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Black Male Students' Perceptions of Effective Teachers:

A Qualitative Study of Compton Middle Schools

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

by

Francis Vladimir Lozier

2013



## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Black Male Students' Perceptions of Effective Teachers:  
A Qualitative Study of Compton Middle Schools

by

Francis Vladimir Lozier

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Robert Cooper, Chair

This study investigated the characteristics of effective teachers of African-American male middle school students. Black males are underserved throughout all levels of the educational pipeline and experience an achievement gap. Researchers have posited several causes of the achievement gap: teachers' beliefs, students' cultural capital, and teachers' pedagogical skills. Moreover, the transition from student-centered elementary school settings to curriculum-centered secondary school settings can be disproportionately jarring for Black male adolescents. Using a community nomination process, students and principals at 4 Compton middle schools identified whom they perceived as the most effective teacher at each site. Fifty-three students participated in 8 focus groups. Each of the 4 teachers was observed 4 times (for a total of 16 observations) and interviewed 3 times (for a total of 12 interviews). In the effective teachers' classrooms, nearly 100% of Black males participated throughout lessons, teachers and students used high levels of

academic vocabulary, and teachers used humor and code-switching to elicit positive responses from students. Students described the importance of humor, high expectations, and fairness, as well as multiple types of teaching practices. Teachers believed that teaching was their means of effecting social justice, that their students' intelligence was malleable rather than fixed, and that their personal experiences were instrumental in shaping their teaching philosophy and practice. These findings began to coalesce into an emerging profile of effective teachers for Black male middle school students: (a) a social justice stance, (b) cultural congruence with their students as a result of lived experiences, and (c) the ability to wield a robust arsenal of pedagogical strategies. The findings point to the importance of recruiting teacher candidates who can relate to the lived experiences of their students, of designing hiring protocols that test for the characteristics of effective teachers for African-American males, and restructuring middle schools to allow for multiple attempts to demonstrate mastery of complex academic concepts.

The dissertation of Francis Vladimir Lozier is approved.

Todd Franke

Rashmita Mistry

Robert Cooper, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

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- 2007-2008 Teacher, 8<sup>th</sup> grade English  
Compton Unified School District
- 2008-2009 Curriculum Specialist, Middle School  
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- 2010      *The Laurel Writing Approach*  
California School Boards Association  
*Golden Bell Award* Winning Presentation  
San Francisco, California
- 2012      *Closing the Achievement Gap and Dispelling the Myth*  
The Education Trust  
*Dispelling the Myth Award* Winning Presentation  
Washington, District of Columbia
- 2013      *Collaborative Inquiry: Using Data to Foster School-Wide Improvement*  
National Title I Conference  
*National Title I Distinguished School Award* Winning Presentation  
Nashville, Tennessee
- 2013      *Accelerating Quality Across Sectors*  
Schools That Can National Forum  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- 2013      *Becoming an Outlier School with Uncommon Results: Evidence-Based Systemic Improvement*  
Riverside County Office of Education Models of Academic Excellence  
Palm Springs, California

## CHAPTER ONE

### Statement of the Problem

Since the election and subsequent reelection of President Barack Obama, many pundits have posited that we now live in a post-racial America. The fact that a Black male now serves in the highest office in the country and is arguably the most powerful man in the world has reinforced the color-blind worldview of some Americans. However, we need not look very far to see current and widespread examples of African-American males as a marginalized segment of our society: the hyper-racialized narrative around the killings of Oscar Grant and Trayvon Martin, the overrepresentation of Black<sup>1</sup> males in the penal system, the under-representation of Black males in higher education (Brunn & Kao, 2005; Planty & Kridl, 2007), and the overrepresentation of Black males in special education and remedial classes (Monroe, 2005; Neal, McCray & Webb-Johnson, 2003; Planty & Kridl, 2007; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Assiz, & Chung, 2005; Watts & Erevelles, 2004). Despite Barack Obama's significant accomplishment of slipping through the glass ceiling, our nation still experiences a pervasive and systemic gap with regards to life outcomes for African-American males (Carter & Welner, 2013).

### **The Educational Achievement Gap as a Systemic Gap in Opportunity**

Beginning in pre-kindergarten and continuing through college, students who are Black, male, and low-income are underserved by the American educational system and, as a result,

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<sup>1</sup> Labels used to describe racial and ethnic groups undergo significant changes over time. Throughout this study, the words "African-American" and "Black" will be used somewhat, but not entirely, interchangeably. A 2013 Gallup poll showed a slight tilt towards preference for the use of "African-American" over a 15-year period, but that a majority (65%) of Black Americans had no preference for either term. This study will follow the convention that "African-American" is used as a noun or an adjective and "Black" is used as an adjective.

achieve academically at a level below their White, Asian, and Latino peers. This phenomenon is commonly dubbed the *achievement gap*. Researchers and practitioners continue to study and address the many facets of the achievement gap because such inequality of opportunity belies education's promise to our nation to be the great equalizer, affording America's diverse citizenry the tools for economic mobility and civic participation (Mann & Cremin, 1957).

While the last century has brought improvements in the inclusion and integration of working class students and students of color, academic results still show disparities between groups of students throughout all levels of the educational pipeline. Gloria Ladson-Billings frames the achievement gap within a systemic lack of opportunity for African-Americans (Carter & Welner, 2013). Ladson-Billings (2013) traces the systemic suppression of equal opportunities for African-Americans from slavery to its legacies of economic servitude, legal segregation, voter disfranchisement, de facto segregation, and unequal school funding. Rather than an intellectual deficit within Black students, then, the achievement gap is a result of the debt of opportunities owed to African-Americans, or an opportunity gap.

This achievement gap begins even before kindergarten. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 47% of students who are low-income are enrolled in preschool, compared to 60% of their more affluent peers (Planty & Kridl, 2007). It is in early childhood where 3- and 4-year-olds learn the basic foundational skills that set them up for success in classrooms: holding a pencil, taking turns, productively solving conflicts with peers, and letter and sound correspondence. As a result, many low-income Black males enter school with diminished opportunities to achieve academically compared with their more affluent peers.

Not surprisingly, the gap persists throughout elementary and middle school. By the fourth grade, African-American students score 29 points lower (on a 0-500 scale) than White

students in reading and 26 points lower in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). By the eighth grade, the reading gap remains at 29 points while the math gap grows to 34 points. In each of these cases, the reading and math achievement gaps have not significantly narrowed over the last 15 years (Planty & Kridl, 2007).

In California, the Academic Performance Index (API) measures the academic performance and growth of K-12 schools, assigning a composite score between 200-1000. This number aggregates the percentage of students who perform at the advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic levels on the California Standards Tests (CSTs). For middle school students, the overall API score statewide for White students is 855, 906 for Asian students, 743 for Latino students, and 709 for African-American students (California Department of Education, n.d.). The API aggregates student performance on statewide exams in English, math, science, and history.

The significance of this trend of lower performance for Black students can be seen even more clearly when examining the proficiency rates for the four major racial groups. On the English CST, 80.0% of White students and 74.0% of Asian students scored at proficient or advanced, compared with 46.9% of Latinos and 45.6% of African-Americans. On the math CST, 71.2% of Whites and 84.8% of Asians scored at proficient or advanced, compared with 50.6% of Latinos and 42.3% of African-Americans (California Department of Education, n.d.). These quantitative results point to the existence of an achievement gap for Black students.

At the high school and college levels, the achievement gap between Black males and their peers becomes even more pronounced. The high school dropout rate for African-American students is more than double that of their White peers (Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006). Of the students who reach the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, achievement gaps on the NAEP persist. In reading, Blacks, as

a group, scored 264, while Whites scored 293, and males, as a group, scored 278, while females scored 292. In math, Blacks scored 285, while Whites scored 313, and males scored 308, while females scored 205. In science, Blacks scored 120, while Whites scored 156, and males scored 149, while females scored 145 (Planty & Kridl, 2007). In addition to academic indicators of the achievement gap, researchers have also noted that Black males are more than twice as likely as Whites to be suspended or referred to special education (Monroe, 2005; Neal et al., 2003; Planty & Kridl, 2007; Skiba et al., 2005; Watts & Erevelles, 2004). This is a highly noteworthy statistic because it represents time away from grade-level core instruction and therefore diminished opportunities to succeed academically. Thus, the preponderance of quantitative indicators highlights the trend of African-Americans being underserved by the educational pipeline.

At the college level, African-Americans in general and Black males in particular continue to be significantly underserved and underrepresented. Even though African-Americans make up 17.3% of K-12 enrollment, they comprise only 12.7% of undergraduate enrollment. Conversely, Whites comprise 57.9% of K-12 enrollment yet make up 65.7% of college enrollment. Furthermore, for every Black male undergraduate, there are 1.68 Black females (Brunn & Kao, 2005). In addition, not only do females earn the majority of associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees, their college enrollment rate has grown three times faster than that of men (Planty & Kridl, 2007).

From preschool to graduate school, students who are Black, and male, and low-income are underserved by our nation's educational system. Their intersection of race, class, and gender place them in a social group that, as the aforementioned statistics illustrate, make them less likely to achieve at the same levels as their peers. This gap in achievement is caused not by a deficit in

intellect but rather by a debt of opportunities, or an opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings, 2013). In other words, the leaks in the educational pipeline disproportionately hinder Black males.

### **Multilayered Gaps in Achievement**

Though the achievement gap is typically framed as one between Black students and White students, there are actually multiple achievement and opportunity gaps. Gaps exist between racial groups, between sexes, between schools in a district, and even within schools. For example, while gaps exist between school districts such as Compton Unified School District, where this study was conducted, and other more affluent districts in California, there are also gaps within the district, as well as within each school. As detailed in the previous section on statewide trends in performance gaps, the API is an aggregate number representing the percentage of students who perform at the proficient or advanced levels (versus the basic and below levels) on the CST. Compton's elementary schools outperform its secondary schools on standardized tests; there is a roughly 200 API point gap separating the district's elementary and secondary schools (California Department of Education, n.d.). Amongst the district's secondary schools, roughly 90 API points separate the middle schools from the high schools. And amongst middle schools, roughly 80 API points separate the highest performing middle school from the lowest performing middle school, both of which are included in this study. In other words, achievement gaps exist within the overall achievement gap.

Pacific Middle School<sup>2</sup> is one of the four schools included in my study. It scores near the top of the district's middle schools with an overall API of 674 (California Department of

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<sup>2</sup> To maintain anonymity of those involved in my study, I have changed the names of my research sites and participants.



Education, n.d.). However, within the school, Latinos average an API of 707, while African-Americans score at 629. Black females score at 649, while Black males score at 620.

Special education and suspension rates at Pacific also illustrate African-American males' status at the bottom of the opportunity gap. One out of three students in the special day class is a Black male, even though Black males comprise only 20% of the student body at Pacific.

Document review revealed that African-American males are also overrepresented in discipline referrals and suspensions. Both of these trends are consistent with the literature on Black male students and the opportunity gap. The proportion of discipline referrals given is significant to achievement for two reasons: (a) they represent time out of class and reduced learning time, and (b) they also manifest teachers' perceptions of students. Interestingly, at Pacific Middle School, no intervention has focused directly on Black males, even though the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) prompts us to examine race-specific results and multiple data points shed light on African-American males as a student group that is being underserved.

### **Middle School Students and Adolescence**

Given this study's focus on middle schools, it is important briefly discuss the unique nature of the middle school years, which is often a tumultuous time for students. Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, and Constant (2004) outline the significant and sometimes turbulent transition between the child-centered environment of elementary school and the curriculum-centered setting of high school. Middle school researchers posit that the change of going from one teacher to multiple teachers while simultaneously undergoing the physiological changes of puberty can be stressful and detrimental to student learning in the long-term (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Juvonen et al., 2004; MacIver & Epstein, 1990). Jackson and Davis (2000) point out that

the environmental and structural design of middle schools coincide, often negatively, with the already tumultuous physiological transition of adolescence.

