterstories were constructed in several different ways and intentional decisions were made about the presentation of each counterstory. The counterstories focused on teacher identity were written in first-person voice, with each participant sharing his personal background and journeys to becoming teachers. These words were lifted directly from interview quotes and woven together to create a cohesive narrative; these stories are italicized to denote that they are written in the voices of each teacher.

Additionally, an informal conversation between Mr. Gomis and myself is written as a dialogue, as a reflection of a conversation on the influence of African teachers within American schools. This conversation was analyzed through a memo that highlighted key points from the conversation.

In the section that follows, *Expressed Affection* and *Safe Spaces* for Making Mistakes, these counterstories evolved from the analysis method of memo-writing after classroom observations of affectionate actions, coupled with interview quotes from Malik who provided additional context on his relationship with Mr. Gomis. Utilizing the kidwatching observation form (referenced in Chapter III), as observations were recorded, meanings and interpretations were constructed. Bringing together interviews and observation notes allowed for a more robust counterstory.

Finally, in the last section, *Role Modeling*, a combination of observation notes and recorded memos on hunches were utilized to create counterstories. Unlike other themes, for this section the voice of an additional teacher is included. This teacher sparked a conversation with Mr. Gomis about the role of Black male teachers at this Harlem charter school with only three Black male teachers on staff. But before turning to the counterstories, I offer a brief description of two of its actors, offering insights into how they conceptualize their roles as Black teachers.

Participants

Mr. Gomis

During the time of this study, Mr. Gomis was in his second year of 2nd grade teaching at the school site, although he taught for 14 years in his home country of

Senegal. He is in his early 40s and has one daughter. In his free time, he enjoys exercising, and this often shows up in his instructional methods. He was a Teach for America (TFA) corps member and he was working towards completing his master's in teaching during his second year of teaching in the United States. His participation as a corps member also afforded him the opportunity to earn his elementary education certification in the state of New York. Being a corps member was a great area of pride for Mr. Gomis, as he was committed to earning teaching certification in the United States. Upon the conclusion of the study, he was chosen to give a speech for an alumni TFA event and was extremely honored by the invitation. Mrs. Tisdale was the co-teacher in Mr. Gomis's classroom, and the year prior she worked as a 1st grade teacher. Malik (the student participant) was a member of Mrs. Tisdale's 1st grade classroom.

Mr. Richardson

Mr. Richardson was in his third year of teaching 2nd grade at the school site, and his seventh overall year of teaching. The majority of his teaching career took place in 2nd grade classrooms, and he currently teaches a 2nd and 3rd grade combined class in the lower part of Manhattan. He was born and raised in Long Island, and a career and interest in performing arts brought him to New York City. Upon retiring from a professional dance career, he worked in the fashion industry and joined the United States Army before deciding to pursue his passion for teaching in an elementary school setting. Like Mr. Gomis, Mr. Richardson is also in his early 40s and has one daughter. He has an impeccable style in clothing, which he attributes to his time working in the fashion industry, and his students often admire his work attire. He is very proud of his graduate degree which he earned at Bank Street College of Education. Mrs. Smith was the co-

teacher in Mr. Richardson's room. She was also a TFA corps member and attended the same graduate school with Mr. Gomis.

Malik

When I inquired with Mr. Gomis about a student-participant, he quickly noted that he knew the perfect student for this study. Having a close relationship with Malik's parents allowed Mr. Gomis to obtain the dissertation study consent form submitted in a timely fashion. Mr. Gomis mentioned that Malik's mother and father were very grateful for his presence and trusted him with managing Malik's behavior.

Mr. Gomis provided Malik with a brief introduction of his participation in the study, to which Malik responded with much enthusiasm. At the time of the study, Malik was 7 years old. He towered over his classmates, but he had a very gentle personality with his peers (despite often reflecting on having an "attitude problem"). He was missing several teeth, with baby teeth interspersed among adult teeth, and had a very endearing smile. He attended the school site with two siblings, both in higher grades, and lived with both his mother and father.

He had attended kindergarten and 1st grade at the school, prior to entering Mr. Gomis's classroom. Malik was eager to please and responded well to positive narration and friendly body language, such as smiling and laughter, which helped to build our budding relationship. At times, during observations Malik struggled with following the directions from his teachers, but they were always patient with him along this journey.

Black Male Teachers and Empowerment

The following counterstories are expressions of how the teachers conceptualized their roles as Black male teachers and discussed the impact that these identity markers had on their relationships with young Black boys in their classrooms. Their lived experiences as former Black boys who appreciated being seen in classrooms for their potential and brilliance influenced their perceptions of their relationships with their Black male students. They wanted to empower and uplift Black boys in ways that mirrored their relationships with specific elementary school teachers.

The italicized words are direct quotes from teacher-interviews that were situated together as cohesive counterstories. Additionally, understanding the importance of my experiential knowledge as related to Black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 2000), I included a conversation I had with Mr. Gomis about my own experiences and parallels to observations from his classroom. Finally, an informal phone call with Mr. Richardson is included to highlight how he continued to perceive his relationships with Black boys in early childhood upon the completion of the study.

Mr. Gomis

My interviews and informal conversations with Mr. Gomis were always lively and driven by his passion towards teaching and learning. A common theme for all of our conversations was an emphasis on talking about his life in Senegal and how these experiences influenced his teaching practices in the United States. In the following section, Mr. Gomis's voice will be honored through a collection of quotes from our interviews that have been strategically pieced together to provide a fuller narrative.

I was born and raised in Senegal. All of my schooling happened in Senegal. I attended public schools, and well, it's a little different than school in the United States. The number of students is a little bit higher because we have one class with between fifty and sixty-five students in the classroom with one teacher. I had never seen any classroom in a public school where you have less than fifty students. I have very fond memories of elementary school because I had very dedicated teachers, extremely dedicated. Their main goal was to elevate and then empower us, and I can't remember any teachers who were not really dedicated to making sure we get the education we deserve. I had both female and male teachers and all of them were committed to my success.

My teachers' commitment influenced my decision to be a teacher. My sixth-grade teacher was very influential because I remember how he was with us; he invested a lot in us. I wanted to be just like him. Teachers like this and the fact that my father was a teacher guided my teaching aspirations. After seeing my father teaching, seeing the dedication he has, I know that his influence impacts my teaching because growing up, he was always telling us about the benefits of teaching, the goodness of teaching, helping kids grow, and helping kids develop their learning. My father really instilled in me the morality of teaching. While teaching is considered a very prestigious profession back at home, my parents were still poor.

I taught in Senegal for fourteen years before deciding to come to the United States to pursue teaching because I wanted to still teach, have an impact on kids, but I also needed to make money to support my family. When I moved to

the United States, it was very difficult for me at the beginning to be a teacher because I was undocumented. So, I came here with a master's degree from Senegal and a teaching certificate also from Senegal, but those things were useless because I was undocumented. I was working a lot of menial jobs during that time when I was undocumented, I think for about six years. During that time, that's when I heard about Teach for America (TFA) and the New York City Teaching Fellows.

I was accepted into both programs in the same year; then I had to weigh the programs against each other, and I realized I was a better fit for TFA, which is the program I chose, and I do not regret this. This is my second and last year in TFA, and although I am older than most of the teachers, I appreciate the timeline of the program, that I can quickly get my teaching certification needed here in the States while working at the same time. I also love to learn so I have enjoyed the graduate school classes that I am enrolled in currently. It's been a long road to get back into the field that I am passionate about, because when I came to this country, that's what I always wanted to do, so I am very happy to be back in the classroom. I take a lot of pride in the work that I do as a teacher, particularly in this community.

The pride that I get is very important for me, to be part of Black and Brown kids' education in a so-called poor community, I can relate to this because I also grew up in a similar community, so I know what they are undergoing. I put a lot of pressure on myself thinking about how I can impact these children's

future. For me, at the core of my teaching is building relationships with both students and families.

The most important thing for a teacher, what I always believe, is before you can teach a child, you have to build a warm relationship between you and them. If you don't have the right relationship, it's very hard to teach children. That's why from day one I make sure that I start building that relationship. I use different ways to build that relationship with children. Like at the beginning of the year, I sit with them in the cafeteria. I give out lots of hugs especially in the morning when the transition to school can be challenging, even for second graders. You'll see me in the classroom caressing my students' heads and me sitting with them to discuss about their lives and sharing parts of my life with them. I want my kids to know that I respect them, making sure that they know that the adult in front of them is very respectful to them, making sure they know that I care. And my kids, though they know that I am a very demanding teacher, they also know that I am a very warm teacher.

I am truthful with my students; I am extremely transparent, but I also like to play with them. I try to find a balance because of their age, they are still very young, I always have to remember that. I like to play with my students and tell jokes, but they also know that there are boundaries. Being able to have fun with my students is important because I think kids should enjoy coming to school, they should enjoy their environment.

Honestly, I really enjoy being close to my students because I want them to feel the same type of empowerment I felt in school. And there's something I

always tell the kids, and you can feel it in their body language, which is, "I am here to serve you. Yes, I am here to serve **you**. *This classroom belongs to you." Those are things I always tell them. I also tell my kids "I love you. There is nothing I wouldn't do to make sure you guys can compete [in the world]." There is not at least one or two days a week that during morning meeting or during closing circle, that I don't create a discussion in which every child feels engaged, every child feels like I'm there for them. I care because that's very important. Any teacher who cannot build warm and strong relationships with children, in my opinion, I would think they should leave the field of teaching.*

It's important to know that your teacher cares, especially working in an elementary school, and that the care is being expressed by a male teacher. Here in the United States you don't see a lot of male teachers in elementary school, and Black men really are rare, which was a foreign idea to me coming from Senegal, and it's something I've spent a lot of time thinking about since moving here. Take, for example, last year there were only three Black male teachers and this year, but it really feels like here in the United States, Black men either don't like to be in the elementary setting or maybe that aren't appreciated in these types of classrooms. If I could inspire more Black men to get into teaching in early elementary, I would, because we definitely need Black male teachers to teach Black kids—that's very important.