In other words, middle school adolescents enter a school environment with departmentalized courses, multiple teachers, and larger student populations at precisely the time when they are looking for deeper relationships with peers and adults. MacIver and Epstein (1990) found that a lack of adult to student connection often characterized middle school settings, in part because while middle school teachers were focused on their curriculum, middle school aged students were seeking out relationships and connections. During this pivotal stage of adolescence, Erikson (1950) points out, the middle school student struggles with the conflicts of industry versus inferiority and identity versus role confusion. Thus, just at the stage when adolescents are struggling with peer pressure and self-esteem, they are thrust into more rigorous, more compartmentalized, and less connected school environments.

### **The Black Male Achievement Gap: Teachers' Beliefs, Students' Cultural Capital, and Teachers' Pedagogical Skills**

Given the already difficult developmental and structural transition of middle school, Black male middle school students face a particularly challenging educational experience. Researchers have posited several causes of and solutions to the Black male achievement gap. The preponderance of studies emphasizes educators' mindsets about their students. Other researchers emphasize the cultural capital students bring to school from home. Still another growing body of literature focuses on teachers' pedagogical planning and execution skills. The next section discusses each of these three bodies of literature about the Black male achievement gap in turn.

**Teachers' beliefs.** Early research on Black students' academic underperformance confirmed the significance of teachers' expectations and the phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy in determining which students fail and which succeed (Rist, 1970). Subsequent research built upon this notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy in education and revealed the importance of how a teacher conceptualizes intelligence as either fixed or malleable as a determining factor of how she serves her students (Clark, 1997; Dweck, Trzesniewski, & Blackwell, 2007; K. Lee, 1996; Howard, 2003a).

Recent studies have correlated teachers' expectations with African-American student achievement (Sheppard, 2006; Mistry, White, Benner, & Huynh, 2009). Researchers have found that teachers' expectations of African-American students negatively interact with class and gender, namely low socioeconomic status and being male (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Strayhorn, 2008; Van Duzer, 2006). Other studies have found that students are keenly aware of this phenomenon of *learning while Black or poor*—that some teachers hold them to a lower standard because of their race and class—and identify teachers' expectations as key to developing their academic efficacy (Gushue & Whitson, 2006; Tyler & Boelter, 2008). On a similar note, Steele (2010) has theorized that certain groups, such as African-Americans, experience *stereotype threat* of lower academic performance, which leads to anxiety about their performance, which in turn can lead to lower performance. The experience of stereotype threat can then lead to a downward spiral of diminished confidence, poor performance, and lack of motivation.

**Students' cultural capital.** In addition to the role teachers' mindsets play in widening or closing the African-American male achievement gap, researchers also point to the cultural capital students bring from their personal and home life. Bourdieu (1977) posited that cultural knowledge and skills passed down through familial and social networks, or cultural capital, explain why some students succeeded in school while others tended to fail. Solórzano (1997) and Yosso (2005) have expanded on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Observing how the theory that was meant to critique social reproduction has been applied to frame Black and Latino culture as deficient, they have sought to de-center whiteness as the cultural norm and to highlight the pluralism of cultural wealth of communities of color.

One common thread in this subset of literature on students' cultural capital is the way students view time—either oriented towards the present or focused on the future (Adelabu, 2007; Gayles, 2005; Hyatt, 2003; Sheppard, 2006). In particular, researchers have connected a student's long-range focus on college as a long-term goal as key for academically successful Black students (Howard, 2003b; Milne & Plourde, 2006; Moore, 2006). These studies posit that Black male students' long-term perspective—especially related to continuing education—is a key factor in closing or widening the Black male achievement gap. In other words, the inclination to delay immediate gratification for the sake of a long-term goal is critical for those Black male students who have experienced academic success.

Research on students' cultural capital also points to the importance of verbal and nonverbal communication codes—namely the ways in which codes differ between school and home (Rivers, Rosa-Lugo, & Hedrick, 2004; Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003; Zusman, Knox, & Lieberman, 2005). For example, physical activity such as making body movements while talking may be permitted at home but frowned upon or even punished at school. Similarly, a

school-home disconnect between the importance of cooperative versus assertive social dispositions is posited as another determining factor in the Black male achievement gap (Beebe-Frankenbeger, Lane, Bocian, Gresham, & MacMillan, 2005; Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2006; Tharp-Taylor & Gall, 2005). While an assertive orientation tends to be valued in the homes of Black males, schools value and expect a cooperative orientation, while punishing assertiveness towards peers and adults. Beyond socio-cultural orientations, researchers have pointed to how guardians manage homework time and assert their authority at home as other key levers in the achievement gap (J. Lee & Bowen, 2006; Mandara, 2006). More recently, researchers have looked at how differences in cultural capital lead to the overrepresentation of Black males in special education (Monroe, 2005; Neal et al., 2003; Skiba et al., 2005). Because special education referrals can be subjective and made based on educators' interpretations of what is appropriate behavior, this subset of research illuminates how contradictory social orientations between home and school place Black males at the bottom of the opportunity gap.

**Teachers' pedagogical skills.** A third area of literature on the Black male achievement gap focuses on teachers' discrete pedagogical skills. A preponderance of researchers examining this area point to teachers who, perhaps as a way of combating low expectations and a cultural disconnect, adopt an intentionally self-reflective stance to planning and teaching, taking personal responsibility for student outcomes (Ash & Levitt, 2003; Gerhke, 2005; Giovannelli, 2003; Morrell, 2003). Drawing from critical race theory, such culturally responsive teachers (a) focus explicitly on equity issues, (b) incorporate students' culture into the curriculum, and (c) see teaching as a political and cultural act (Datnow, Hubbard, & Conchas, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lynn, 2002; Milner, 2003; Morrell, 2002; Tatum, 2006; Traynor, 2003).

Beyond a self- and socially-reflective stance to planning, there is a growing body of literature on the discrete pedagogical skills of teachers who are closing the achievement gap. For example, these teachers not only embody high expectations for their students, but are also able to break down content into comprehensible chunks (Sheppard, 2006). Some researchers have also found that teachers who can teach Black male students effectively utilize cooperative learning and group projects (Howard, 2001; Wilson-Jones & Caston, 2004). Still other researchers have extended this notion, positing that utilizing familiar linguistic patterns, behavior cues, and call-and-response structures to facilitate teacher-student or peer-peer interaction mirrors Black students' home environment at school (Flowers, 2006; Gardner et al., 2001; Hubbard & Datnow, 2005).

In a last subset of research on teachers' pedagogical skills, some researchers have examined how teachers assess and grade students: relying on anecdotal and intuitive "evidence" rather than systematic data (Ash & Levitt, 2003; Ingram, Louis, & Schroeder, 2004). All of these findings connect back to the body of research on teachers' expectations and mindsets, as differences in grading can be attributed to subjective judgments of behavior rather than actual academic progress (Randall & Engelhard, 2009).

This study is situated within the convergence of these three bodies of literature: (a) teachers' beliefs, (b) students' cultural capital, and (c) teachers' pedagogical practices. Though much has been written about each individual area, few studies have attempted to bridge all three. This study focused on the links between outcomes, students' cultural capital, teachers' pedagogical practices, and teachers' beliefs. The conceptual framework, built upon an integration of the aforementioned bodies of literature, can be explained as follows:

- Student outcomes, including CST performance and GPA, are influenced by teacher practice interacting with students' cultural capital.
- Students' cultural capital is influenced primarily by forces outside of school: family, peers, and media. Such forces help shape a student's aspirations, locus of control, attitude towards school and teachers, and ability to code-switch his verbal and nonverbal communication modes.
- While students' cultural capital is *primarily* shaped by forces outside of school, teacher practices not only *interact* with student capital—but can also help to *shape* student capital. Teacher practice falls along four main domains: (a) social management, (b) explaining and helping, (c) making material relevant to students' lives, and (d) grading and giving feedback.
- Teacher practice is influenced by a teacher's beliefs about intelligence (fixed versus malleable) and beliefs about his role as a teacher (social reproduction, meritocracy, social justice).
- Finally, institutional practices such as hiring, professional development, organizational structure of a school, and leadership help to foster teacher beliefs.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this conceptual framework:

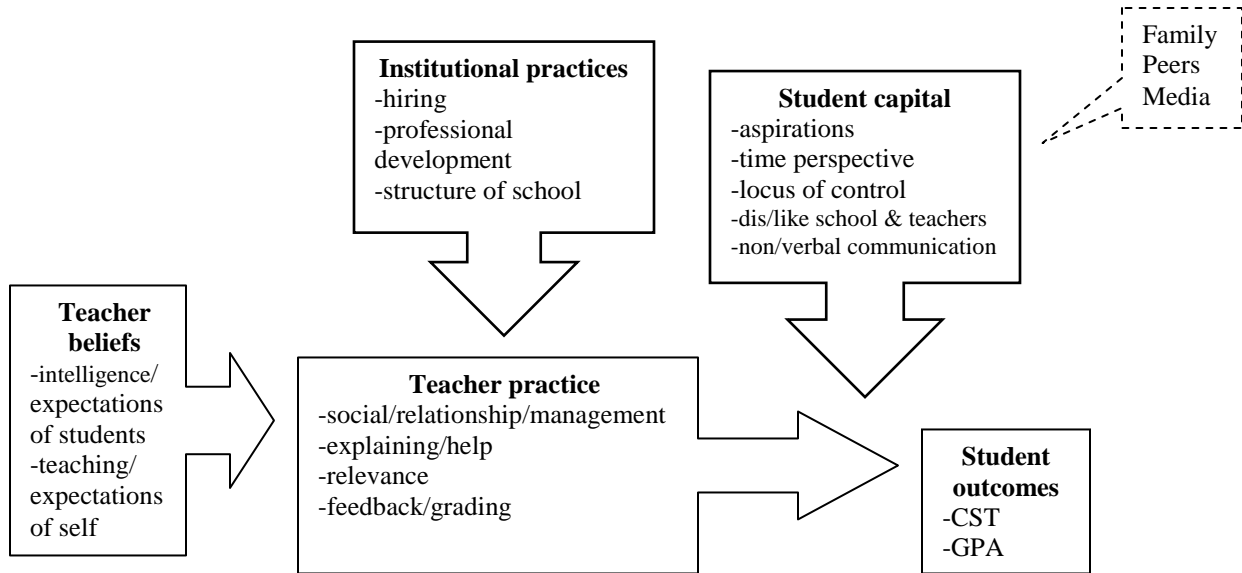


Figure 1. *Conceptual framework.*

My study focused on teacher beliefs and practices, and how they can influence student outcomes.

In summary, the literature on the Black male achievement gap points to three main categories of causes and solutions: (a) teachers’ mindsets, (b) students’ cultural capital, and (c) teachers’ pedagogical skill. I set out to situate my study in the convergence of these three areas. Given my role as an educator, leader, and practitioner, I was especially interested in the question of pedagogical skill (specifically, planning and assessment). Also, I was curious about how successful teachers might build upon African-American male students’ cultural capital. As outlined in my conceptual framework in Figure 1, it is my belief that teachers can interact with, influence, and intentionally build upon students’ cultural capital. By bridging the existing sets of literature, I intended for my study to build upon and add to the knowledge about closing the Black male achievement gap in education and mitigating the opportunity gap experienced by African-Americans.



## Purpose and Structure of the Study

**Research questions.** The purpose of this study was to bridge and extend the research base about what works to help Black male middle school students succeed academically. I set out to identify the characteristics of educators who are helping Black males achieve academic success. There is undoubtedly much growth needed in the Compton Unified School District with regards to how it can better serve its African-American male population. However, rather than coming from a deficit<sup>3</sup> perspective, this study intended to mine the pockets of success in the urban school district of Compton Unified. This study set out to examine the seeds of what is working in the district in order to answer the following questions:

1. What is good teacher *practice* for Black male middle school students?
2. How do students perceive the *impact* of these effective teachers' practices?
3. What factors and experiences help to *influence* these effective teachers' practice and philosophy?

**Research design.** In order to answer these questions, this study utilized a qualitative sequential methods approach carried out in several stages: (a) site selection—*via document review*, (b) nomination of effective teachers—*via principal interviews and student focus groups*, (c) understanding the practices of effective teachers—*via student focus groups and teacher observations*, (d) understanding the impact of those practices on Black male students—*via student focus groups*, and (e) understanding what factors and experiences helped to influence effective teachers' philosophy and practices—*via teacher interviews*. A sequential study is one

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<sup>3</sup> A review of the articles and studies about Compton Unified returned titles with dismal outlooks on the city's educators and students.

where the findings of one phase inform the methodology of the next phase (Creswell, 2003). For example, the results of the focus groups helped identify themes sought out during classroom observations. The themes emerging from the observations, combined with those from the focus groups, helped define topics explored in the individual teacher interviews.