For our Black boys, Black male teachers can serve as mentors. There is a mentorship that exists between Black male teachers and Black boys. Black boys can see himself in that Black male teacher. But as we've grappled with before in

the past, Nicole, it's not one hundred percent guaranteed that the Black male teacher is always going to have a better relationship with their kids, if we simply replace White teachers with Black teachers. What I am saying is, that as a Black male teacher, you have to make sure that if you are in front of kids, you have to ensure that you are impacting them positively. If you cannot have a positive impact, I consider you a useless teacher. And having an impact is not only showing them the color of your skin; the impact is more about making sure you are prepared to support our kids, not only academically but also socio-emotionally.

Every Black male teacher, well, every teacher, but more specifically Black men teaching Black and Brown children, must see them as the next generation of leaders and professionals in America. Our Black boys really need this motivation because this isn't always the message that society teaches them, so it's my personal goal to instill this belief in them; you have to make them believe that they are going to be somebody because they can and will be somebody important.

Black Male Teachers Across the Diaspora

As mentioned previously, Mr. Gomis and I often spoke about his home country, Senegal. When talking about his life at home, Mr. Gomis's entire disposition would change—his face would light up as he reminisced about what he missed the most. My favorite pair of earrings are large, pounded metal earrings, carved into the shape of the continent of Africa, that I purchased in Harlem 8 years ago. Whenever I wore them (which was often), Mr. Gomis complimented my earrings and commented on how refreshing it was to see a Black woman who was proud of her African heritage. Since I

traveled to Africa one summer on a Fulbright fellowship, sharing our experiences in Africa was always a source of joy for both of us. Mr. Gomis's willingness to share about his home life often encouraged me to share more about myself as well.

A discussion about my exploration of my African heritage led to a conversation about my life as a young person in Detroit, grappling with what it meant to be Black in a city plagued by remnants of race riots and the effects of redlining and White flight. I lived in a predominately Black city, but my parents made the conscious decision to send me to a private school in a predominately White neighboring suburb. The impact of these decisions continues to shape how I view relationships between teachers and students in relation to race. The conversation that follows illustrates the personal stories shared, reflecting on race and the African diaspora.

My (the researcher) parents divorced when I was 12 years old, at the very beginning of my transition into adolescence. Like most children experiencing divorce, my entire world came crashing down before my eyes. Fortunately, I knew that I needed an outlet to express my pain, and under the guidance of my writing teacher, I turned my anger into a journal of poetry. Fortunately, my home life did not impact my school performance as I successfully compartmentalized tensions at home from classroom interactions. For my brother, one year younger than me, the transition was much more turbulent. I shared my brother's experiences one day with Mr. Gomis during his prep period, and I was surprised that so much of my brother's challenges in school were reminiscent of Mr. Gomis's relationships with his own students. Below is an excerpt of our conversation:

> I attended a predominantly White school for the bulk of my education. I only had White teachers. It wasn't until I had my first Black teacher that I even stopped to think about the fact that none of my teachers ever looked like me. And sixth grade was an extremely tough year because my parents divorced. It was really hard on all of us, but especially hard on my brother because we didn't get to see my dad as much as we would have liked. He started to act out at school, like flipping desks because he was angry. None of the teachers seemed to care about how drastically different he was behaving since my parents split. It seemed like every day I would find my brother in the same place, outside of the principal's office waiting on another suspension. That year was really traumatic because my brother labeled himself a scapegoat in his classroom. I remember my mom asking him if he even knew what a *scapegoat* was, to which he accurately responded: "a person who is blamed for everything." You know how hard it is on parents to get all those phone calls from the school, expecting you to stop working to pick your kid up because of suspension? I never really reflected on this before today, but it caused a lot of stress on the whole family.

At this point in the conversation, I was fully aware that I had been talking for quite some time. Yet Mr. Gomis was listening attentively to my experience, maintaining eye contact as I fought back tears. It was really painful to reminisce on a year that was both physically and mentally exhausting on my brother, and to consider for the first time how my brother must have felt about himself then. Mr. Gomis nodded at me to continue, still not breaking the silence.

> The following year, my school hired the first Black teacher I'd ever seen in my seven years at the school. Mr. Diop was my brother's sixth grade teacher. He told my mom that she shouldn't expect phone calls home because he was going to work with my brother to get to the root of his issues. My brother spent an entire school year without one suspension, not one suspension. He was a tough teacher but he cared about my brother and it showed.

Mr. Gomis smiled. "He was more than likely Senegalese like myself. That is a Senegalese last name." He was right, Mr. Diop was a Senegalese man, and I remember his hiring was extremely controversial at my Catholic school. Many parents complained about the idea of a Muslim teacher working at a Catholic institution, even though Mr. Diop was not in charge of teaching religion classes. Even at a young age, I could see through the surface complaints about religious differences and understood that many parents were uncomfortable with a Black man in a classroom teaching position. Although Black men were present in the building, often as janitors, the simple fact that a Black man was in a position of power was too overwhelming for the White parents to digest. Mr. Diop had been "let go" at the end of the year under the guise of religion. It was disheartening that for the first time there was a teacher who not only looked like my brother but also believed and was committed to his success, but he was let go from a school where teachers spent entire careers before retiring.

The elimination of Black teachers in predominately White schools is not a new phenomenon. As discussed in Chapter II, there were many limitations of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Epps (2002) noted that about 38,000 African Americans lost teaching-related jobs as a result of desegregating schools. In 1956, two years after the

Brown decision, the Alabama legislature introduced a bill that would allow school boards to dismiss Black educators without a cause and without a hearing or right to appeal (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Haney (1978) reported that the majority of the 131 superintendents in North Carolina considered it “impracticable to use Negro teachers in schools under their jurisdiction” (p. 90). Several decades later, the impracticability of hiring Black teachers in predominantly White schools appears to remain an issue in the United States.

Mr. Gomis started: “You know Nicole, that sounds a lot like a student I have in my classroom. During the first week of school, he informed me that he had “anger problems.” Can you believe that a second grader could say that about himself? It was probably language he learned about himself from an adult. I spent a lot of time with this boy to work on his self-esteem and to improve how he felt about himself. The student is a real joy to have in my classroom and he doesn’t seem to think of himself as an angry person anymore. My principal even sent out a schoolwide ‘shout-out’ for my commitment to making sure this boy didn’t harbor negative feelings about himself. That is something I am really proud of.”

We talked for 40 more minutes about the impact that Black men have on Black boys, particularly those who have been (mis)labeled as deviants and outcasts. Despite the grade-level difference—Mr. Diop teaching 6th grade, Mr. Gomis working with 2nd graders, these were two similar stories of Senegalese men, born abroad and teaching in the United States, teaching Black boys important lessons about their potential and future success.

Mr. Richardson

My relationship with Mr. Richardson was drastically different than the relationship I formed with Mr. Gomis. Mr. Richardson was very intentional about how he used his prep periods, stressing the importance of trying to create a semblance of work-life balance by completing his work during the non-teaching time. I respected his commitments and often tried not to interrupt when his students were away in art, gym, or science. Our interactions were punctuated between instructional time, where I did my best to act as a silent observer.

Mr. Richardson believed in strict schedules and holds his classroom to these same standards. His time spent in the Army may have contributed to his sense of punctuality. But in text messages and interviews, in his time outside of the classroom, Mr. Richardson was brimming with enthusiasm to talk about his experiences and his role as a Black male teacher. The next counterstory emphasizes this enthusiasm, as Mr. Richardson narrated the diverse path that led him to the field of education and his passion for teaching Black boys.

> *I grew up in a very segregated town on Long Island. The White kids lived near the water, and the Black kids lived up North for the most part, and this didn't dawn on me until I was an adult. If they didn't live by the water, they lived across the County Side Road, which says everything. We lived on one side of County Line Road, and they lived on the other side. Hmm...yeah, the county line seems kind of ironic that there was an actual line that divided us.*
>
> *I had a lot of family who lived in the area since my mom had thirteen brothers and sisters. We did everything together, everything. Everybody lived in*

the same town, I had cousins on every street, on every block, so I had a very close-knit family, with large family dinners on Sunday. We had lots of barbeques and lots of time spent at the beach; when we went to the beach we traveled as a caravan, six, seven cars going to the beach. It was really nice; I had a very good upbringing.

I would consider us middle class, I am not sure what people would consider us now, but both of my parents worked. My mother was a telephone operator and my father was a jazz musician, producer, and electrician. Neither of my parents had college degrees, they just saved a lot of money. I come from a family of savers. They know how to pinch a penny. I appreciate my life on Long Island, but I always knew that I was not going to stay there and I think my family knew that, too. My mother brought me into the city a lot. She always exposed me to New York.

I had an aunt who was a maid in New York, and the two ladies she worked for were teachers, and my aunt regretted the fact that she never went to college, so they would give her books to read. My aunt probably had the equivalent to a college education from reading so much. These teachers also gave her tickets to Broadway plays once a month. These tickets were good for a Wednesday matinee, and every other month my aunt would take me to see a show. I'd go see a Broadway show, and that's how I was introduced to theater and dance. I noticed that in the theater you could step outside of who you are and become something different. I was hooked and knew that this was something I wanted to pursue.

After graduation, I studied dance at Alvin Ailey school and went to SUNY as a dance major with a minor in liberal arts. When I got out of college, I auditioned in New York, so I was working as a professional dancer in New York. I got a job in Guadeloupe, then moved to the Caribbean and choreographed for an all-inclusive family resort. I was snatched up to work in Paris for a few years, so I taught and choreographed in Paris. I made a little life for myself, but at some point, I just got sick of that life, traveling back and forth to Guadeloupe and I moved back to New York.

At this point, the dance market had changed, and I was a little older and needed to find a job, so I joined the military. I was in the Army for nine years and I worked as an orthopedic tech. I rolled casts and worked with surgeons. My military orthopedic tech certifications didn't cross over into the civilian world and I didn't have time to go back to school to do that, so I just landed in fashion.

I say all of this to point out that I had a very roundabout path into teaching. I worked at Macy's for about four years, and I was fed up with that world. I was on the train one day after work and I saw a sign that asked, "Do you remember your third grade teacher? Who's going to remember you?" And that sign hit me like a ton of bricks. It was a New York City Teaching Fellows billboard. New York City Teaching Fellows is an alternative teacher certification program that attracts career changers from all over the country to teach in New York City public schools. That one billboard changed my life.