The findings from each subsequent stage of the study help to explain and deepen the findings from previous stages (Creswell, 2003). Employing qualitative methods of interviewing and observation allows for the analysis of respondents' narratives in terms of their contextualized knowledge—the impact of their race, gender, and life events (Merriam, 2009). Detailed recording of qualitative data (respondents' stories and observations of classrooms), coupled with ongoing analysis of emergent themes, forces the researcher to focus on the questions while allowing for a final product that is shaped by the collected and analyzed data rather than the researcher's assumptions (Bailey, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Sample selection employed community nomination (Howard, 1998), a more rigorous version of snowball sampling in which the eligibility of subsequent participants is verified via multiple recommendations (Bailey, 2008). The sequential nature of this study afforded the added benefit of triangulation of findings across data sources, which in turn leads to more robust conclusions and helps to avoid bias (Bailey, 2008; Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998).

In this study, the sequence progressed as follows:

1. Four of the eight middle schools in the Compton Unified School District were selected for characteristics that represented the entire district (school size, overall academic performance levels, percentages of students who were African-American, size of the gap between Black students and the school average).

2. Eight focus groups were conducted with a random stratified sample of higher-performing and lower-performing Black males. There were two groups at each of the four selected school sites: one with higher-performing Black males and one with lower performing Black males.
3. Principals were interviewed to identify which teachers were perceived to be the most effective, especially with African-American male students. These nominations were triangulated and verified with nominations from students during the focus groups. The community nomination process resulted in the identification of one teacher at each of the four school sites (four teachers total).
4. Each of the four teachers was observed four times (for a total of 16 observations). The observations served to explore the themes that emerged out of the student focus groups.
5. Each of the four teachers was interviewed three times (for a total of 12 interviews). The three interviews per teacher focused on their background, the development of their practice and philosophy, and their teaching practices.

**The client.** Compton Unified School District is the client for this study. The district holds a vested interest in learning student's perceptions about what helps them succeed academically. In particular, Black males—as the lowest performing student group in the district—are a priority focus area that teachers and leaders throughout the district are interested in supporting.

This study was conducted at four of the district's eight middle schools: Pine, Central, Pacific, and Occidental. Because the unit of analysis was the district, I chose these four schools based on diversity along the following criteria:

- Range of school size (two of the district's smaller middle schools as well as two of the largest schools are included),
- Relative achievement levels compared with the district average (the district's lowest performing middle school as well as its highest performing are included),
- Location within the city (to account for nuances between geographic areas of the city),
- Percentage of African-American students within the school (ranging from 17%-45%), and
- Discrepancy between the achievement levels of Black students and the overall school performance (the difference between the school's overall API and that of its Black students ranged from 0-45).

After I collected and analyzed the data, I shared the initial findings with study participants, as well as the school principals, director of secondary education, director of human resources, associate superintendent, and superintendent. It is my intent to (a) disseminate best practices for raising student achievement of Black males throughout the district and (b) initiate a protocol that other schools can replicate with their staff and underperforming student groups. Additionally, as a school leader in the district, I am poised to not only share my findings and conclusions but also work on initiatives that result from my research.

In addition to sharing the formal write-up and executive summary of my study with leaders throughout Compton Unified, I plan to circulate my findings with the broader education

community. Educators, leaders, and policymakers throughout the state and nation, especially those in urban districts who serve African American students, will want to learn from the findings from my research. By tapping into my professional networks and presenting at state and national conferences, I hope to spread the impact of my research well beyond the boundaries of my district.

Some of the tangible deliverables emanating from this study include (a) a rubric for effective teaching, (b) a battery of professional development topics for schools, districts, and schools of education, and (c) guidance for human resources departments to devise interview questions and selection protocols based on the mindset and skills of the district's most successful teachers. The intent of my study was to help support educators in closing the achievement gap as they seek to meet ever more demanding academic standards and ever-increasing accountability targets for all student groups.

The next chapter will dive deeper into the existing literature that seeks to explain the achievement gap for Black males.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### **The Black Male Opportunity and Achievement Gap**

One of the most pressing problem facing educators—and our society—is the achievement gap. This discrepancy in achievement is the result of a gap in opportunity, especially for African-American males, throughout the educational pipeline (Carter & Welner, 2013). Although it is already the focus of countless studies, researchers and practitioners continue to examine the many facets of the achievement gap in order to live up to education’s promise to our nation to be the great equalizer. Public education is the ladder promising to equip America’s diverse citizenry with the tools for economic mobility and civic participation (Mann & Cremin, 1957). Despite improvements over the last century in the inclusion and integration of working class students and students of color, academic results still show disparities between groups of students throughout all levels of the educational pipeline (Brunn & Kao, 2005; Laird et al., 2006; Planty & Kridl, 2007; Skiba et al., 2005; Watts & Erevelles, 2004).

The advent of NCLB under President George W. Bush, furthered by the pro-accountability reform movement under President Barack Obama, has made the opportunity gap an issue that cannot be ignored. More and more, it has become faux pas to rely on the soft bigotry of low expectations and excuses. And more and more, parents of color are educating themselves about which schools can better serve their students and are voting accordingly with their feet. Therefore, if public education is to remain solvent, educators, leaders, and policy-makers must find constructive solutions to meet the needs of its underserved. Throughout the

pipeline from preschool to graduate school, students who are Black, male, and low-income are consistently underserved and therefore attain lower levels of achievement.

Ladson-Billings (2013) traces the systemic suppression of equal opportunities for African-Americans from slavery to its legacies of economic servitude, segregation, voter disfranchisement, and unequal school funding. Slavery made it illegal to teach enslaved African-Americans to read. Reconstruction set up separate schools for Black students, which only operated during the agricultural season, and with cast-off resources from the White school system. Even after the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision, de facto segregation and voter suppression left African-Americans in schools and neighborhoods that were underfunded and under-resourced (Carter & Welner, 2013). Rather than an intellectual deficit within Black students, then, the achievement gap is a result of the debt of opportunities owed to African-Americans, or an opportunity gap.

The achievement gap, which is a result of the opportunity gap faced by African-Americans, begins even before kindergarten. The National Center for Education Statistics (as cited in Planty & Krindl, 2007) reports that 47% of students who are low-income are enrolled in preschool, compared to 60% of their more affluent peers. Because they experience diminished opportunities to develop foundational requisite academic skills, low-income Black males already enter kindergarten at a disadvantage to achieve academically compared to their more affluent peers. Not surprisingly, the gap persists throughout elementary and middle school. By the fourth grade, African-American students score 29 points lower (on a 0-500 scale) than White students in reading and 26 points lower in math on the NAEP. By the eighth grade, the reading gap remains at 29 points while the math gap grows to 34 points. Moreover, the reading and math achievement gaps have not significantly narrowed over the last 15 years (Planty & Kridl, 2007).

In California, the API measures the academic performance and growth of K-12 schools, assigning a composite score between 200-1000. For middle school students, the overall API score statewide for White students is 855, 906 for Asian students, 743 for Latino students, and 709 for African-American students (California Department of Education, n.d.). The API aggregates student performance on statewide exams in English, math, science, and history.

This significance of this trend of lower performance for Black students can be seen even more clearly when examining the proficiency rates for the four major racial groups. On the English CST, 80.0% of White students and 74.0% of Asian students and scored at proficient or advanced, compared with 46.9% of Latinos and 45.6% of African-Americans. On the math CST, 71.2% of Whites and 84.8% of Asians scored at proficient or advanced, compared with 50.6% of Latinos and 42.3% of African-Americans (California Department of Education, n.d.). These quantitative results point to the achievement gap for Black students.

At the high school level, the achievement gap grows even wider. Black students drop out of high school at a rate more than double that of their White peers (Laird et al., 2006). Of the students who do reach the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, achievement gaps on the NAEP persist: in reading, African-Americans, as a group, scored 264, while Whites scored 293, and males, as a group, scored 278, while females scored 292; in math, Blacks scored 285, while Whites scored 313, and males scored 308, while females scored 205; and in science, African-Americans scored 120, while Whites scored 156, and males scored 149, while females scored 145 (Planty & Kridl, 2007). In addition to academic indicators of the achievement gap, researchers have also noted that Black males are more than twice as likely as Whites to be suspended or referred to special education (Monroe, 2005; Neal et al., 2003; Planty & Kridl, 2007; Skiba et al., 2005; Watts & Erevelles, 2004).



At the university level, African-Americans continue to be significantly underserved and underrepresented, comprising only 12.7% of undergraduate enrollment even though they actually make up 17.3% of K-12 enrollment. Whites comprise 65.7% of college enrollment, yet make up only 57.9% of K-12 enrollment. Furthermore, for every Black male undergraduate, there are 1.68 Black females (Brunn & Kao, 2005). Moreover, not only do females earn the majority of associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees, but also their college enrollment rate has grown three times faster than men's (Planty & Kridl, 2007).

### **Middle School Students and Adolescence**

Given this study's focus on middle school students, it is important to briefly discuss the unique nature of the middle school years, which are often a tumultuous time for students. Juvonen et al. (2004) outline the significant and sometimes turbulent transition between the child-centered environment of elementary school and the curriculum-centered setting of high school. Middle school researchers posit that the simultaneous changes of going from one teacher to multiple teachers while simultaneously undergoing the physiological changes of puberty can be stressful and detrimental to student learning in the long-term (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Juvonen et al., 2004; MacIver & Epstein, 1990). Jackson and Davis (2000) point out that the environmental and structural design of middle schools coincide, often negatively, with the already tumultuous physiological transition of adolescence.

In other words, middle school adolescents enter a school environment with departmentalized courses, multiple teachers, and larger student populations at precisely the time when they are looking for deeper relationships with peers and adults. MacIver and Epstein (1990) found that a lack of adult to student connection often characterized middle school

settings, in part because while middle school teachers were focused on their curriculum, middle school aged students were seeking out relationships and connections. Erikson (1950) describes the critical stage of adolescence as one where the middle school student struggles with the conflicts of industry versus inferiority and identity versus role confusion. Thus, at the precise stage when adolescents are struggling with peer pressure and self-esteem, they are thrust into more rigorous, more compartmentalized, and less connected school environments.

### **Literature on the Black Male Achievement Gap: Teachers' Beliefs, Students' Cultural Capital, and Teachers' Pedagogical Skills**

Given the already difficult developmental and structural transition of middle school, Black male middle school students face a particularly challenging educational experience. Researchers have posited several causes of and solutions to the Black male achievement gap. The preponderance of studies emphasizes educators' mindsets about their students. Others emphasize the cultural capital students bring to school from home. Still another growing body of literature focuses on teachers' pedagogical planning and execution skills. In the following section, I will review these three main bodies of literature in turn. It is within the convergence of these bodies of literature that I situated this study and outlined a conceptual framework that bridges all three.

**Teachers' mindsets and beliefs.** Early research on Black students' underperformance confirmed the significance of teachers' expectations and the phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy in determining which students fail and which succeed. Rist (1970) conducted a longitudinal ethnography in which he observed an urban elementary school with all Black

students, teachers, and administrators. Over the course of 2.5 years, Rist conducted twice weekly 1.5-hour observations of a cohort of students beginning in kindergarten. Based on non-academic criteria such as families' government assistance status, parents' behavior concerns, and experience with older siblings' behavior, the kindergarten teacher segregated students into caste-like tables. These groupings were an explicit prediction of the students' success or failure, and the teacher gave preferential treatment to one favored table while infrequently teaching or rewarding the other two groups. As a result, the initial subjective evaluations became the catalyst of an ever-widening achievement gap between these groups of students. Thus, Rist's seminal study shows how the achievement gap begins with a teacher's subjective evaluation of whether or not a student is capable of learning. Early on, such subjective evaluations are based on value judgments (in this case, how a family's norms align with those of the teacher's social class distinctions and biases), yet become crystallized into actual academic performance as the teacher's self-fulfilling prophecy comes to pass.