I said to myself, "Oh my God, I do remember my third grade teacher, Mrs. Wood!" Everything about Mrs. Wood came back to me and how much I thought

about her even till this day. I said, "I want to be a teacher!" It just hit me. Not only did I think "I want to be a teacher," I said to myself "I am a teacher" and I knew I was a teacher. I wasn't passionate about fashion, I just kind of landed in that position. I applied for Teaching Fellows that year, and I was called in for an initial interview and taught a demo lesson. I got a letter saying that I wasn't accepted into the program because they were only looking for math and science teachers that year. I called the military and asked about money for college. I took that money from the military and said, "Since I had to sleep out in the mud and all of that [in the military], I'm going to take them up on money for graduate school."

I knew I needed a smaller, quaint school where I could get any needed help immediately because I really wanted to be a great teacher. A friend of mine told me about Bank Street and that felt like a really good fit. It was rigorous, it was not a joke. You knew that you were putting in some work. There was no easy grade given at all. I was really challenged at Bank Street to put my best work forward and, you know, that's needed. You should have to work hard to be a teacher because it's such an important profession. I thought a lot about my own schooling experiences while at Bank Street and the lack of Black teachers I had growing up.

I mainly had White teachers in elementary school. I had my first Black teacher when I was in the seventh grade. He was definitely nurturing and he was a great teacher, but I think there were eight or nine Black boys in my class, all of us together in one room. There's this saying, "When the student is ready, the

teacher will appear." Unfortunately, we didn't really see him. We didn't fully see him. Maybe it was because having a Black male teacher was such a foreign experience that we couldn't appreciate his presence, but there was a certain kind of dismissal. We never had confrontations with him, he never yelled at us, but I could hear the frustration in his voice like, "You boys need to get it together." And now as a teacher myself, I can understand what he was trying to do with us young Black boys from Long Island. He was trying to prepare us for life outside of the classroom, but it's only now in adulthood that I am able to process that.

This is my seventh year teaching and I would say that I am also trying to uplift my Black boys. When I look at them, I see so much potential, in all of them, regardless of their behavior or home situation, or economic background. I do notice that when I'm dealing with Black children, I always see the light, I always see potential, and I always see greatness. Always.

I think the kids who seem the dimmest to others, to me they are the brightest. Many of my Black boys, when they enter my classroom, in their minds, they see themselves as troublemakers. I am trying to redirect the way they see themselves, to reject the idea that they are troublemakers, because if you accept that narrative, then you find yourself behind bars. And you have the mentality, "Well, I always mess up anyway, so I'm not scared of getting in trouble. I always get in trouble."

I want my boys to feel like school is a place where they are held to high expectations, where they are held to standards of excellence, and they feel embarrassed for getting in trouble. I see opportunities for redirection with

compliments through affirmative speech with them, through clear expectations. I want my boys to know that I see them and that I don't expect them to fail. I have to be nurturing because they are young, and all children deserve a loving teacher, but I have to also show my Black boys that I love them by being honest and straightforward with them. I can't give them a false sense of what life really is. We have to be mindful that these boys are going out into a world where it's going to be even more difficult for them if they don't have the tools to be able to survive.

The 6 Lexington Avenue Local Train

After teaching in Harlem for 7 years, Mr. Richardson was ready for a change and wanted to work at a school where he was offered more instructional freedom. During an informal phone conversation in January of 2020, we caught up on recent events in our lives and talked about updates in our teaching careers. Mr. Richardson now works at a school on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and despite having a classroom of students who look different than his students in Harlem, his perspectives on his teacher identity as related to teaching Black boys remain the same. The title of this section was inspired by the subway train in New York City that runs from Harlem to the Lower East Side, highlighting Mr. Richardson's route as a resident of Harlem now teaching in lower Manhattan. At the beginning of our phone call, I asked Mr. Richardson if the call could be recorded, just in case anything related to the study emerged, and he agreed. Below is a recount of our conversation, with Mr. Richardson's words italicized.

I now teach nineteen students at a school on the Lower East Side. It's much different than my school in Harlem where I taught at least thirty students every year. I'm enjoying it. This year I'm teaching second and third [grades].

This school combines grades. I have nine third graders and ten second graders in the same class. Most of their day is spent together, and it works. It seems to be [working]. It's my first time witnessing anything like this, but I get it. I totally get it. The theory is that just because you're in third grade does not mean you're reading in third-grade level; doesn't mean that you are socially a third grader, you might be more like a second grader. Instead of feeling like you're out of place in third grade, you've got a second grader you can socialize with until you mature to that next level. It's less focused on children's age and more about where they are in their development. It works beautifully.

But there is one part that saddens me, and that's the fact that these types of schools aren't available for all students. This school charges a lot for tuition, around fifty thousand dollars. Most of my [former] families in Harlem can't afford this type of school where we are preparing students to attend competitive colleges. I have one Black boy and I feel like we have a special bond, because it must be hard being the only Black boy in the classroom. I have two Black girls, but Reggie, he's really attached to me. It's been interesting, observing how we interact. I'm in a completely different neighborhood, a more colorful school, Japanese, Indian, Jewish, and Mexican students. And one Black boy who I've been able to really bond with.

Our work together, Nicole, has really encouraged me to think about why this is the case and how I feel about teaching Black boys. I've been fortunate to work with Black boys in different schools and teach them about how special it is

to be a Black boy. I've appreciated your questions and your insight. You've always made me think; you really have, so thank you.

Both Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson felt that a large part of their teacher identities was intricately connected to their personal identity markers of being both Black and male. Growing up as Black boys on two different continents, they shared similar conceptualizations of love, respect, and transparency as related to their work with young Black boys. Expressed affection and allowing space for mistakes are directly related to both teachers' commitment to displaying love to Black boys in early childhood classrooms and are discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Expressed Affection and Safe Spaces for Making Mistakes

Throughout this study, both teachers discussed how they show love and affection towards young Black boys and the importance of these types of actions in early childhood classrooms. Central to both teachers' pedagogies is the ability for children to make mistakes in their classrooms as they learn and develop. Black boys were not penalized for mistakes but were often given second and third chances within the classrooms of these two Black male teachers, creating a space where the Black boys felt loved and respected. This section was constructed through a combination of observations, interview notes from the teachers and the student, and an analysis of a student artifact. Through triangulation, my goal was to provide multiple dimensions to these counterstories, merging the voices of Mr. Gomis, Mr. Richardson, and Malik. These counterstories are told in the present tense.

Head Rubs and ‘Playin’ the Dozens’

It is my first observation and I am nervous yet excited. I eagerly find a spot on the carpet and settle in for the unexpected; colorful stories of love and laughter are illustrated in the following sections.

The students are wrapping up a whole-group lesson on the carpet with the co-teacher, Mrs. Tisdale, and are transitioning back to their seats to work individually or with a partner for guided reading. As the students transition, Mr. Gomis is privately checking in with the boys in the class. As the boys move to their spaces, he quietly pulls them to the side. I struggle to hear what Mr. Gomis is saying to the boys because the conversations are intentionally private. I notice a trend in Mr. Gomis’ comments—they are a combination of redirections and positive affirmations. Having noticed that some of the boys struggled on the carpet during whole group, Mr. Gomis is making it clear that the boys are allowed to make mistakes, to struggle with sitting still (as most young children do), and that a redirection does not have to include public shaming.

Mr. Gomis offers reminders of the expectations sprinkled with phrases such as “Remember to try your best” and “I know you can do it.” Mr. Gomis also expresses a sense of closeness with his boys, with pats on the head as encouragement, an arm around a boy’s shoulder as he listens to the boy explaining his needs, and standing in a cradling position over boys as they read. These interactions seem to change the power dynamics between teacher and students because although Mr. Gomis is standing over the boys, his leaning in suggests that he is having a conversation with the boys opposed to merely telling

them what to do. There is an endearing quality observed as Mr. Gomis reminds a Black boy that he is a leader and that other students look up to him, and as he high fives with a different Black boy who has been focusing diligently on his independent reading. The boys are seen within this classroom and they appreciate and reciprocate the affection.

Figure 4.1. Portraying Mr. Gomis

In addition to physical closeness, Mr. Gomis showed affection through telling jokes, similar to what is often referred to within African American communities as "playing the dozens," which Smitherman (1997) noted has similarities to joke-telling of West African ethnic groups such as the Efik in Nigeria. Smitherman noted that this

linguistic-cultural practice has critical rules: “For one thing, the insult must be funny and original...and, most important, it must not be literally true because, then, it is no longer a game” (p. 13).

At one point during guided reading, a Black boy seemed to have allergies which caused a string of sneezes. Mr. Gomis, who was now working with a small group, looked up at the boy from his table. He smiled at the boy as he joked, “If you continue to sneeze like that, I am going to get sick and then I’ll have to go home.” The boy quickly and wittily responded, “No, you will *still* have to be here!” Both Mr. Gomis and the boy shared a laugh at the teacher’s threat to not come to school.

During my interview with Malik, he also explained that Mr. Gomis was strict, but that he can be less serious at moments too. Describing the picture he drew of Mr. Gomis as an interview prompt (Figure 4.1), Malik stated,

> Mr. Gomis is a nice person, sometimes he likes to tell jokes. He’s strict and clearly likes order. He tells jokes but they’re not silly jokes, they are jokes about how he wants you to behave. He’s nice and he’s kind. He’s caring and respectful. When students are absent, he looks for the children. This is a picture of him smiling as he is teaching. He expects a lot from me. I can sometimes have an attitude but he still respects me.

Friendly banter between teacher and Black boys was also common in Mr. Richardson’s classroom, although his humor tended to err on the sarcastic side, a form of joking that his students understood and would often emulate. During an observation of a read-aloud, I was able to witness the candid humor between Mr. Richardson and his Black boys.

> Mr. Richardson is reading a book about Wilma Rudolph and Mr. Richardson begins a discussion on an era in American history where people of color were not treated equally. At one point in the story, the author explains how

> Wilma fought back against her bullies who taunted her about her physical differences. In a very lively manner, Mr. Richardson begins in a sermon-like fashion: "Do you think Wilma is just going to lay down and give up?!" To which the students eagerly respond, "No!" Mr. Richardson turns his attention to the Black boy who is seated near him with his hand raised through this energetic call-and-response interaction: "Yes, Reggie. You have a question?" With a grin on his face, he sheepishly remarks, "Mr. Richardson, I thought this book was about her running a marathon." Mr. Richardson chuckles at the student's redirection back to the text, "We're almost there." The statement was not perceived as a sign of disrespect as the teacher has created a classroom culture where joking is both a form of communication and a tool for building relationships with his students.

Black boys, in particular, are unafraid to showcase a shared culture of joke-telling common to African and African American communities. Both Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson strike a delicate balance of shared respect between teacher and students, coupled with deep affection towards Black boys, which is often lacking in American classrooms.

Malik

Situated in the hallway outside of Mr. Gomis's classroom, Malik and I prepare for our second interview. He seems excited for our time together as Mr. Gomis described his participation in the study as his "special time to share [his] knowledge." The hallway is quite noisy as the sounds of children playing and learning rings through the corridor. We situate ourselves close to each other and the recording device. I press record and our conversation begins.

To get the conversation moving, I start by asking Malik to share some things he has noticed about his teachers. Malik informs me that he had the co-teacher, Mrs. Tisdale, in first grade and that her demeanor has changed quite a bit since starting second grade with Mr. Gomis. He attributes this shift to Mr. Gomis's more strict tone, highlighting that Mrs. Tisdale was much more lenient as a 1st grade teacher. We move into a discussion about his feelings on why Mr. Gomis is stricter, and Malik mentions that second graders can be much more challenging than first graders, as far as attitudes are concerned.

This is reminiscent of his remarks from our first interview, and he again reiterates that he can "give [his] teachers a hard time," but that this is "something [he's] working on." I acknowledge Malik's effort to improve his attitude and remind him that he is only a kid and that he is allowed to make mistakes and grow, to which he responds with a toothy smile. Although he is physically larger in size than his peers, Malik has a very young-appearing face and is still in the phase between baby teeth scattered among adult-sized teeth.

I inquire about things Malik enjoys to do with Mr. Gomis, which leads us on a journey to discuss math games. "I like playing math games with Mr. Gomis. They're fun and I'm actually pretty good at math now." Malik goes on to talk about some of the math he has learned from Mr. Gomis, including the use of a T-chart to organize place values. He also expresses his love for counting change and we spend a few minutes counting the coins that he previously heard clanging in my pocket. It is clear that Malik is engaged by learning experiences framed as games, and this is something that I observed in previous visits to Mr. Gomis's classroom; he often played games with his students, whether for learning purposes or to just boost the overall morale of the students and foster

relationships. I ask Malik to share any other games he enjoys playing with Mr. Gomis, and he begins laughing before he even starts the description:

> Okay, there's this game we play in class, right? It's a jumping-jack game. Mr. Gomis, he likes to stay in shape, so he's always got us doing some exercise. Well, my friend Justin *really* hates jumping-jacks, and Mr. Gomis knows this. Anytime he wants us to take a break, stretch a little bit, he tells us we're about to do some "Justins."

At this point, Malik is laughing uncontrollably at this joke, which I do not fully understand. I nod my head and encourage him to take a second to let out his giggles before continuing.

> See, what makes this funny is that now the jumping-jacks are called Justins and the whole class shares this joke. Even Justin, he doesn't get mad about it, he laughs, too. Because Mr. Gomis can just be funny! He says it was a serious face, "*Okay, class, let's stand up and do some Justins*," and everybody just starts laughing! Mr. Gomis doesn't laugh, but we all know it's his way of sharing a little inside joke.

Malik and I share a laugh at his imitation of Mr. Gomis's strict face as he makes a joke in front of the class. It is clear that Malik appreciates Mr. Gomis's sense of humor and this seems to make him feel closer to his teacher because of a shared history of inside jokes. This aligns with Mr. Gomis's intentionality in building relationships through jokes and wanting his students to have fun in his classroom. This interaction, which started by thinking about fundamental math skills Malik had acquired in Mr. Gomis's classroom, showcases the balance that Mr. Gomis exhibits frequently during observations—holding

Black boys to high learning expectations, but doing so in a way that expresses affection through jokes and laughter.

As referenced in Chapter II, one common approach of Black male teachers working with Black boys is a focus on laughter and playfulness (Brown, 2009a). Black male teachers in this study understood the importance of creating spaces where Black boys could vent, joke, and laugh as a way of combatting some of the societal pressures that Black boys experience on a daily basis. This was also true of Mr. Gomis's and Mr. Richardson's interactions with Black boys, with a greater emphasis on preserving early childhood experiences for Black boys—a period where play is critical to the learning process.

Additionally, while both Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson displayed affectionate gestures towards Black boys, they also communicated their care by holding their students to high expectations. Both teachers are *warm demanders*, which Delpit (2012) described as "[teachers] who expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them to reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment" (p. 77). These counterstories highlight classroom environments where Black boys are shown affection, are held to high standards, and are allowed to make mistakes, creating positive learning experiences that stand in juxtaposition to common crisis narratives often portrayed in educational research focused on young Black boys. These are classroom environments where love and justice are braided in the actions and interactions between Black male teachers and Black boys (hooks, 2000).

Role Modeling

Both Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson spoke about the importance of serving as a positive role model for the Black boys in their classrooms. Upon several visits to the school, it became evident that the role modeling was not limited to Black boys in their classrooms, but Black boys across the entire school as well. Mr. Richardson mentors a 4th grade boy who visits his classroom after school, and a Black boy in kindergarten is a frequent member of Mr. Gomis's class. This counterstory is unlike the others previously presented, as data were collected through an interaction with a teacher who was not an active participant in the study.

As a visitor at the school, I spent many mornings waiting for a name badge in the office, as the secretaries juggled the many responsibilities of late drop-offs and sick children. The interaction described below forced me to reflect on the great deal of pressure placed on Black male teachers to serve as role models for Black boys and the expectation that this is a natural role for Black men. The complexities of role modeling are explored through this counterstory that weaves together my office observations and a follow-up conversation with Mr. Gomis.

"They love him, especially our challenging boys"

> It is my fourth visit to the school site, and most of the school staff knows my face, and some know why I am at the school every Friday. Sitting in the office, waiting for my visitor's badge, a White woman approaches me. This story begins here.
>
> "Oh, you're the woman working in Mr. G's class, right?"

I pause. I am never fully sure how to answer this question. I feel so much gratitude towards the two teachers of my study who have been so generous in allowing me into their space with open arms, often reminding me that I am not a visitor but family. I spent a year and a half trying to solidify participants, due to the extremely low number of Black men teaching in early childhood classrooms, coupled with Black men's expressed and valid concerns about my position as a researcher. At this moment, I too am apprehensive of this woman's intentions, hyperconscious of the fact that both teachers have mentioned feeling policed by White staff.

"I am learning from Mr. Gomis about student-teacher relationships."

This answer feels safe. Without knowing if she is a teacher or an administrator, my goal is to make it clear that I am a guest in Mr. Gomis's classroom, that my role is not aligned with any evaluation.

"Mr. Gomis, oh, he's fantastic with students. They love him, especially our challenging boys. I teach kindergarten and I send one of my boys to his room at least once a week. I don't know what it is, but the boys, they really respect and listen to him."

I smile because in moments like this I am slow to react. *I am an outsider*, I remind myself. But I have so many questions I want to ask, particularly as it relates to this 5-year-old boy missing out on his kindergarten lessons. I am also curious as to how Black male teachers must feel to constantly be thrust into the position of an authoritative figure. Does Mr. Gomis like this routine?

Knowing the racial makeup of the school, where the majority of the student population are first-generation West African students, I imagine the boy being sent to Mr. Gomis is Black. With a critical race theory lens, knowing that racism is so intricately ingrained in American society and especially in our education system, I am saddened by the thought that the policing that Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson feel at their schools trickles down to the policing of Black boys across several classrooms.

Brockenbrough (2015) conducted a study that focused on how schools expect Black male teachers to serve as disciplinarian figures of Black children, often creating unwanted tension in trying to maintain their positions as father-figures, role models, and authoritarians.

> Popular perceptions of Black male teachers as well-suited disciplinarians for predominantly Black urban schools emerged…these perceptions reflected patriarchal constructions of Black masculinity that presumed Black male teachers' capacity to enforce stern, father-like forms of authority in the classroom…the patriarchal authoritarianism expected of Black male teachers was a notable source of stress, anxiety, or frustration in [the participants'] professional experiences. (p. 507)

I make a mental note to talk to Mr. Gomis about this when the time feels right.

A few weeks later I enter the classroom and notice an unfamiliar face. It is evident that this student is younger than the rest of the students, with a mouth of baby teeth and a uniform that is of a different color. He's working on an alphabet worksheet as the rest of the class is focused on a math assignment. Mr. Gomis circulates the classroom before pausing at the young boy's desk. He rubs his head in a way that reminds me of how my own father still rubs my head lovingly, as he hugs me when I visit home.

He looks at the boy's work. "Mamadou, I knew you could do great work. You are a smart boy. Do you hear me? So smart. I don't like that you have to be sent to my class to work because you need to be with your kindergarten peers. But I am proud of you and your hard work." The period ends and Mr. Gomis's class lines up for lunch. I ask him if I can stay awhile to chat and he agrees.

Mr. Gomis eats his lunch in his classroom as I start to delve into my hunches that were sparked weeks before in the school office.

"Mr. Gomis, the boy who was here earlier, was a kindergartener?"

"Yes, yes, Nicole. He comes to my class quite frequently. His teachers say they don't know what to do with him. They say he won't work and that he is combative. I like Mamadou. He's a very kind boy. He can be emotional but he's young. He just needs help controlling his emotions. He's become a member in my class. The other students in my class know him. I just wish he could stay in class so that he could get the full kindergarten curriculum."

"Did you volunteer to have him in your class?"

"I didn't. Around the school, lots of students know me because I am one of two Black men who teach here. On the playground and in the halls, you'll hear a lot of students shouting "Mr. G!" I'd like to think students like me because I take my time getting to know them. Even the ones not in my class. So, one day, Ms. K. sends Mamadou to my class with a note saying that he doesn't focus, asking if he could take a five-minute break in my classroom. And it just kind of kept happening from there."

> There's silence as we both process the magnitude of Mr. Gomis's words.… He continues: "You know, Nicole, these White teachers, they don't know what to do with our boys. Mamadou isn't a bad boy, but his teacher makes him feel that way. I do so much already at this school, but they refuse to increase my salary. We are at a school where most of the students speak French at home. Whenever something needs to be translated, they call me. When they can't get a boy to behave, they call me. I am working on my second master's degree. I taught for fourteen years back at home, but they won't pay me more. I don't complain about having extra students in my class because I know they need my support, someone who reminds them that they are good boys. But it can be very tiring. I love teaching and working with children, I just wish my school would acknowledge me."