In another seminal study, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) conducted an experiment that induced expectancy and bias. Rosenthal and Jacobson administered an IQ test to children at an elementary school. The researchers then placed students into classes at random but told 18 teachers at the school that the tests scores showed that some students showed greater academic potential based on the IQ test, which they had renamed the *Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition*. At the end of the experiment, the researchers tested the students again using the same IQ test. They found that those who had been labeled *ready to bloom* showed greater gains than the control group. In other words, Rosenthal and Jacobson proved the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy; teacher expectations significantly impact students' academic performance.

Subsequent research developed the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy in education and revealed the importance of how a teacher conceptualizes intelligence as either fixed or malleable as a determining factor of how she serves her students (Dweck et al., 2007). K. Lee (1996) conducted an experiment in which she administered the Teachers' Implicit Theories of Intelligence Questionnaire to 400 teachers from 30 schools in order to ascertain whether a teacher subscribed to an entity (fixed) theory or an incremental (malleable) theory of intelligence. She then randomly selected 100 teachers from each category to follow up with a hypothetical student. Although K. Lee found that fixed and incremental theory teachers tended to give the same scores based on the hypothetical student's problem set, they greatly differed in the quality of feedback and follow-up assignments they gave to the student. Entity teachers tended to give direct answers, comment on non-academic aspects of classroom and student dynamics, and give easier follow-up assignments, while incremental teachers praised effort and tried to develop problem-solving and self-diagnosis skills. A similar experiment found that how a teacher treated a child was greatly impacted by the factors to which he attributed that child's performance (Clark, 1997). Similar to Rist's study, both K. Lee and Clark found that teachers who subscribe to a fixed theory of intelligence were significantly more influenced by their perception than teachers who believed in a malleable theory of intelligence. Howard (2003) builds on this concept by tying in teachers' beliefs about race and their role as teachers. Relating findings from a case study involving teacher training, Howard posits several questions to encourage critical reflection and culturally relevant pedagogy that combats the types of unconscious bias illuminated in earlier studies.

Recent studies have correlated teachers' expectations with African-American achievement. In interviews with 16 successful Black math students, two teachers, and two

principals from two low-performing high schools, Sheppard (2006) found that teacher expectations of students were perceived to have a positive impact on their math performance. In a longitudinal study with 863 children (60% of whom were Black), Mistry et al. (2009) surveyed mothers' and teachers' expectations that their child or student would go to college. They found that teachers' expectations of students' academic achievement held more predictive power 3 years later than mothers' educational expectations.

Further, researchers have found that teachers' expectations of African-American students interact with class and gender, namely low socioeconomic status and being male. Van Duzer (2006) conducted an experiment in which 52 students in a teacher credentialing program were asked to name three imaginary students and identify one as being in danger of failing. Males were named as in danger of failing three times more often than females. In a similar experiment, Auwarter and Aruguete (2008) asked 106 teachers to read a scenario about a hypothetical student with academic and behavioral challenges. The researchers varied the gender and socioeconomic status of the students. Teachers perceived that low-income students—especially males—had less promising futures than higher income students. Diamond et al. (2004) conducted interviews and observations at five elementary schools with varying race and class demographics and found that at the schools that were predominantly Black and low-income, teachers exhibited low academic expectations and low sense of responsibility for student learning. Strayhorn (2008) conducted ex post facto research using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 and found that 16% of Black males reported that their teachers recommended work rather than college (compared to five percent of White males and eight percent of Black females) and 20% of Black males reported feeling put down in class by teachers (compared to four percent of White males and 4.8% of Black females).

Other studies have found that students are keenly aware of this phenomenon of *learning while Black or poor* and identify teachers' expectations as a key to developing their academic efficacy. Howard (2003) studied 20 high performing students from two predominantly Black high schools and found that they perceived some teachers as profiling them as low ability and discouraged them from college—even when they were in honors and AP courses. Gushue and Whitson (2006) surveyed 104 Black ninth graders and found that teacher support correlated strongly with self-efficacy. Similarly, Tyler and Boelter (2008) surveyed 262 Black middle school students and found that perceived teacher expectation was a significant predictor of academic efficacy and engagement.

**Students' cultural capital.** In addition to the role teachers' mindsets play in widening or closing the African-American male achievement gap, researchers point to the cultural capital students bring from their personal and home lives. Bourdieu (1977) posited that cultural knowledge and skills passed down through familial and social networks, or cultural capital, explained why some students succeeded in school while others tended to fail. Cultural capital can include mastery of linguistic skills, understanding of cultural meanings, and ways of thinking (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2007). Solórzano (1997) and Yosso (2005) have expanded on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Observing how the theory that was meant to critique social reproduction has been applied to frame Black and Latino culture as deficient, they have sought to de-center whiteness as the cultural norm and to highlight the pluralism of cultural wealth found within communities of color. Focusing explicitly on communities of color, Yosso (2005) built upon Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to include aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital.

A common thread in this subset of literature on students' cultural capital is the way students view time—either oriented towards the present or focused on the future (Hyatt, 2003; Sheppard, 2006). Gayles (2005) conducted an ethnography with high-performing Black male seniors in a low-income high school and found that they embodied a utilitarian view of academics as a way to level their economic playing field in the future. In a larger study, Adalabu (2007) administered the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory to 232 Black high school students and found that Black females actually had a higher association between future time perspective and higher grades than Black males, but for Black males, expressing a present time orientation predicted lower achievement. In particular, researchers have identified a home environment where there is a long-range focus on college as an important long-term goal as a key characteristic of academically successful Black students (Howard, 2003a; Milne & Plourde, 2006; Moore, 2006). Black male students' long-term perspective—especially related to continuing education—is one factor in closing or widening the Black male achievement gap. The inclination to delay immediate gratification for the sake of a long-term goal is crucial to those Black male students who have experienced academic success.

Research on students' social capital also points to the importance of verbal and nonverbal communication codes—namely the ways in which codes differ between school and home and between males and females. Zusman et al. (2005) surveyed 287 undergraduates and found that females were significantly more likely than males to exhibit school- and teacher-approved behaviors such as coming to class on time, sitting near the front of the class, taking notes, buying and reading textbooks, and organizing study time. Rivers et al. (2004) studied randomly selected Black male high school students and found that, although their use of Black English Vernacular did not actually correlate with their performance on a standardized language test, they had been

labeled as underperforming by the district. Sherwin and Schmidt (2003) observed a racially diverse high school and found that Black males, more than any other student group, engaged in physically “aggressive” play-fighting as a greeting—a behavior that has been ascribed a negative connotation by school officials.

Studies suggest that there is a school-home disconnect between the importance of cooperative versus assertive social dispositions, particularly for Black males. Lane et al. (2003) surveyed 366 K-12 teachers in eight schools across two districts by administering the Social Skills Rating System and found that all teachers, especially at the middle school level, valued cooperation behaviors (e.g., following directions) and self-control behaviors (e.g., controlling one’s temper) over assertive behaviors (e.g., questioning unfair rules). Beebe-Frankenberger et al. (2005) corroborated this finding in their longitudinal study of 33 adolescent students identified as academic and/or behavior concerns and their guardians and elementary and secondary teachers. Also using the Social Skills Rating System, they found that teachers valued cooperation behaviors while parents valued assertion skills. Further, a study by Tharp-Taylor and Gall (2005) suggests that Black males experience this home-school disconnect even more profoundly. They surveyed 53 Black fourth and fifth graders and found that while boys and girls perceived that cooperation behaviors were valued by adults in both home and school contexts, boys—more than girls—reported receiving more approval for competitive and individualistic behavior in both contexts. So, while an assertive orientation tends to be valued at home for Black males, schools value and expect a cooperative orientation while punishing assertiveness.

Other studies go beyond socio-cultural orientations and point to other tangible home factors that instill social and cultural capital in students. These researchers have pointed to how guardians manage homework time and assert their authority at home as other key levers in the



achievement gap (J. Lee & Bowen, 2006; Mandara, 2006; Milne & Plourde, 2006). This group of studies posits that parental involvement strategies such as providing consistent time and space for homework, limiting non-productive extracurricular activities such as television viewing, and utilizing parenting styles that are high in both warmth and control are positively correlated with academic achievement, particularly for Black males.

Recently, researchers have looked at how differences in cultural capital led to the overrepresentation of Black males in disciplinary action and special education. Neal et al. (2003) conducted an experiment where 136 middle school teachers viewed videos of students walking and then administered a questionnaire. When the students on the tape were randomly varied, teachers tended to rate Black male students as more aggressive, lower achieving, and more likely to need special education. Skiba et al. (2005) analyzed data from 295 districts in one state and found that race, poverty, and suspension rates predicted dates of special education referral, particularly for subjective categories of disability such as emotional disturbance and mild mental retardation. Monroe (2005) points out that Black students are two to five times more likely than White students to be reprimanded or suspended, even for similar behaviors; thus Black males in middle school are subject to criminalization. This trend offers yet another example of how differing social orientations between home and school place Black males at the bottom of the achievement gap—because special education referrals can be subjective and left to educators’ interpretations of what constitutes appropriate behavior.

**Teachers’ pedagogical choices.** A third area of literature on the Black male achievement gap focuses on teachers’ discrete pedagogical choices. This body of literature can be divided into four subcategories: (a) relevance, (b) explaining challenging concepts, (c) social

relationships, and (d) feedback and grading. This section takes each of these four subcategories in turn.

**Relevance.** A growing body of research examining this area points to teachers who, perhaps as a way of combating low expectations and a cultural disconnect, take an intentionally reflective stance to planning and teaching (Ash & Levitt, 2003; Gerhke, 2005; Giovannelli, 2003; Morrell, 2002; Morrell, 2003). Drawing from critical race theory, such culturally responsive teachers focus explicitly on equity issues, incorporate students' culture into the curriculum, and see teaching as a political and cultural act (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Datnow et al. (2001) conducted longitudinal case studies of 12 single-gender academies created to address inequity and respond to student and community needs. They found that despite the best intentions of the educators in the academies, gender politics and differing ideas about how to meet the needs of students (gender neutrality versus gender specificity, responsiveness to individual needs versus gender essentialism) coupled with a lack of commitment of resources to this reform led to the dismantlement of the academies.

Using case studies, Traynor (2003) found that teachers who were reflective and garnered intrinsic rewards from teaching took more responsibility for maintaining a healthy classroom culture, choosing assertive strategies instead of a laissez-faire approach. Building on critical race theory, Lynn (2002) conducted ethnographic interviews with 36 Black male teachers identified by school leaders as effective and found three common themes articulated by his participants: they saw themselves as change agents for their school system, as role models for their students, and as mirrors of their students' experiences as people of color. A similar study by Milner (2003) corroborates this finding, as he found that teachers identified as effective took an

intentionally reflective stance to planning and attempted to incorporate cultural comprehensive knowledge (their compendium of personal cultural experiences) into their lessons. Finally, Tatum (2006) describes teachers who engage Black male adolescents in literacy by connecting challenging literature (both canonical and novel) with student's daily lives, community contexts, and historical movements.

*Explaining challenging concepts.* Beyond a self- and socially-reflective stance to planning, there is a growing body of literature on the discrete pedagogical skills of teachers who are closing the achievement gap. For example, these teachers not only embody high expectations for their students but are also able to break down content into understandable units. Sheppard (2006) interviewed and surveyed successful math Black math students in low-performing schools who responded that their teachers were able to explain complex math concepts in comprehensible chunks. Also studying equity in math education, Secada, Fennema, and Byrd (1995) discuss the importance of connecting complicated math concepts to students' prior knowledge. They note the particular importance of this practice when working with students from language minorities and low socio-economic status backgrounds.

Ladson-Billings (2013) corroborates the importance of teachers holding high academic standards and then employing any means necessary to facilitate student understanding of those concepts. In case studies of successful teachers of African-American students, Ladson-Billings details the ways these teachers persevere with student mastery of difficult, large concepts, especially when it seemed like they would not make it. Such teachers used a blend of demanding and cheerleading and helping, which fostered academic success.