Mr. Gomis is overworked and tired, and he has more teaching experience than most of the administration, yet his commitments to the greater student population are going unrecognized when it is time to discuss pay increases. Leaving the school, my heart feels heavy as I mull over Mr. Gomis's words and the reality that Black men are disproportionately underrepresented in American classrooms.

Summary

Three major themes emerged from the data presented: Black male teachers and empowerment, expressed affection and safe spaces for making mistakes, and role modeling. The Black male teachers of this study perceived their relationships with Black boys in early childhood education as rooted in empowerment and role modeling—both

Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson stressed the importance of supporting their Black boys in ways where students feel like valued members of the classroom community. Joking and laughter were encouraged in both teachers' classrooms as a way of building relationships with Black boys, thus shaping Black boys' classroom experiences in a positive manner. Malik had the freedom to laugh alongside his teacher, and he (and other Black boys) was given the space to make mistakes (both academically and behaviorally) without being penalized. In many ways, the Black male teachers in this study were working in opposition of the *historical debt*, which imposes the inferiority of Black, Latina/o, and Native peoples in American schools, and is often supported by national leaders and reinforced through crisis narratives (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Upon the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, there was a great deal of hostility towards African American students bused into predominately White schools.

> Many whites assumed, and feared, that if blacks and whites went to school together, blacks would suddenly feel equal, perhaps even intelligent. And this, of course, would lead blacks to become not only overconfident, but skeptical of the carefully crafted façade of white superiority. (Lutz, 2017, p. 8)

Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson worked diligently to support their young Black boys' confidence, provided positive learning environments, and unashamedly expressed loving behaviors to counter lessons of inferiority often projected upon Black boys in American classrooms, both implicitly and explicitly.

In the following chapter, the implications of these findings are addressed in relation to what the literature notes about relationships between Black boys and Black male teachers.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore relationships between Black boys and Black male teachers in early childhood education by focusing on the counterstories of their experiences together in an early childhood classroom in New York City, guided by the following research questions:

- How do Black male teachers in the greater New York City area perceive their relationships with Black boys in early childhood education?
- How are the educational experiences of Black boys in early childhood classrooms in New York City shaped through interactions with Black male educators?
    - What are young Black boys learning about themselves as both learners and future Black men from their Black male teachers?

This chapter includes a discussion of major findings as related to the relationships of Black boys and Black male teachers in early childhood classrooms. Also included is a discussion of the connections to critical race theory (CRT) and Black feminist thought, the theoretical frameworks that guided this study. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the limitations of this study.

Discussion

Similar to the research on Black male teachers' relationships with Black boys in upper elementary and secondary school (Brown, 2009a, 2009b; Hayes et al., 2014; Milner, 2006, 2007; Milner & Howard, 2004), several positive findings were revealed in the exploration of these relationships with Black boys in early childhood classrooms. These findings are comprised of three themes: (a) Black male teachers and empowerment, (b) expressed affection and safe spaces for making mistakes, and (c) role modeling.

While exploring these relationships, it was evident that both of the teacher-participants were intentional and strategic about fostering and sustaining relationships with young Black boys. The themes that are presented reflect the mindsets and deliberate practices of both teachers. The themes were generated through the coding of both observation notes and interview transcripts. The interviews were coded first; in the interviews, empowerment, affection, making mistakes, and role modeling were mentioned by each teacher several times. These codes were then used to analyze the observation data, to provide explicit classroom examples of these themes in action.

For example, during an interview, Mr. Gomis reflected on his commitment to making sure his Black boys know that they "are going to be somebody" and this was supported during an observation on his interaction with his kindergarten visitor, Mamadou. After rubbing his head affectionately, Mr. Gomis stated, "Mamadou, I knew you could do great work. You are a smart boy." These practices contributed to the feelings of mutual respect, love, and inclusivity of Black boys in early childhood spaces.

Black Male Teachers and Empowerment

The first theme, Black male teachers and empowerment, was discussed often by both of the Black male teachers in this study, as both teachers considered what it means to be a teacher at the intersection of being both Black and male. Interview questions were constructed around the topic of teacher identity, as several participants spoke about the importance of this specific identity during interviews in the exploratory study.

The interview questions on the topic of teacher identity were aimed at answering the question: How do Black male teachers in the greater New York City area perceive their relationships with Black boys in early childhood education? In order to understand how these two teachers perceived their relationships with the Black boys in early childhood education (first research question), it was pertinent to first consider how these teachers viewed their role in the classroom as Black men.

Sachs (2015) defined teacher professional identity as:

> the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. (p. 15)

Exploring how both teachers conceptualized and negotiated their professional identities as Black male teachers revealed stark differences in the teachers' perspectives. Although both teachers saw their role as being grounded in Black men uplifting Black boys in the classroom, and the significance this type of support has in the grand scheme of Black boys' lives, the teachers' paths to this understanding were deeply influenced by the context of their own schooling experiences. Both men self-identified as Black; however, Mr. Gomis also considered himself an African man, while Mr. Richardson related his

experiences to being an African-American. The majority of the students at the host school also identified as Black, and more specifically African, with families originating from West African countries.

Mr. Gomis was not only able to share similar culture and language, but he noted that this shared African culture helped him form more natural relationships with his students' families. Having grown up in Senegal, a predominately Black country, Mr. Gomis experienced an education that included both male and female Black teachers; thus, the idea of becoming a teacher was highly supported by his family and surrounding community. He came to visualize his teacher identity as one that would mirror the male teachers who influenced his schooling experiences.

Conversely, Mr. Richardson grew up in a highly segregated town on Long Island and did not experience a Black male teacher until middle school. The lack of Black male representation in his earlier schooling experiences forced him to conceptualize student-teacher relationships between Black boys and Black male teachers through the lens of the type of support he wished he had received as a young Black boy. Nonetheless, both teachers emphasized that their personal and professional lives were intricately connected—their teaching identities rested on the intersection of being Black and male and helping Black boys understand what this intersection of race and gender meant within an American context, and on their commitment to empowering young Black boys to resist pejorative narratives related to their potential and brilliance in school.

Expressed Affection and Safe Spaces for Making Mistakes

Discussions pertaining to early childhood education must include reflections on the importance of nurturing social and emotional health, as it affects children's overall

development and learning. An article published recently by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) shed light on how happier children have greater motivation to learn, have more positive attitudes towards school, are more eager to participate in school, and demonstrate higher academic performances when compared to less mentally healthy peers (Ho & Funk, 2018).

In order to promote positive social and emotional health, teachers in early childhood education are encouraged to show warmth and affection consistently, which contributes to the development of secure relationships between children and adults. In both of the observed classrooms, the teachers expressed affection and warmth towards their students, and more specifically their Black boys, in a variety of ways. In many instances, head rubs and pats on the shoulder were observed, coupled with smiles, high fives, and shared laughter.

The narrative of Black boys being over-policed in classroom spaces and implicit biases against Black boys starting in preschool, as discussed in Chapter I, stand in contrast to the counterstories provided in Chapter IV, which emphasized how Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson created loving and welcoming spaces for their Black boys, understanding that young children require affection in order to build healthy interpersonal relationships and strong feelings of self-efficacy. As teachers of young Black boys, these lessons on shared love and affection modeled by Black men have the potential to impact how they perceive relationships with other Black men outside of the classroom—learning that Black men express affection in ways that are culturally bound to the intersection of being Black and being male.

Additionally, both teachers created space for their young Black boys to make mistakes within their classrooms without being unnecessarily penalized. Too often, the media portrays Black boys as Black men (Ladson-Billings, 2011), striping Black boys of their childhood before they finish elementary school. This portrayal of Black boys then perpetuates a school system where Black boys are punished at higher rates because they are not given the freedom allotted to White children, of making mistakes and trying again. In both classrooms, there were many opportunities where Black boys failed to meet the teachers' expectations, by either answering a question incorrectly, behaving in a way that did not meet the classroom standards, or getting off task during a learning activity. However, these students remained in the classroom under the guidance of their Black male teachers, which stood in stark contrast to the narrative of pushing Black boys out of the classroom. Both teachers were intentional in their commitment to dealing with any challenges within their classroom, noting that Black boys at this age need to be able to make mistakes while realizing that adults are there to support them when they need a little extra love and care.

Role Modeling

The final theme, role modeling, was influenced by the research on the value of Black male teachers in American classrooms, discussed in Chapter III. The topic of role modeling came up in interviews and informal conversations and both teachers viewed role modeling as a vital part of their roles as Black male teachers. However, unique to the conversation on role modeling is the fact that some Black male teachers, in early childhood education settings, are being thrust into positions of role modeling Black boys

across grade levels, due to the extremely low number of Black male teachers in early childhood settings.

Both teachers were observed mentoring Black boys from younger grades, with kindergarten and 1st grade students often present in their classrooms. Whether they expressed a desire to serve as a role model for other Black boys or not, it was apparent that the culture of the school was to rely on Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson when a teacher could not "get through" to a Black boy. While neither teacher refused to serve as a role model, the additional work required to mentor younger students proved to be taxing at times. The counterstory from Chapter IV exemplified how the Black male teachers at this school site were able to forge relationships with students across the kindergarten-2nd grade spectrum, but also spoke to the multitude of expectations and pressures placed on Black male teachers in school settings where their presence is rare.

Both teachers' willingness to do whatever it takes to serve Black boys, including mentoring Black boys from other classrooms in spite of their other responsibilities, speaks to the idea of "teachers doing whatever is necessary for students to learn, achieve and meet their capacity" (p. 241) that Milner (2007) reflected on as necessary traits of teachers who are providing *next-level education* for Black boys. Milner conceptualized *next level education* as one that moves beyond the rhetoric of policy and reform to education that is centered on practice, commitment, effort, and results. Next-level education has central principles that align with the observed actions and practices of the two teacher-participants. The principles include: (a) teachers and student envision life beyond their present situations, (b) teachers and students come to know themselves in

relation to others, (c) teachers and students change their thinking to change their actions, and (d) teachers and students care and demonstrate that care.