***Social relationships.*** Some researchers have also found that teachers who are effective with Black male students utilize cooperative learning and group projects. Howard (2001) observed and interviewed Black students of elementary school teachers who had been identified as culturally responsive. Students in the study responded that the teachers were not only caring (positive reinforcement, high expectations) but also established a family-type classroom environment and made learning entertaining. Wilson-Jones and Caston (2004) corroborated this finding by interviewing 16 Black male elementary students. The authors found that the use of cooperative learning was reported as having a positive effect on the participants' desire to learn. Studying middle school math classes, Kinel (1994) employed statistical analysis to show that cooperative learning tended to reduce the performance gap between Black and White students.

Other researchers extend this notion and posit that employing cooperative learning social practices, whether teacher-student or peer-peer, mirrors Black students' home environment at school (Flowers, 2006; Gardner et al., 2001; Hubbard & Datnow, 2005). Ladson-Billings' (2013) case studies of successful teachers of Black students corroborate this finding. The classrooms studied by Ladson-Billings featured a strong sense of community and family. These teachers eschewed traditional notions of individual success, opting instead to foster and celebrate a culture of collective responsibility.

***Feedback and grading.*** In the last subset of research on teachers' pedagogical skill, some researchers have examined how teachers assess and grade students. Ash and Levitt (2003) conducted case studies of experienced teachers attempting to utilize formative assessment. They found that even experienced teachers were initially not well-versed in using assessment to reshape instruction and student support. Instead, before receiving significant mentoring and

feedback, they had relied on end of course assessments, which came too late to help struggling learners. Similarly, Ingram et al. (2004) conducted a longitudinal study of nine high schools attempting to use formative student assessment data to improve instruction. Even in these schools that were committed to using formative assessment and data-based decision-making, more than half of the staff reported that they relied on intuition and anecdotal “evidence” rather than systematic data. Even fewer cases were found in which participants actually changed their understanding of a situation once they had collected objective data.

In a larger study that garnered similar findings, Randall and Engelhard (2009) conducted an experiment with 234 teachers from randomly selected schools in a large district. Teachers were asked to grade and respond to hypothetical student scenarios. The researchers not only found that grading practices were linked to student behavior and effort (versus ability and achievement), but also that middle school teachers assigned lower grades than the elementary teachers. All of these findings circle back to the research on teachers’ expectations and mindset, detailed earlier in this review of the literature. Rather than being grounded in objective student performance evidence, differences in grading can be attributed to students’ behavior and teachers’ subjective responses to behavior. These findings lend credibility to the other bodies of research pointing to teachers’ beliefs and students’ cultural capital as factors contributing to the Black male achievement gap.

## **Summary**

In summary, the literature on the Black male achievement gap falls within three main categories of causes and solutions: (a) teachers’ mindsets, (b) students’ socio-cultural capital, and (c) teachers’ pedagogical choices, which can be subdivided into (a) relevance, (b) explaining

challenging concepts, (c) social relationships, and (d) feedback and grading. Though much has been written about each individual area, few studies have attempted to bridge all three. I have situated my study in the convergence of these three areas. As I embarked on my research, I was especially interested in the question of pedagogical skill (planning and assessment). However, as I will explain in Chapters Four and Five, this set of findings actually became less of a priority compared with my findings related to teacher beliefs. Building on and integrating these three bodies of literature, I constructed a visual representation of my study's conceptual framework (see Figure 1 in Chapter 1).

This study focused on students' perceptions of teacher practices, and how they were impacted by those practices. I was particularly curious about how successful teachers might build upon African-American male students' socio-cultural capital. Although the category of student capital falls outside the explicit scope of this study, in Chapters Four and Five, I will describe how teachers effectively capitalized upon the existing schema that their Black male students brought to the classroom. This study also sought to discern how effective teachers developed their beliefs and practices.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the methodology for my research.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Research Methodology

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, Black males continue to be educationally underserved. At all points in the preschool to graduate school pipeline, the educational leaks disproportionately impact Black males, and their academic outcomes lag behind those of their peers. Researchers have studied the Black male achievement gap, and there have been three main categories of causes posited in the literature: teachers' beliefs, students' cultural capital, and teachers' practices.

The preponderance of studies emphasizes educators' beliefs about their students: expectations of Black males (Mistry et al., 2009; Sheppard, 2006; Steele, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008), conception of their role as teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2003; Morrell, 2003; Tatum, 2006), and definitions of intelligence as fixed versus malleable (Dweck et al., 2007, Howard, 2003a; K. Lee, 1996). Other studies point to the cultural capital students bring to school from home: the ability to delay immediate gratification for long-term goals, verbal communication codes, and nonverbal norms of behavior (Adelabu, 2007; Bourdieu, 1977; Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Finally, a growing body of literature focuses on teachers' pedagogical skills: a reflective stance towards teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Morrell, 2002), long-term and short-term lesson planning (Kinel, 1994; Secada et al., 1995; Sheppard, 2006), and assessment and grading practices (Ash & Levitt, 2003; Ingram et al., 2004). I have situated this study at the convergence of these three bodies of literature, (a) teachers' beliefs, (b) students' cultural capital, and (c) teachers' pedagogical practices. Though much is written about each individual area, few studies bring all three bodies of literature together.

## Research Design

In order to answer the research questions, this study utilized a qualitative sequential methods carried out in five stages: (a) site selection—*via document review*, (b) nomination of effective teachers—*via principal interviews and student focus groups*, (c) understanding the practices of effective teachers—*via student focus groups and teacher observations*, (d) understanding the impact of those practices on Black male students—*via student focus groups*, and (e) understanding what factors and experiences helped to influence effective teachers' philosophy and practices—*via teacher interviews*. A sequential study is one where the findings from subsequent stages of the study help explain and deepen the findings from previous stages (Creswell, 2003). In this study, for example, the results of the focus groups helped identify themes sought out during classroom observations. The themes emerging from the observations, combined with those from the focus groups, helped define topics explored in the individual teacher interviews.

Employing qualitative methods of interviewing and observation allows for the analysis of respondents' narratives in terms of their contextualized knowledge—the impact of their race, gender, and life events (Merriam, 2009). This approach lent itself to affording study participants' perspectives to be analyzed in order to answer the research questions. Detailed recording of qualitative data (respondents' stories and observations of classrooms), coupled with ongoing analysis of emergent themes, forces the researcher to focus on the questions while allowing for a final product that is shaped by the collected and analyzed data rather than the researcher's assumptions (Bailey, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). The sequential nature of this study afforded the added benefit of triangulation of findings across data sources,



which in turn leads to more robust conclusions and helps to avoid bias (Bailey, 2008; Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998).

In this study, the sequence progressed as follows:

1. Four of the eight middle schools in the Compton Unified School District were selected for characteristics that represented the entire district (school size, overall academic performance levels, percentages of students who were African-American, size of the gap between Black students and the school average). [selection]
2. Eight focus groups were conducted with a random stratified sample of higher-performing and lower-performing Black males. There were two groups at each of the four selected school sites: one with higher-performing Black males and one with lower performing Black males. [question 1: *practice* & question 2: *impact*]
3. Principals were interviewed to identify which teachers were perceived to be the most effective, especially with African-American male students. These nominations were triangulated and verified with nominations from students during the focus groups. The community nomination process resulted in the identification of one teacher at each of the four school sites (four teachers total). [selection]
4. Each of the four teachers was observed four times (for a total of 16 observations). The observations served to explore the themes that emerged out of the student focus groups. [question 1: *practice*]
5. Each of the four teachers was interviewed three times (for a total of 12 interviews). The three interviews per teacher focused on their background, the development of their practice and philosophy, and their teaching practices themselves. [question 3: *influence*]

## Site Selection

Nationally as well as locally, there exist multiple achievement gaps nested within each other. For example, while gaps exist between school districts such as Compton Unified School District, where this study takes place, and more affluent districts, there are also gaps within the district, as well as within each school. Compton's elementary schools outperform its secondary schools on standardized tests by an average of about 150 API points. Among Compton's eight middle schools, a spread of 156 API points separates the highest performing from the lowest performing. And even in the higher performing middle schools, a gap exists between Black and Latino students.

Overall, the district is approximately 25% African-American, 70% Latino, and 5% other (Samoan, White, etc.), but the individual percentages of Black students at each school ranges from 10-45%. Further, while African-American students tend to be lower performing than Latino students, there is also a range in that performance gap at each school, ranging from 0-45 API points.

At all but one of the eight middle schools, the API of Black students is lower than the average and significantly lower than the API of Latino students. In addition, throughout the district, Black males are overrepresented in special education classes, as well as in discipline referrals. Both of these trends are consistent with the literature on African-American male students. Adding to the diversity of middle schools in the district, the total student population ranges from 471 students at the smallest school to 1299 students at the largest. Table 1 summarizes the demographics and performance levels of each of the district's eight middle schools.

Table 1

*Summary of Schools' Demographics and Performance Levels*

School	Total # of students	Percentage of students who are Black	# of Black males at school	Percent of school proficient in English	Percent of school proficient in math	School-wide API	Black students' API	Latino students' API	English learners' API	Difference between Black & school-wide API
Lakeside	794	12%	47	18.1%	15.5%	627	>10%	632	606	<sup>4</sup>
Central*	1413	17%	120	18.7%	13.7%	566	531	571	561	35
Pine*	660	37%	122	33.9%	34.5%	697	681	706	690	16
Occidental*	1299	18%	116	26.7%	27.2%	666	666	665	623	0
Pacific*	471 <sup>5</sup>	45%	105	29.1%	24.0%	674	629	707	690	45
Portsmouth	582	31%	90	23.3%	22.2%	612	599	616	604	13
Atherton	1095	10%	54	15.2%	12.2%	541	>10%	539	523	
Carson	605	40%	121	24.5%	19.4%	638	596	662	638	42

*Note.* \* = sites selected for this study

<sup>4</sup> Lakeside and Atherton do not have an API calculated for Black students because of their small percentage.

<sup>5</sup> Given the wide variance between schools' student population sizes, the district had been discussing consolidation of smaller schools. The political will, however, to actually close down smaller schools and bus those students to other schools has waned in recent years.

In order to discern patterns of effective teacher practice, perceived student impact, and development of those practices across the district, I chose four of the district's eight middle schools: Central, Pine, Occidental, and Pacific<sup>6</sup>. Not only do they represent a diversity of the district's geography (they are in all four corners of the city), but also their demographics and achievement profiles represent a diversity of the district. Occidental and Central have over 1,200 total students, while Pine and Pacific are less than half their size. Pine and Pacific are approximately 40% African-American, while Central and Occidental are approximately 17% African-American. The total API of each school ranges from the bottom to the top of the district—spanning over 100 API points. Finally, Pacific and Central have an approximately 40-point gap between their Black and Latino students, while Pine has only a 16-point gap and Occidental has no gap. In the preceding table, an asterisk denotes the four selected sites and highlights this diversity.

### **Sample Selection**

**Students.** Each of these four schools had a critical mass of Black males who were able to participate in the study. Focusing on Black males who are at the bottom of the achievement gap will not only help this particular group succeed, but may also provide ideas for how to close other achievement gaps. Conducting focus groups with the students yielded their perspective on which teachers are helping them succeed academically and afforded them the opportunity to answer research question two, *How do students perceive the impact of these effective teachers' practices* (Merriam, 2009)? The student focus groups also incorporated Black male middle school students' voices into the community nomination process (Howard, 1998). Conducting focus groups with purposeful samples of Black males at each site—those scoring below basic

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<sup>6</sup> All school names have been changed to protect anonymity.

and far below basic on the CSTs and those scoring proficient and advanced—provided insight from both high- and low-achieving Black male students (Bailey, 2008; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). In all, a total of 53 students participated in the focus groups. Only eighth graders were chosen for the sample because, unlike sixth and seventh graders, they would have experienced the full range of possible teachers by the time they reached their final year at the school.