The fact that boys across the school could enter Mr. Gomis's or Mr. Richardson's classroom and feel welcomed and cared for (despite whatever happened in their homeroom class) highlights the types of relationships these men created with Black boys at the school. They exhibited care by maintaining an open-door policy, even when they were already faced with overwhelming responsibilities. This was the case when I observed Mamadou in Mr. Gomis's classroom.

As a kindergartener, Mamadou was working on a different assignment than the one that Mr. Gomis was teaching his class of students; however, this did not stop Mr. Gomis from checking in with the 5-year-old student, providing feedback about his progress towards the work he was completing, and showing affection and care through both verbal and nonverbal gestures (such as a rub on the head). Mr. Gomis expressed that he was tired, that he felt that were too many things on his plate; however, having Mamadou in his classroom on a weekly occasion was a duty that he felt compelled to perform. Mr. Gomis understood the importance of Mamadou having a role model at the school who saw him as a bright and brilliant boy with a promising future. Without the presence of Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson working at the upper limits of what is considered early childhood education, and given what is known about the lack of Black male teachers in early childhood classrooms, one could assume that Mamadou may not encounter a Black male teacher until later in elementary or secondary school. By this point, the damage of how he viewed himself, as a "combative" boy, may have already impacted his perception of self-worth and ability.

This study has shown the importance of Black men serving as teachers in early childhood settings. Black men who see their role as intricately connected to role modeling, showing affection, creating space for students to learn from their mistakes. Further, they understand that the early years are vital to children's development of self-identity.

Conclusions on Theory and Research

Chapter I included descriptions of two theories that guided this study, from the construction of research to the analysis and write-up of my findings. They are critical race theory (CRT) and Black feminist thought. How these theories connect to my findings is discussed in the following subsections.

Critical Race Theory

From my very first informal conversations with both teacher-participants, it was clear that these two teachers defined their identities as being at the intersection of race and gender. Their stories were formed around the realities of being Black *and* male within different settings. Mr. Gomis was hyper-aware of his shifting identities of what it meant to be a Black male teacher in an all-Black school setting, versus being a Black male teacher in a school where the teaching staff is predominately White. Mr. Richardson grew up experiencing segregation both in his school and neighborhood; thus, he came to understand what it meant to be a Black boy and then a Black man in a society where he was aware of the meaning and ramifications of White privilege.

Mr. Richardson developed a sense that racism is a "permanent fixture in American life" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11), as a child growing up on Long Island and

seeing the physical differences in the neighborhood and schools in his community compared to the White neighborhoods on the other side of "County Line Road." Mr. Gomis, however, came to understand the reality of American racism as an adult. Mr. Gomis quickly realized that his race and cultural background made it more challenging for him to become an American citizen, with limited access to high-paying careers as his advanced degrees were not honored in the United States.

Although these two teachers had very different paths, the component of CRT that focuses on the ingrained structures of racism in American society was present in their individual stories. CRT provided the backdrop to how these teachers came to understand their role as teachers in American schools, and encouraged a focus on presenting their counterstories—stories that would challenge deficit perspectives of Black boys and Black men.

Black Feminist Thought

At the beginning of this journey, I often questioned my role in this field of research. I was often overcome by *stereotype threat* (Steele & Aronson, 1995), a psychological threat that because negative stereotypes exist about the success of African Americans[1] within higher education spaces, I would fall victim to not finishing what I started. Stereotype threat impacted every step in this process, including solidifying participants. When reaching out to potential participants, who were often strangers recommended by a colleague or friend, I often mentioned the purpose of my study and my position as a doctoral student without delving into much detail about myself. I was

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[1] I use the term African American here intentionally, as there are unfortunately many different stereotypes that exist about Black students and educators across the diaspora.

unsure about my position as an African American woman, more broadly a Black woman, conducting research at this level. Although it was not intentional, I often left out my race in my introduction email; this may have been a subconscious result of stereotype threat. However, I found that by not mentioning my race, I was creating a heightened level of apprehensiveness for potential participants, with many of the Black men expressing that prior to meeting me, they thought I was a "White woman doing research on Black men" and they were not interested in being subjects for White researchers. I quickly realized that by ignoring how my identity impacts my relationships with participants, I was missing key considerations for approaching this work.

Black people in the United States have a complicated history with the field of research that stems from violence towards Black bodies in the name of research; for example, Mrs. Henrietta Lacks who, following a diagnosis of terminal cervical cancer in 1951, had cells snipped from her cervix to be used for future research without her permission. Her unique cells were commercialized and generated millions of dollars for medical researchers who patented her tissue (Skloot, 2010). In addition, in the now infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment between 1932 and 1972, African American men who were used as test subjects to track the effects of syphilis were not informed that they had the syphilis, were denied access to penicillin (although penicillin became the recommended treatment for syphilis in 1947), and were not provided effective care as they were left to die or experience other severe health issues due to untreated syphilis (Jones, 1992). These are only two of the countless examples of why Black men may have been apprehensive about participating in my study without knowing my personal connection to this work.

Black feminist thought helped shift how I perceived my role in this study. I came to understand that my personal story could not be separated from my role as a researcher; that at the core of everything that I do within the field of education is the maintenance and empowerment of the Black community, a key component of Black feminist thought. I could not erase a history of observing the stark differences in the educational experiences of my brother compared to my own within a predominately White school. I had to reflect on the impact of growing up with a father who was leery of certain suburban areas in Detroit because of high rates of police brutality against Black men. These stories and experiences are ingrained in how I carry myself throughout the world, and acknowledging it and being transparent about my lived experiences helped me connect with the participants in my study.

Finally, I realized that succumbing to stereotype threat would only limit the field from experiencing the much-needed Black female perspective. hooks (1994) noted that although Black female teachers bring unique gendered experiences and perspectives, Black female teachers have been historically silenced in conversations about teaching and learning; Black women teachers have often been left out of the discussion even when the topic being discussed is race. I know this misrepresentation becomes even more alarmingly clear when looking at scholarly research within the field of early childhood education which is dominated by the voices of White women, having attended several sessions and speaking on an early childhood education panel at the largest conference for American educators (the American Educational Research Association annual meeting), and finding that I was one of very few women of color represented. As this study

unfolded, I found agency in knowing that Black feminist thought supported the centrality of my experiential knowledge, encouraging me to bring my full self to this work.

Implications for Practice

The counterstories that were produced as a result of this study challenge the majoritarian story of Black boys overcrowded in special education and absent from gifted classrooms (Milner, 2007). These Black male teachers perceived their relationships with Black boys in early childhood classrooms as being grounded in providing explicit role models for Black boys; empowering young Black boys to see their individual potential and future success in life as Black men; focusing on showcasing affection that is often not expressed towards Black boys in early childhood due to implicit biases (Brown, 2006) through explicit verbal praise and loving gestures and body language; and understanding that early childhood classrooms should serve as a space for children to learn through their mistakes, as this is a key component in the development of positive feelings towards schooling and learning.

Malik helped bring to life the perspective of Black boys in early childhood education, through his appreciation for his Black male teacher's commitment and expressions of care, shared cultural background, unique communication style (jokes as a form of affection), and his teacher's no-nonsense approach when Malik had a self-proclaimed "attitude." It appeared that Malik's educational experiences were impacted more on a social-emotional level, as opposed to academic, as Mr. Gomis was helping him recognize his potential as both a student and a Black boy who will eventually become a Black man. Malik mentioned feeling respected by his teacher which, in turn, made him

feel like a valued member of the classroom community. One could imagine that these informal lessons will impact how Malik grows to see his self-worth as a Black man in the greater community, as a result of having a role model who took the time to know him on the individual level and verbally (and unabashedly) communicated "I love you."

Thus, the implications for practice point to specific pedagogies and strategies that can be gleaned from the findings of this study. The first implication for promoting more positive learning environments for young Black boys is the importance of recruiting more teachers who view their teacher identities as being intricately connected to role modeling and the empowerment of Black boys. While researchers have documented the need for attracting more Black men to teach in early childhood settings (Meidl, 2018), and this study supported these recruitment endeavors, there are several lessons about role modeling that teachers of all races and genders can take away from the interviews and observations of Mr. Gomis, Mr. Richardson, and Malik.

Another lesson is that Black boys, like most young children, appreciate respect, care, and loving gestures, yet these attributes are often missing in teacher-student interactions between teachers and Black boys in early childhood education (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Young Black boys need teachers who are not afraid of closeness, both in the physical sense (sharing hugs and high fives) and closeness in relation to taking the time to really get to know Black boys as individuals. Black boys need teachers who engage in love as action—via their commitment to supporting their growth, respect, affection, and more (hooks, 2000). Love is a requisite to teaching young Black boys in the pursuit of justice.

Additionally, while most teacher education programs stress the importance of building relationships with students, void from these conversations are explicit discussions on the role that implicit bias plays in determining which teachers forge authentic relationships with which students. These unaddressed biases were at the forefront of preschool teachers' minds when they spent substantially more time looking at Black children in anticipation for misbehaviors in the study conducted by Yale University (Brown, 2016). More work must be done to not only call attention to these biases, but also provide training on how to shift classroom practices and perspectives once the biases have been acknowledged.

Finally, this study suggested that young Black boys thrive in classroom spaces where there is freedom to make mistakes. Black boys, just like other young children, need to come to see classrooms as environments where mistakes are not only acceptable but encouraged. This important finding was evident in both Mr. Gomis's and Mr. Richardson's classrooms—students were not penalized for needing additional support with academic content and meeting the demanding expectations of American classroom behaviors. These teachers did not resort to suspensions and expulsions or sending their Black boys out of the classroom for time to reflect on their actions. Instead, these two teachers saw Black boys as children and valued individual check-ins with Black boys and incorporating motivational affirmations as a tool for redirecting student behavior. In these classrooms, there was a sense that mistakes were expected but that children learn and grow during this process. While this is a central theme in early childhood education, space for making mistakes is not always afforded to young Black boys.

Limitations

While there was much to be learned from interviewing two teachers and one student, there were several limitations in this study. The first limitation was that the observations were in classrooms of teachers at the same school. The argument could be made that these teachers shared similar beliefs because the school recruits teachers with certain attributes and qualities. The fact that these two teachers were also friends presented a limitation as the data may be affected heavily by the beliefs and practices of one teacher who influences the second teacher. Observing in different school settings may have provided a more robust or varied perspective of the relationships between Black male teachers and Black boys. The limited number of Black men working in early childhood classrooms greatly impacted how data were collected, forcing the research to take place at one school site.