**Teachers.** In this study, principal nominations and student voice amassed a collective nomination process (Howard, 1998) strengthened by student voice of the community most impacted by teacher practices. The involvement of both principals and students within each of the four sites helped to triangulate the nomination process and truly identify the most helpful teachers and practices at each school. The community nomination process employed in this study served as a more rigorous version of snowball sampling in which the eligibility of subsequent participants is verified via multiple recommendations (Bailey, 2008). Principals and students were explicitly asked to identify teachers who were the most effective in helping foster academic success, as opposed to the nicest or the coolest or the favorite. Students were asked, for example, which teachers helped them learn the most, not whom they liked the most or who was their favorite teacher. This distinction was made clear throughout the principal interviews and the student focus groups by both the researcher and the respondents. The top teacher identified by the principal and the students at each of the four sites was chosen for the study.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In rigorous qualitative research, data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously, as the researcher checks working hypotheses and unanticipated results to discern tentative

findings; these emergent themes help shape the subsequent stages of the study (Creswell, 2003; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Without concurrent collection and analysis, data can be unfocused and repetitive (Merriam, 1998). Detailed recording of qualitative data (respondents' stories and observations of classrooms), coupled with ongoing analysis of emergent themes, forces the researcher to focus on the questions while garnering a final product that is shaped by the collected and analyzed data rather than the researcher's assumptions (Bailey, 2008; Merriam; 2009).

In order to answer the research questions, I studied students and teachers at four Compton middle schools that were diverse in demographic and achievement profiles: Central, Pine, Occidental, and Pacific. The stages of this study progressed as follows: (a) document review to select four of the eight middle schools; (b) student focus groups; (c) principal interviews to nominate effective teachers, nominations were triangulated with those from the student focus groups; (d) observations of teachers; and (e) individual interviews with each of the teachers.

**Document review.** As I detailed in the previous section on site selection, a main priority was to account for the diversity of the schools in the district, given that the district was the unit of analysis. Funneling down to possible sites ensured that I would collect meaningful data without wasting time on redundant, unhelpful information (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Although I was granted access to various demographic and performance data by the district, I was also able to verify the accuracy of internal records by utilizing online sources such as the California Department of Education's website (California Department of Education, n.d.; Merriam, 1998). Documents reviewed included school demographics, disaggregated performance levels of schools, district special education rates, school suspension rates, and student performance

records. The information learned from document review determined the selection of the four school sites and aided in the formation of the eight student focus groups.

**Student focus groups.** At each of the four school sites, I convened two focus groups of purposeful, stratified sampled students: one group of high performing Black males who performed at the proficient and advanced levels, and one group of low performing Black males who performed at the basic and below basic levels (Bailey, 2008). Keeping the focus groups relatively homogenous helped to ensure a comfort level among the respondents (Merriam, 1998). The focus group setting also helped respondents share their contextualized knowledge of their experiences, especially pertaining to the impact of race, gender, and life events (Merriam, 2009). Students were not told that they were selected for the focus group because of their performance level<sup>7</sup>. Rather, I told them I was interested in their perspective on effective teaching and effective teachers. Before I conducted the focus groups at the sites, I piloted the questions with students at a non-participating middle school in order to ensure that the questions were clear and comprehensible for middle school students, as well as to verify that the questions were testing for the intended constructs.

The purpose of the focus groups was two-fold: first, to incorporate student voice into the community nomination process, and second, to begin to answer the research questions guiding this inquiry: *What is good teacher practice?* and *How do students perceive the impact of these practices?* Sampling from both the high performing and low performing Black males helped to discern if there was consistency regarding perceptions of good teacher practice and regarding which teachers were nominated by the students. Randomly selected students from the two pools

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<sup>7</sup> At one school, students told me that they thought they were all in trouble, since the group was comprised of Black males. However, once I explained the study to them, they were put at ease and spoke with comfort and candor.

of Black males at each school were asked to participate. In consultation with the district, students and guardians gave their assent and consent by returning signed forms to the school. In all, I spoke with a total of 53 students in the eight focus groups. Groups ranged in size from six to eight students. I convened each group only once.

Based on the literature, I anticipated that there would likely be four main categories of responses: (a) relationships/belonging/management, (b) relevance to life experiences, (c) questioning/assessment/feedback/grading, and (d) explaining challenging concepts. However, I made sure to leave ample room for disconfirming data and responses that fell outside of these expected categories by designing a semi-structured interview protocol that sought out disconfirming data (Merriam, 1998). I also made sure to collect rich, descriptive, and meaningful data by asking open-ended and probing questions (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005).

Before asking students to nominate teachers, I first asked them to discuss what kinds of practices helped them succeed academically. This was in order to engage their collective conversation in the characteristics and practices from the outset and to ensure that the teachers they named were the most effective (as opposed to the nicest, coolest, favorite, etc.). Then, I asked students to identify the teachers who most embody these practices (in other words, which teachers help them succeed academically the most). Finally, I followed up to ask if their rankings would change if they were asked specifically about effectiveness with Black male students in particular.

Focus group questions were semi-structured, and I constantly probed and analyzed for disconfirming evidence in order to collect meaningful data. Additionally, I was careful to mitigate socially desirable responses by crafting neutral, non-leading questions and maintaining homogeneous groups (Merriam, 1998; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). I was especially mindful to



remain as neutral and non-judgmental as possible, given the potential for my race, age, and social status to influence the students' responses (Bailey, 2008). As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the hallmark of a robust qualitative study is the researcher's ability to simultaneously collect and interpret data (Merriam, 1998; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Thus, as I listened to respondents' stories, I noted trends, tested hypotheses, and followed up with probing questions to ensure I was accurately interpreting and effectively facilitating the focus groups.

I recorded each focus group and also jotted down notes, observations, and embryonic themes as I facilitated the focus groups. This ensured that as I reviewed and coded the transcripts, I had an accurate record of important emergent findings. I transferred respondents' direct quotes, along with my pertinent observations, into separate charts by emergent themes. Initial themes were connected to the literature I had already reviewed, but as I continued to collect and interpret data from each focus group, I also noted trends that necessitated seeking out additional literature. The results of my analysis at this stage informed which teachers I contacted for the subsequent stages of the study; additionally, they helped shape the themes I would explore in the teacher interviews and observations.

**Principal interviews.** The purpose of the principal interviews was to provide verification for the students' nominations. By triangulating principals' nominations with the perspectives of students from both higher performing and lower performing groups, I guarded against bias of tracking, since some teachers may have been assigned higher performing students initially. I first asked principals to rank their teachers in terms of effectiveness, clarifying that I was seeking out those who were most helping their students succeed academically. Then, I followed up by asking them if their rankings would be different in terms of effectiveness with Black males

specifically. Taken together, the community nominations (Howard, 1998) from the principals, the higher performing Black males, and the lower performing Black males served as a more rigorous version of snowball sampling in which the eligibility of subsequent participants is verified via multiple recommendations (Bailey, 2008).

**Teacher interviews.** Based on principal nominations and student nominations, I identified the teacher who was perceived as most effective at each of the four schools. In these subsequent stages of data collection and analysis, I concurrently conducted three interviews and four observations with the top identified teacher at each of the four school sites (for a total of 12 interviews and 16 observations). The questions for teacher interviews at each site were grounded in the themes derived from the literature but also informed by the preceding stages of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998).

The three interviews were held at the beginning, middle, and end stages of the observations (Howard, 1998). The first interview focused on the teachers' background. The second centered on the development of the teachers' practice and philosophy (in order to answer question 3, *What factors and experiences help to influence these effective teachers' practice and philosophy?*). The final interview afforded an opportunity to follow up on the observations. The succession of interviews, in conjunction with the four observations per teacher, gave me the opportunity to refine questions based on my findings throughout the process (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Questions centered on the specifics of each practice (*how*) as well as their rationale for taking these specific pedagogical approaches (*why*). Like the student focus groups, the teacher interviews served to explore the contextualized knowledge of these effective teachers (Merriam, 2009).

Similar to the student focus groups, I recorded, transcribed, and coded the 12 teacher interviews. Also similar to the student focus groups, I designed the interview protocol to be semi-structured, seeking out disconfirming evidence and noting emergent themes. I purposefully kept the first of the three interviews general and did not directly reveal the research topic (African-American males) so as to elicit genuine interview responses and to minimize the Hawthorne effect in the observations (Merriam, 1998; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005).

**Teacher observations.** The 16 total observations, four per teacher, were strategically scheduled to cover four different class periods. During the observations, I scripted out teacher actions and student actions on my laptop, and I was vigilant about separating observer commentary from objective observations (Merriam, 1998; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Throughout the observations, I noted significant themes that resonated with those that emanated from the previous student focus groups and concurrent teacher interviews. The purpose of the observations was to triangulate the findings from the student focus groups in order to answer my first research question: *What is good teacher practice?* While I was interested in the nuanced approaches each took (based on personal style and subject, for example), I was primarily looking for the common threads that may contribute to their success with African-American male students. In order to avoid teachers changing their practice in light of my research topic, I intentionally scheduled two of the observations before we discussed Black males specifically during the interviews.

During this final stage of the study, the emphasis shifted greatly to data analysis (vs. data collection) as clear themes were repeating and qualitative data began to become redundant (Merriam, 1998; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). This is not to say that the data gathered in the final

stage were less important than those gathered in the early stage, but rather that the final stage of a well-crafted qualitative study will funnel down to the significant findings and begin to allow the researcher to draw conclusions. I aggregated the data from the multiple stages into one matrix in order to identify which practices emerged consistently and were indeed stronger findings. As I analyzed my data, I reconnected with teachers during the interviews to share my initial analysis, affording study participants the opportunity to confirm or disconfirm my ideas (Creswell, 2003).

### **Validity and Reliability**

Because I am a staff member in the district, I needed to check against my own biases about teachers' practices. In many ways, I have had to do this already in order to be effective in my role as a principal. Rather than having conversations based on opinions, I constantly have to ground our discussions in observable data. This practice already helps me guard against my own biases.

In designing the student focus group protocols and teacher interview protocols, I synthesized previous trends in the research literature with an eye towards integrating the three bodies of literature identified earlier: teacher beliefs, teacher practice, and student capital. Once I designed my protocols, I piloted them to identify questions that may be confusing, especially for student participants.

As for conducting the focus groups and interviews, I was careful to guard against participant reactivity—particularly as a staff member of the district (Creswell, 2003). I took care to be mindful of how I identified teachers and students who had been selected for the focus groups so that they were not aware of the specific reasons why they had been chosen. I took care to maintain neutrality in word choice, voice tone, and body language as I asked initial questions

and follow up questions. I also remained vigilant about consistently asking clarifying and probing questions to ensure that I was not overlaying my own prior assumptions onto participants' responses (Bailey, 2008). Further, I constantly looked for disconfirming evidence and alternative explanations to ensure that I was not fulfilling my own prophecies. During student focus groups in particular, I was careful to ensure relative homogeneity of the groups (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Similarly, I was vigilant about ensuring that my adolescent student participants felt comfortable expressing divergent perspectives among their peers (Merriam, 1998). Finally, at the end of my study, I conducted a member check to act as one final checkpoint for the credibility of my findings (Creswell, 2003).

Given the sample of my study, I was cognizant of its limitations. I have attempted to be diligent about reporting the context of Compton Unified and do not assume generalizability to different contexts.

### **Ethical Issues**

Because I was studying the teachers who were helping Black male students succeed academically, I anticipated that conversations with participants would be generally positive and asset-based. However, I realized that the conversations could also elicit some negative memories for students as they compared teachers who help with teachers who have hindered them. Also, because I was looking explicitly at race, I recognized that some participants could be uncomfortable addressing such potentially sensitive topics. Here, again, I took special care to be thoughtful as I designed and asked questions.

I made sure to clarify that participants' identities would remain anonymous. They needed to be confident that their responses could be traced back to them as individuals or even as a

group or site. All recorded interviews were deleted at the end of the study so as to render them untraceable and unidentifiable. All participants were also allowed to opt out at any time if they ever felt uncomfortable during the focus groups, interviews, or observations. While I anticipated that this would be more of an issue for students than teachers, I made sure to clarify this option with all research participants.

All of the aforementioned ethical considerations were documented in writing. Participating in the IRB feedback and approval process for both the district and the university further strengthened my study's commitment to the safety of students and teachers.