Additionally, the voices of certain key stakeholders were absent from this study, including families and parents, administrators, and community members. It is imperative that future research bring the counterstories of the families of young Black boys to life. Their perspectives and insights are valuable and should inform the improvement of the educational environments for and experiences of their sons.

Lastly, although not a specific aim of this study, it would be helpful to learn more about why so few Black men feel drawn to the field of early childhood education. Findings from the pilot study suggested that Black men are often encouraged to move to teaching in higher grade levels, even if their preference is working within early childhood. This was not the case for the two teachers in this study who have been teaching in early childhood classrooms for 24 years collectively.

There is great promise in listening to the counterstories of young Black boys and their families, Black male teachers, school administrators, and community members in pursuit of providing positive learning experiences for Black boys in our earliest American classrooms. This is what I seek to pursue in my future research, as discussed in the following and final section of this dissertation.

Future Research

One topic that surfaced during interviews was the lack of Black male teachers in early childhood education. However, unlike the participants of my exploratory study, neither teacher felt pressured by their administration to teach in higher grade levels. Thus, neither Mr. Gomis nor Mr. Richardson had clear postulations on why there are so few Black men teaching in early childhood classrooms, yet they were both interested in literature that delved into this disparity.

It should be noted that Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson were experienced classroom teachers, having taught in various early childhood settings prior to teaching at the school site in Harlem. Their veteran teacher status might influence how they are treated by administration regarding teaching in lower elementary classrooms. C.E. (a participant in the exploratory study) was only in his second year of teaching kindergarten and he felt compelled to teach in a higher grade due to his perception that parents, faculty, and administration were uncomfortable with his position as a kindergarten teacher. Similar sentiments were expressed by novice Black male educators teaching in early childhood classrooms. I am interested in studying this perspective in future research, to consider how to best support Black male teachers who are just entering the

field of early childhood education, which could impact teacher retention in early childhood classrooms.

Additionally, I am driven to continue learning *with* children, and I believe that diversity in student-participants would have made the counterstories feel robust. In the future, my goal is to continue interviewing Black boys in early childhood settings in order to better understand how they perceive their relationships with Black male teachers. Coupled with interviews, I am also interested in implementing focus groups with groups of Black boys to glean how they talk about their Black male teachers among their peers.

Finally, leveraging the focus on experiential knowledge that is central to critical race theory and Black feminist thought, I would like to co-teach a section of an early childhood class with a Black male teacher, where we both would serve as teacher-researchers, journaling our experiences and relationships with Black boys in our class and comparing our findings. The goal of this type of research is to learn alongside Black male teachers in order to inform the teaching practices of early childhood teachers from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Another area of interest for future research involves undertaking a deeper examination of the racial identity development of Black male teachers in early childhood education. Racial identity theory (Helms, 1990) involves a person's self-conception as a racial being and includes one's attitudes, values, and beliefs about oneself in relation to other racial groups. One key component that was mentioned in informal conversations and resonated in the interviews with both teachers was how these Black male teachers came to understand race in two very different countries. Mr. Gomis came to understand his racial identity in a country where the majority of the population is of African descent.

Moreover, while there is diversity in tribal groups, the lack of racial diversity in Senegal limited Mr. Gomis's interactions with individuals of different races. His schooling experiences, and subsequently his teacher identity, were heavily influenced by his Black teachers who implicitly taught him that the color of his skin was not a limitation in his future career endeavors. Having grown up in a family of educators, he saw himself as highly capable of succeeding within this field. Conversely, Mr. Richardson was extremely cognizant of race as a boy living in the United States. He often reflected on the stark differences of the living communities between Black and White residents of Long Island and how he understood that these differences were attributed to race. Both teachers' lived experiences point to the importance of *social location*, which concerns how identity develops in spaces occupied by groups of varying levels of power (Zaytoun, 2006). In order to understand how Black male teachers conceptualize their role as teachers of young children, a closer exploration of how they came to understand themselves as racialized beings, and if (or how) this recognition impacts their work with Black boys.

Finally, because Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson viewed empowering young Black boys as a key component of their role as teachers and enacted love in action—encompassing "acceptance, care, knowledge, and responsibility" (hooks, 2000, pp. 214-215)—in and through their teaching, in my future research, I plan to further explore Black male teachers' perceptions of what it means to be an empowering teacher, the place of love in action in their practices, and how these factors inform their relationships with young Black boys in early childhood education.

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Appendix A

Data Collection Outline

School Site
• 16-weeks of observations • 2 interviews with teacher (pre- and post- interviews) • 2 interviews with student (pre- and post-interviews) • Student artifact collection

Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Teacher (Interview #1)

<table>
<tr><th>Objectives</th><th>Questions</th></tr>
<tr><td>Background: Focus here is on the counternarrative (CRT) and Research Question #1</td><td>Can you talk to me about your experience(s) as a Black boy in the U.S?

Can you briefly describe your current role and your teaching experiences?

What influenced your decision to get into teaching?

Did you have Black male teachers?
If yes:
● Could you describe your relationships with Black male teachers in your own school experience?
If no:
● Imagine that you'd have a Black male; do you believe your experiences would have been different? If so, how?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Relationships with students: Research Question #1</td><td>Tell me about the Black boys in your class. Regarding Black boys, what brings you the most pride? What worries you most?

Can you tell me a bit about your relationships with Black boys in your class?

Is there anything in particular that you do with your Black boys to build relationships with them?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Race and gender intersection: Research Question #1</td><td>Tell me about your interactions with Black boys.

Is there a difference between how you interact with your Black boys and the interactions of your colleagues with Black boys?
● Can you give me an example of the differences you observe?
● Have you ever experienced sharing the same race and gender of Black boys to work in the student's favor?</td></tr>
</table>

Perceptions on Teaching: Research Question #1	How do you keep your professional connections and commitments alive? Do you have a network of Black male teachers who you share experiences with? If so: When talking to other Black male teachers, how do you talk about your role as a teacher? Why do you think there are so few Black male teachers within the field of Early Childhood Education? How did you become interested in teaching our youngest learners? Are there any other Black males in ECE that you would recommend for this study?
Closing	Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything we haven't touched on? Thank you for all of your insights. I will send a copy of the transcript for you to review.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol for Student (Interview #1)

Objectives	Questions
Background	Student will be prompted to draw a picture of his teacher. After the student has finished the following questions will be asked: Can you tell me about the person in the picture? (Most of these questions will be created in the moment based on what the student draws). Alternative prompts: Who's {insert teacher's name}? Can you tell me a story about {insert teacher's name}? After showing student a picture of an African American boys of the same age, ask: ● If a new kid was entering {insert grade} what would you tell him about {insert teacher's name}? What does your mom/dad/family think of {teacher}?
Interactions with teacher: Research Question #2	What are some things that you have learned from {teacher} this year? What are some of your favorite things to do with your teacher? Tell me about a happy memory with {insert teacher's name}. Tell me about a time when {teacher} was happy of you. How did you know he was happy? Tell me about a time when {teacher} was not happy with you. How did you know?
Closing	You have drawn a very nice picture of your teacher. Could I take a picture of so I can look at it later? Is there anything else you would like to say about your teacher? Thank you for all of your hard work!

Appendix D

Interview Protocol for Student (Interview #2)

Draw a picture of your teacher. Can you tell me about your picture?

____

____

Appendix E

Note-Taking Form for Single-Child Observations

Name:		
Event and Date	Implication/Questions	Observation Meaning/Interpretations

Appendix F

Excerpt of Exploratory Interview #1 with Initial Research Thoughts

Interview #1

10/16/2015

7:30 PM

CE = Participant

NM: = Interviewer

NM: Could you describe your relationship with Black male teachers during your own schooling experience?

CE: As a kid?

NM: Mmmhmm

CE: There were none.

NM: None?

CE: That was my relationship. I don't recall a Black male teacher until I went to Morehouse College.

NM: So you went to Morehouse? So as an adult?

CE: I went to Morehouse.

NM: Not until you went to Morehouse. Wow, that's crazy. These initial moments feel slow, think about how this question could be reframed so that it really opens up the floor for conversation. Think about leading with another question.

CE: Yup. There were none. Til this day, I never had a mentor. I don't have a role model. I never had one. The closest thing I had was my coach last year with the empire fellow. Who I now see like my big sis. So I would say she's like a mentorish type of person, but I never had someone I looked up to like yea, this is my mentor. We go out for lunch and like talk about things.

NM: Like kick it?

CE: No, never.

NM: That's crazy. Being that you didn't have any Black teachers until you got to college, how would you describe your relationship with Black students, with Black male students? This feels like an odd shift. Although I initially thought the order of questions wouldn't be a huge deal, I want to make sure I give participants adequate time to open up

about their experiences. I want the interview to feel more like the participant telling his story and experiences.

CE: Umm, I can tell that, I can tell that many of them just watch me. You know, you can see how they just look at you, because they're not used to seeing someone that's a bigger version of them. I had to stop my kids from rubbing my face, because I started like, breaking out. I don't know what it was. It was like, they would touch my hair a lot and then touch their hair, their arms like rubbing, even the girls too though. Because many of the girls don't have, and the parents don't have a positive, like normal Black male relationship (How does CE define a normal Black male relationship? Think about looking into this further.) in their lives. But the men in particular, there's a lot of affection, is isn't like too much affection, but like I can see it. The high-fives, and they're always starting at me. Always staring.

NM: How many boys do you have?

CE: I have a lot of boys. They gave me a lot of boys because I'm in the room. So I probably have 9 girls, so I would say around 15 boys. It probably around 13 boys, 11 girls or something.

NM: Would you give me an example when sharing the race and gender of your students worked in a student's favor? Here, I am specifically looking for examples of

intersectionality, I need to make it more explicit that I am not talking about race/gender but the intersection of both.

CE: Ok, so sharing their race. I made up this song that my kids sing every day. Every morning. I'll show it to you if you'd like. But, it's a repeat after me song. Now they say it. But it goes "I love my skin" they point to themselves, "I love yours too" they point to someone else. Then they say, "My hair looks great, your hair looks cool. Hold your hair up and don't look down because if you do, you'll drop your crown." We say that every morning then they give each other a hug. And, and that's, that's my biggest way of like, trying to instill something permanent. You know, what I'm teaching them is nice, but as Black people, no one in education says your skin is beautiful, your hair looks great. So for them to say and hear it every day is like, hopefully, maybe in 10 years, where they're at the age where they're recognizing the world, and learn how messed up stuff really is, they'll think about that and never forget.