### **Access**

As a current elementary school principal and former middle school teacher, academic intervention coach, and assistant principal in the district, I have established relationships with staff members (administration and teachers) at all eight of the middle schools in Compton Unified. The nature of my former coaching role (as someone in-between management and teachers) forced me to build strong relationships based on common goals and trust—not authority or power. Not only was I able to leverage my strong relationships to gain access, but I also understood that administrators and teachers have a keen interest in (a) figuring out what works with Black male students and (b) doing so in an asset-based way. The associate superintendent of middle schools expressed excitement about this study and gave me permission to approach principals at all eight sites. Despite ultimately needing only four schools, all eight principals agreed to participate in the study and were eager to learn from the findings from this research.

## **Role Management**

As I approached students and teachers, I emphasized my role not as an administrator or evaluator of their teaching but as a graduate student researcher. I clarified that participation was voluntary and confidential, that no individual responses would be reported to any supervisors, and that they could exit the study at any time if they no longer wished to participate.

## **Feedback to Clients**

Compton Unified School District was the client for this study. The district has a vested interest in learning about students' perceptions regarding what helps them succeed academically. In particular, Black males—the lowest performing student group in the district as a whole—are a priority focus area that teachers and leaders throughout the district are interested in better serving.

After I collected and analyzed the data, I shared the initial findings with study participants, as well as the school principals, director of secondary education, director of human resources, associate superintendent, and superintendent. It is my intent to (a) disseminate best practices for raising student achievement of Black males throughout the district, and (b) initiate a protocol that other schools can replicate with their staff and underperforming student groups. Additionally, as a school leader in the district, I am poised to not only share my findings and conclusions but also work on initiatives that result from my research.

In addition to sharing the formal write-up and executive summary of my study with leaders throughout Compton Unified, I plan to circulate my findings with the broader education community. Educators, leaders, and policy makers throughout the state and nation, especially

those in urban districts who serve African American students, will want to learn from the findings from my research. By tapping into my professional networks and presenting at state and national conferences, I hope to spread the impact of this research well beyond the boundaries of my district.

Some of the tangible deliverables emanating from my study include (a) a rubric for effective teaching, (b) a battery of professional development topics for schools, districts, and schools of education, and (c) guidance for human resources departments to devise interview questions and selection protocols based on the mindset and skills of the district's most successful teachers. Even more than closing the achievement gap to support schools in meeting ever-more-demanding accountability targets for all student groups, I intend for this study to add to the potential for schools to close the opportunity gap for all Americans.

Previous studies on the Black male achievement gap have tended to fall into one of three main explanations—(a) teachers' beliefs, (b) students' socio-cultural capital, and (c) teachers' pedagogical practices. This research sought to integrate all three bodies of literature. Further, although some studies include student voices, rarely have researchers triangulated students' perspectives with those of teachers. Finally, by undertaking qualitative methods, I intended to triangulate findings, guard against bias, and provide conclusions that go beyond the black box.

This qualitative methods approach utilized several stages of data collection: (a) eight focus groups with a total of 53 African-American male middle school students; (b) 12 total teacher interviews with four selected teachers; and (c) 16 total observations of four selected teachers—all launched with a community nomination process involving principals and students from four school sites. Conducting the study at four diverse middle schools throughout the



district helped discern patterns across the diversity of the schools and painted a picture of what is happening in the district as a whole.

In the next chapter, I describe the findings from the research.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings

The purpose of this study was to define effective teacher practices for Black male middle school students. This chapter presents data from the study to answer the three research questions guiding this investigation:

1. What is good teacher *practice* for Black male middle school students?
2. How do students perceive the *impact* of these effective teachers' practices?
3. What factors and experiences help to *influence* these effective teachers' practice and philosophy?

Students explicitly named *explaining* teacher practices as the most helpful, but implicitly described the absence of *social* and *feedback* practices as detriments to learning. Teachers seemed to explicitly prioritize *social* practices as prerequisite to academic learning, but did place an incredibly high value on rigorous academic vocabulary, real-life examples, and preparation for college. Thus, effective teacher practice seemed to wed and integrate all four types of practice (*explaining, social, feedback, and relevance*).

Teachers valued practical experiences that allowed them to reflect on their teaching philosophy. In some cases, these were fostered by teacher preparation programs (especially the district internship program). However, more often, the teachers brought a high degree of reflection on their personal, lived experiences as a prism with which to view the challenges and potential of their students. They also perceived that many of their colleagues were not adequately prepared to be effective with their students.

Finally, students were highly attuned to fairness and, even more importantly, the lack thereof. They also respected and valued teachers who held them to high standards in the same way their family members did.

In order to answer the research questions, I interviewed principals from four representative school sites across the district. Principals were first asked to rank their teachers' effectiveness, from their perspective. I then followed up to ask if their rankings would be any different regarding the teachers' effectiveness with African-American male students.

Next, I conducted a total of eight student focus groups at the four schools: one comprised of higher performing Black males (those performing at proficient or advanced on the CSTs) and one comprised of lower performing Black males (those performing at basic and lower on the CSTs) at each school site. In total, I spoke with 53 African-American male eighth graders. During the focus groups, I asked about teacher practices and the impact of those practices on their academic success. Then, similar to the principal nomination process, I asked students in each focus group to first identify their most effective teachers, as defined by which teachers had most embodied the practices that fostered their academic success. I then followed up to ask if students' nominations would change for Black males specifically.

Once the community had identified one effective teacher at each of the four sites, I then conducted four observations per teacher. Concurrent with the classroom observations, I interviewed each teacher three times, focusing on how they had developed their practices and their beliefs about teaching in general and teaching Black males in particular.

This chapter presenting the data from my research is organized into four sections. The first section presents trends from the community nomination process. The second section presents findings that answer the question, *What is good teacher practice?* The third section

presents findings that answer the question, *How do students perceive the impact of these effective teachers' practices?* And the fourth section presents findings that answer the question, *What factors and experiences help to influence these effective teachers' practice and philosophy?*

## **Community Nomination of Effective Teachers**

### **Students' nominations of effective teachers closely corroborated those of principals.**

Towards the end of each focus group, after students had articulated the teacher practices they perceived as effective as well as the impact of those practices, I asked them to identify the middle school teacher who most embodied those practices. In each of the eight focus groups, there was remarkably strong agreement regarding which teachers were the most helpful and effective. Each teacher nominated was, for more than three-fourths of the respondents, their first ranked choice, and for the remaining one-fourth was their second or third choice. Because all of the respondents were eighth graders, they had experienced the gamut of teachers in the school. Even those who did not have a formal class with one of the teachers had, interestingly, still had received significant help from that teacher. Elijah<sup>8</sup>, a student at Central, the district's lowest-performing middle school, explained it this way:

Even though I had Ms. Harley for math, I had heard from my friend that Mr. Doakes was doing a tutoring group afterschool. My friend said he was really helpful so I just started going with him. He gave me a lot more help in math than she did.

Another important note here is that there was strong corroboration between the teachers that students nominated with the ones nominated by each principal. In three cases, the teacher identified by the students was the top ranked teacher by that school's principal, and in the fourth case, he was the second teacher nominated by the principal. Interestingly, Central Middle

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<sup>8</sup> To protect anonymity, all participants and sites have been given pseudonyms.

School, the district's lowest performing middle school, had slightly less strong corroboration in comparison to Pine, Occidental, and Pacific Middle Schools.

**Students' nominations reveal noteworthy trends about race and gender.** Given the topic of this research, I probed students to see if race and gender made a difference or played a role in the teachers they saw as effective. For roughly 80% of the respondents, race did not play a role. The resounding sentiment here was, as Niles put it, "If you're a good teacher, you're a good teacher." When given a chance to offer a counterpoint, the other 20% of respondents did not seem to feel very strongly about their assertion, nor did they seem interested in offering up any illustrating points. However, when I asked about gender, there was a markedly more pronounced idea here that gender does play a role. About two-thirds of the participants responded that gender does make a difference. Marcel explained, "A guy can talk to you about stuff like a guy." Referring to one of the teachers, a female who actually was identified as the most helpful teacher at that school, Malik noted, "The girls go to her. We go to Martínez [a male counselor at that school]."

Despite these assertions, students did not change their nominations once they had identified their top teachers. Of the four teachers nominated by the community (students and principals), three are male and one is female. Three are African-American and one is White. There are two math teachers, one social studies teacher, and one science teacher. Two had taught outside of the district and two had only taught in the district. Their years of experience range from 4-12 years.

**Nominated teachers ranged in years of experience, background, and academic**

**discipline.** The four teachers nominated by students and principals ranged in years of experience and subjects taught. Table 2 summarizes the student and teacher participants in this study.

Table 2

*Summary of Student and Teacher Study Participants*

School	Higher-performing focus group <sup>9</sup>	Lower-performing group <sup>10</sup>	Nominated teacher
Pine	Travis Louis Kasaan Alonzo Russell Curtis Omar Malik	Teddy Richard Jeremiah Brandon Jordan Earl	Ms. Draper Math teacher 5 years at Pine Black female Previously taught at private and charter school Entered district through internship program
Occidental	Charles Jared Andrew Dante Rudy Darnell Alan	Kendrick Damien Marcel Amari Cyrus Henry	Dr. Kuti Science teacher 12 years at Occidental Black male Career change Doctorate in education
Pacific	Tavares Benjamin Tyson Demarion Danny Jericho Matthew	Terrence Marquis Riley Miles Khalil George William	Mr. Smith History teacher 10 years at Pacific White male Sociology and African-American studies major Entered district through internship program
Central <sup>11</sup>	Tariq Kowan David Rashan Wilson Wesley	Brayan Elijah Josiah Niles Cedric Sheldon	Mr. Doakes Math teacher 2 years at Central Half-Black, half-White male Previously taught PE & special education

<sup>9</sup> Students in this group scored proficient or advanced on the California Standards Test.

<sup>10</sup> Students in this group scored basic or below on the California Standards Test.

<sup>11</sup> Because the number of Black males who scored proficient at Central was low, the cut score dividing the higher performing from the lower performing focus groups was set at mid-basic.

Dr. Kuti is a science teacher at Occidental Middle School with 12 years of experience at the same school. He immigrated to the United States, and prior to teaching, he worked as a clinical microbiologist and as a probation officer. He is a Black male, and he earned his doctorate in educational leadership.

Mr. Smith has taught history at Pacific Middle School for 10 years. He studied sociology and African American studies in college and identifies as a White male. He came to teach in the district through a teacher recruitment and internship program.

Ms. Draper is a math teacher at Pine Middle School who, coincidentally, entered the district through the same teacher recruitment and internship program as Mr. Smith, after they had met at a conference 5 years ago. Prior to joining the district, she had taught elementary and middle school at two private schools and a charter school. She is a Black female.

Mr. Doakes teaches math at Central Middle School. He is in his second year in the district. Prior to joining the district, he had been a PE teacher and a special education paraprofessional. He is a male who identifies as half Black and half White. Table 2 summarizes the student and teacher participants in this study.

## **Practices**

In this section, I report the findings regarding teachers' practices. I conducted four observations with each nominated teacher (for a total of 16 observations over 2 months). During each observation, I noted how each teacher interacted with Black males in particular and with his classes in general. I paid close attention to corroborating or disconfirming evidence of what students claimed about these teachers during the focus groups, as well as what the teachers

themselves articulated during the individual interviews. This section presents the trends from the observations that answer the question, *What is good teacher practice?*

**Finding 1a: Nearly 100% of Black males participated in teachers' classrooms.**

Perhaps the most striking finding is that in every teacher's classroom, there was nearly 100% participation by Black males. Throughout the observations, Black males were not only answering—but also posing on-task questions. These examples of participation ranged from simple (responding to the teacher's specific prompt individually, in a choral response, or in written format) to complex (collaborating in a small group, working out the steps to an Algebra problem on the front board). Moreover, the levels of questions posed by Black male students in the classes ranged from procedural/administrative questions (*Are we having tutoring tomorrow?*) to clarifying questions (*Can you go over that one more time?*) to curious/probing questions (*Isn't Castro a dictator? What would happen if two stars die in front of each other?*). In nearly all of the 16 observations, Black males were participating at rate on par with or greater than the class as a whole.

It is important to note here that the one exception was at Central Middle School, the district's lowest performing middle school. At this school, which had a 100 point or greater API deficit compared with Occidental, Pacific, and Pine Middle Schools, the culture in general is one that is generally more chaotic and rife with discipline issues. So, the exception to the 100% Black male participation at Central seemed to be a reflection of the general school culture. However, even here, Black male students seemed to be participating at greater levels than in other classes at the school.