Appendix G

Excerpt of Exploratory Interview #2

Interview #2

11/17/17

6:45 AM

BP: Participant

NM: Interviewer

NM: Could you describe your describe your current role and your teaching experience?

BP: Yes, I'm an assistant principal at an elementary school here in Long Island. It's a K-5 school, we have about 800 students. Again about my role, we have a principal and another assistant principal so its 3 administrators on staff. And my role, its broken down into two positions this year and we all divide the teachers in various aspects. This year, I supervise teachers in grades 2, 3, and 4, the principal supervises k, 1, and 5 and the other assistant principal she takes on the role of {inaudible}…We all take part in sharing responsibilities of the classroom, formal observations and informal observations. I also supervise the music department, special ed, and also that encompasses the social workers, school psychologists.

NM: Ok, could you describe just quickly your teaching experience?

BP: Oh, yea, I was a physical education at an elementary school that was in an intermediate elementary school which was grades 3-5.

NM: And you said physical education?

BP: Yes, I was the physical education teacher.

NM: Ok. I'm looking at the relationship between Black male teachers and Black male students. Specifically thinking about Black male students in Early Childhood. So for my study thinking about students in schools, from pre-k to age 8. Just to give you some framework, the questions that will be asked will coming from that perspective.

BP: That's perfect.

NM: Ok. So thinking about your experiences what were your relationships like with Black male teachers?

BP: I didn't have any. {Laughs} Black male teachers? What is that? So, umm, so for me, the only time I got a chance, my first experience having a Black male educator, it wasn't until I had the great privilege of having a principal who was a Black male when I reached junior high in seventh grade, so prior to that, there wasn't a Black male in my formal school, traditional school setting up until that point. And then after that I still never had a Black male teacher until….I didn't have a Black male teacher until undergrad at NYU,

and I think it might have been my junior year where I took an elective and it was an African American literature course. Then after that, I took a class with Dr. Smalls in Africana Studies, and then to be honest with you, I didn't have another male teacher formally until I had my certification program in leadership. So, I think that's critical to share with you, so you get a context in which you understand how small my interfacing with Black men formally, in a school setting, however, because of my parents they always made sure I had Black male mentors outside of school. The other thing that you should know about me is that I grew up as a male dancer, so at the age of 7 I was I entered in dance school so that's where I was able to have male teachers but again it wasn't in the formal setting, but it was a school setting because it was dance school, so to be honest with you Nicole I guess part of the reason I never felt a void is because has always been a prominent role in my life and so through that I've always had tremendous Black male mentorship through that piece so I never really thought about it til now honestly. I mean of course it's come up before but you were the first person to make me think about it from that perspective. Usually it's like how many Black teachers have you had, but a Black male, you know actually no it didn't happen.

NM: Did you grow up here in New York City?

BP: I grew up in Long Island, was born and raised in Grayshore. Then I had the great opportunity, when I was in eighth grade to move in with my grandparents in Brooklyn, so I was actually went to the high school of preforming art, LaGuardia, so I had the best of both worlds. Elementary and middle school in Long Island and High in New York City.

NM: I’m not from New York, but LaGuardia High school is well known.

BP: Yea, it performing arts, the singing school.

NM: Could you describe your relationships with Black boys at your school thinking specifically about younger boys?

BP: Yea, absolutely. I would say its dynamic, its close, I would say many of them see me as a father figure, and mostly adjacent I would say, because of my role in the school, I’m in and out of the classroom, I’m there during morning line up, being a constant, a consistent. I would say my relationship is close and for the most part its nonverbal, its more about my physical presence, it’s about that look that I’m able to give them, it’s about the proximity I’m able to pray for them, one of the things I have to say is that, what is pervasive in education especially here in New York state people have this thing about proximity with children and with me I think it’s critical you’re not afraid of children, and you’re not afraid to be close to them and I think that’s something I provide, particularly our Black boys. I’m not afraid to be close to them. So when they come to hug me, I hug them back, unapologetically. And so if they’re having joy or in crisis, I don’t have an issue with picking them up and supporting them in whatever they need. For me, its, a lot of it honestly Nicole is nonverbal. Because as you know the dynamics of Black boys and men, Black men, a lot of our communication is nonverbal. You know that as a woman, you see how we move.

NM: Yea. I understand. Could you tell me more about the look you're able to give? For me, I'm coming from a different perspective, experience as a Black female educator. Is the look like when you're trying to make sure they're doing the right thing in class, or…?

BP: Yea. Hold on one minute. So you want to know about the look? The look is in various ways. The look is in compliments, the look is in presence, like I just see them, I'm acknowledging you're there, I'm here, sometimes it's a look to support redirection. It's a nonverbal. The look is about presence. The look is about really just knowing that I'm there. I guess the best way to say is that the look is about acknowledgement.

NM: Acknowledgment?

BP: Yea, like I see you. And the other thing I do is, I'm not afraid to just touch them. Run them on the head, tap them you know "boom, I still got you" you know rub their head and just move on. You know because so many of us are not present its about just being there and actually just being there for them. Sometimes at breakfast I just sit down in the middle of them like "Good morning!" You know? It's like, everybody's eating? Alright! Same thing in the classroom. You know they're on the carpet doing a read aloud, and I just sit down and listen. Sometimes it's just about that Nicole! It's not about talking or doing something. So often we think about the doing right? It's really about the being that's what I'm trying to say. It's about being, that's what I've learned.

NM; Yea, that's a very important point for me to think about. Being present. Being there in your students' lives.

BP: And just being comfortable with that. Knowing I don't need to do more than that. You know you say with your teachers sometimes you're doing too much, it's like can you scale back a little bit? You don't have to do all that. You already had them. But when you do all that extra stuff… What I'm saying is less is more. Being there present is all the need for me. They don't need to say or do anything. So with that said, when I have to do something Nicole, then it's that more powerful. You follow me? If there's something I have to do, if there's something I actually have to say it has more meaning.

NM: I see, that's interesting I had never really thought about the impact of just being present until now. So I appreciate you pushing my thinking there. Can you give me an example when sharing the race and gender of your students worked in the favor of the student? So thinking about the intersection of race and gender as a Black man and how that works in your students favor?

BP: Oh absolutely, when it comes to negotiating with teachers, and families and colleagues, you know just making sense of stuff. You know reminding, you know we all live in this world together, so we know we just need to be reminded, reminding all of us what it's like to be a boy, to be a male, and what that may or may not be. Giving context to things.

Appendix H

Excerpt of Observation Notes

11/17/15

9:48 AM

Mr. W Second Grade

T = Teacher

Brooklyn charter school, part of large charter district

Black, female co-teacher

10 students in small group on carpet, 5 male students

- T gives lots of positive feedback
- Non-verbal redirection of boy in front row to track the books, redirects student to put his hand down
- Student (boy) snapping his fingers, presumably to a song in his head, T gently holds students' hand
- Student stops snapping, looks at Mr. W and smiles
- Male student is called to read aloud, reading with lots of expression, Mr. W. reminds him that he is just reading in a normal conversation voice
- Boy moves from the carpet back to his seat, trips and falls in the process, Mr. W helps him to his feet, asks him if he's ok, then directs him back to his seat (doesn't chastise student for unintentionally disrupting the lesson 9
- T physically kneels down to talk quietly to student on the carpet, places hand on his head as they speak

- Redirects male student’s attention to the book (T has informed that this is the student’s first day in the class)
- T spends a lot of individual time working with the new student, talks quietly so the rest of the class doesn’t hear their conversation
- Co- teacher talks to parent in the hall
- Mr. W. circulates around the perimeter of the small group to check their work
- T states, “I see you home girl!” to female student working
- Mr. W. has spent a substantial amount of time crouched next to the new male student
- TRANSITION TO NEW SMALL GROUP
    - 11 students, 7 boys
- Students settle on carpet in front of Mr. W.
- T makes eye contact with boy on carpet, nonverbal redirection to the book they are reading aloud
- T states, “Started from the bottom…”
- Students respond, “Now we’re here” (Reference to Drake song)
- T makes eye contact with male student, “I see you Tyrell!”
- T often smiles throughout the reading lesson
- Boy sitting on the side near teacher, smiles at Mr. W as he prepares the two male students for individual “battle reading”
- Student calls out for T, T responds, “You ok?” Student reminds T that there’s a book that he should use
- T notes, “I got this” and smiles

Appendix I

Exploratory Study (Memo 1)

10/29/15

Fatherhood

It's been a couple of weeks since my first interview and I think I've had adequate time to begin thinking through some of the things I've learned. A common theme across both interviews was the Black male teacher serving as a father figure in the lives of the young men they teach/lead. I'm not entirely surprised by this finding. Milner and others talk about this being a positive aspect of Black male teachers/Black male students relationships. One striking finding, however, was how younger male teachers assumed this role, men who are not fathers in their personal lives outside of school. This was true of C.E. who is in his second year of teaching and self-identified as being fairly young. Not only does C.E. lack the experience of fathering his own children, but also from his interview I learned that his father was not around during his childhood. It does not sound like his father is an active participant in his life, whether this is by choice or not is unknown. C.E. mentioned being a strict father figure, how he imagines his own father would have been to him. This is what really moved me—imagination. I wonder what influenced C.E.'s construction of fatherhood, who influenced his images of what Black fathers look like. More importantly, I think about what his portrayal of Black fatherhood means to his first-grade boy. How are they constructing meanings of fatherhood and masculinity through their interactions with C.E.? How does this early exposure with Black men influence how they seem themselves and their futures? I think about the

lessons I will never be able to teach Black boys about being Black men. This feels like a point I need to further explore—the specific lessons Black men teach young, Black boys.

Appendix J

Codes Used for Coding Exploratory Study Interviews and Observations

1. “I’m a much bigger version of you”/other-fathering
2. Teacher Identity
3. Lack of Black Male Teachers
4. Culturally Relevant Teaching
5. Mentoring/Role Modeling
6. Parental Connections
7. Counternarratives
8. Love
9. Shared Language
10. Leaving the field
11. Community building