**Finding 1b: Classrooms exhibited high levels of academic vocabulary.** In addition to strikingly high participation by Black male students, there was a consistently high level of academic vocabulary, paired with real life examples, in each of the classrooms. In one class, the teacher offered an analogy to explain the makeup of the universe:

Let's say the city of Compton is a nebula. In the city, we have blocks of homes. Let's say each block is a galaxy. Within each block we have many streets—let's call these solar systems. Each traffic light can be called a star. That traffic light on South Street is called the Sun; without it we have no light.

In a math class, the teacher reminded the students about a *Brady Bunch* strategy for factoring composites and finding the greatest common factor in a polynomial. In another math class, the teacher explained *undefined* and *zero slope* by relating a story about slope and a fictional character named *Daisy* unable to climb a vertical wall or to ski across a horizontal plane. In a social studies class, the teacher prompted students to articulate, in complete sentences, how they would feel about a significant policy change if they were living in ancient Japan. Just as students had expressed strongly in the focus groups, these four teachers were utilizing a substantial volume of high quality *explaining* teacher practices.

**Finding 1c: Teachers used humor and code-switching to elicit positive responses from students.** Another finding consistent throughout the classroom observations was a practice of teachers utilizing humor and code-switching to interact with their students. Especially in the classes where there were more learners who struggled with academic concepts, teachers used humor to diffuse minor misbehavior and get students back on task:

- Let's leave out all the drama of the CPT and get back to business.

- OK, put the mute button on that!
- Oh so you're doing yours with invisible ink, huh?
- Someone is not paying attention; I'm gonna step on your face and make it flatter.
- What?! No homework today... lazy!
- I need Alvin to focus—he's a very people person, gonna work for TMZ someday.

Three points are critical to note here. First, students responded overwhelmingly positively to these teacher choices in language. Students—including ones to whom statements like those above were directed—were smiling in response. Second, the statements seemed to work. In each case, it was clear the teacher's goal was to redirect the minor misbehavior, reengage the off-task students, and keep the class as a whole flowing towards the academic objective; and in just about every case, it worked. Third, in the rare case where a student escalated rather than de-escalated, the teachers drew a very clear line of demarcation. In one instance where a student continued to stray off-task, the teacher switched tactics and took the student to the doorway to have a private conversation, away from the ears of the class. Overall, for these four teachers, the use of humor to manage minor misbehavior worked effectively. Minimal time was spent on classroom management, classes remained engaged in high levels of academic vocabulary, and students stayed in class, learning.

In addition to the use of humor to redirect minor misbehavior, I observed many small interactions where subtle choices in word choice and tone mirrored Black male adolescent students' home language: "Uh huh!"; "C'mon, man, be honest with me"; "Hey, can you do me a favor...Thank you my, man"; "Don't play...I don't like that"; "OK, y'all are on point today"; "You all good, man?"; "Take care, buddy" "OK, you are on fire! I'm gonna call your grandmother" "Aiiite, what's next everybody?" Moreover, when there was down time—during

passing periods for example—teachers seemed to seize the opportunity to banter with their students. One teacher asked a student walking in, “How come we’re not rockin’ the beanies anymore?” Another took a brief departure from a lesson to chat with two boys about NBA teams. The other two teachers were constantly chatting at the door with passersby and current period students alike (who were seeking out the teachers to check in about work and social topics).<sup>12</sup> Like the aforementioned use of humor, the important thing to note here is that these teachers’ efforts at code-switching (whether conscious or not) were incredibly well received by their students.

## **Impact**

In this section, I report the findings regarding students’ perceptions of impact of these practices. I conducted eight student focus groups with Black male eighth graders: two student focus groups at each of the four sites. Eighth graders were chosen because they would have experienced the full range of possible teachers at each site, more so than sixth or seventh graders. Although groups were kept relatively homogenous by performance level, the responses from all eight focus groups fell along strikingly similar trends. This section presents findings from the student focus groups, which answer the question, *How do students perceive the impact of these effective teachers’ practices?*

**Finding 2a: Students explicitly name explaining as the most positively impactful teacher practice.** Across all eight focus groups, there was surprisingly strong agreement that

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<sup>12</sup> One teacher even used Facebook to keep tabs on his students: to apprise them of homework, to update them on details about sports practice, and notably, to head off potential student-on-student conflicts. The way this teacher took on a nonjudgmental tone but was still able to “be the adult”—even on social media—was emblematic of how all of the teachers in the study seemed to be able to deftly code-switch and effectively connect with their students.

*explaining* was the most helpful of the four teacher practice categories from the literature: *social*, *feedback*, *relevance*, *explaining*. One area of the literature studying the Black male opportunity gap emphasized teachers' discrete pedagogical skills. These skills broke into the four main types of *social* (mirroring students' home environment in the classroom), *feedback* (using systematic and objective formative data rather than anecdotal and intuitive subjective judgments), *relevance* (connecting new academic material to students' culture and prior knowledge), and *explaining* (breaking new material into comprehensible chunks).

Out of the 53 students, 41 ranked *explaining* as their top choice and the most helpful to their learning. Out of the remaining 12 students, six chose *social* and six chose *feedback* as their most helpful teacher practice. At Pine, Occidental, and Pacific, there was nearly unanimous agreement within both focus groups of higher and lower performing students. At the lowest performing middle school, Central, there was a much wider variance on the response to the question, *Which of these teacher practices is the most helpful to your learning?*

Focus group participants explained that teachers "should make sure we understand the work." Jeremiah explained,

Kids aren't going to understand everything. And sometimes if I look at the book and try to see how they solve it, I'm not going to get it because Algebra is hard for me. [Ms.

Draper] has her own methods of doing stuff and it's easier and there's shorter ways.

Students in the focus groups stated loudly and clearly that their most helpful teachers use multiple methods to help them learn. In another focus group, Marcel described a math teacher who exemplified this quality:

In Ms. Ealy's<sup>13</sup> class, she'll teach something but we still won't understand. So then she'll teach us another way to do it. And if I still don't get it, later on when the class is doing something else, she'll come and show me a different way.

Examples of teachers who effectively explained difficult concepts to students were not limited to math. In one focus group, students described a history teacher who they agreed was helpful.

Jared: If you're failing Mr. James' class, it's like how is that possible? [half of the room nodded in agreement]

Charles: He makes stuff easier. It's a lot of hands on stuff. I won't say it's easy, but he makes it easier.

Dante: If you don't understand it, he makes you take a lot of notes and has you do lots of charts to go along with them.

Alan: If you miss an assignment, he gives you so many opportunities. Like I was absent, and he let me turn it in later.

Darnell: He'll show you what you missed, and then he tells you to turn it in before next quarter comes.

Although students shared positive examples of teachers who explained the work in order to help them learn, there were, unfortunately, far more anecdotes of teacher practices that resulted in a negative impact.

**Finding 2b: Students implicitly describe the absence of explaining, social, and feedback practices as detrimental to their learning.** Even in elaborating upon how teacher practices of *explaining* help them most as students, focus group participants far more often used negative examples to illustrate their point. Brandon articulated a representative statement, "I had

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<sup>13</sup> To protect anonymity, all participants and sites have been given pseudonyms.

previous teachers who just gave me the book and told me to look over it and do the work.” In a different focus group, Josiah shared a startlingly similar statement, “Some teachers don’t do nothing; they just give us the work and that’s it.” And in a somewhat less indicting characterization, Kasaan described teachers who made failed attempts to explain their subject to students, “Some people just don’t get science. Ms. Derry tried to explain it but kids just didn’t get it. It’s confusing to kids.” At one school, a particularly ineffective teacher generated lively discussion amongst the students:

Tariq: Ms. Walters will put some work on the board and won’t even tell you it’s there or when it’s due.

Wilson: Yeah, she’ll write the homework right behind where he’s sitting, and if he gets there before I do, I won’t even know it’s there [because it’s blocked by another student]. I won’t ever see it because she never said nothing about it!

Wilson: [On the day it’s due] she’ll say, “Well next time look on the board.” And if I say anything, she’s like, “That’s your fault for being dumb.”

Referring to the same teacher, students further rified on her feedback and grading practices:

David: I asked her about an assignment I missed and she told me not to worry about it, like it’s all good. But then at the report card, it’s an F!

Rashan: One time she gave me back an assignment and clearly told me that 19 plus 18 is 27 [points]. I told her, “There’s no way,” so I asked her to re-add it, and she said, “Oops.” But then she said it was too late ‘cuz she’d already turned in her grades. That didn’t make any sense.

Wesley: She didn’t want to give me any credit for it [an assignment] ‘cuz I was late ‘cuz I was still writing my name on it.

At a different school, another teacher sparked a spirited airing of similar concerns about ineffective practices:

Matthew: Mr. Johnson don't teach at all. He'll have a do-now on the board and don't explain it at all.

Tyson: He just sit there confused, scratching his head looking at the class without saying nothing.

Benjamin: He forgets too much. I don't know why he's a teacher.

Tavares: He would explain the simple things that we already learned in the first chapter. He over-explains things, and then he doesn't even explain the chapters in between.

Tyson: I'm over here trying to get help and he just ignore me.

Tavares: The only way I got a B in his class, I'd have to read the book, then go to Ms. Rhodes' class, then she'd have to re-teach it. So I'm doing everything on my own.

Jericho: [During a test] he'd say, "You should just know, if the answer's not A, and it's not C, and it's not D then..." [group laughed in agreement]

Danny: Yeah, he'll blurt out the answers without even giving us a chance.

Demarion: And say the test goes up to 20, we'll do the first 15 together! [group laughed in agreement]

And similar to the students' perspectives on Ms. Walters' ineffective practices and inability to *explain*, students connected Mr. Johnson's inability to explain with his ineffective *social* and *feedback* processes:

Terrence: I was in class and everybody just threw paper balls.

Miles: He'd write like 30 referrals a day.

Khalil: I had to get switched out of his class because there was students throwing paper balls and crayons at me, and I got in trouble for telling! He'd say, "Don't tell me unless they have a gun." Every time I would tell, I would get kicked out of class.

In addition to Mr. Johnson's inability to leverage social practices to effectively manage his classroom, students recounted his ineffective feedback and grading system:

Marquis: I'd be like, "Why do I have an F?" And he'd be like, "OK, go to my laptop and change it."

Terrence: Kids would just go to his laptop and change their grade.

Riley: Yeah, and I had my grade switched because someone changed it.

In another focus group, Jordan's explanation of another ineffective teacher cogently summarizes the resounding perspective about teacher practice and impact: "It be hard concepts [in class]. And she'll be sarcastic. And some people get on her nerves in class, and she'll take it out on us, the people who ask for her help." To sum up, while focus group respondents explicitly named *explaining* as the most important teacher practice to support their learning, over and over again, their examples pointed to the *absence* of effective *social* and *feedback* practices as detriments to learning.

Two trends are worth noting here. First, there were many more *specific* anecdotes of non-examples of helpful practices across all four sites and in both the focus groups with higher performing and lower performing students. Even when participants were elaborating upon what was helpful to their learning, their stories gravitated towards what less effective teachers did to hinder their learning. Second, the district's lowest performing middle school, Central, was overwhelmingly more negative in both focus groups. While all of the focus group participants were incredibly candid and forthcoming and seemed to genuinely enjoying expressing their



ideas, at one point, the focus group of lower performing students at Central Middle School, after sharing so many negative examples, took a decidedly somber tone and nearly all of the students seemed to have tears in their eyes.

**Finding 2c: Students perceive humor, high expectations, and fairness as effective practices.** In addition to the explicit idea of *explaining* as the dominantly named helpful teacher practice and the implicit idea that the absence of effective *social* and *feedback* practices as detriments to learning, there were also some sub-trends around humor, expectations, and fairness that resonated throughout the focus groups.

Some students identified the use of humor as an important aspect of how effective teachers managed their classrooms. Kendrick's assertion was representative of what these students conceptualized as effective use of joking: "Dr. Kuti—he'll be playing around, and then he just gets back to the subject at hand." During another school's focus group, Demarion described, in a positive way, a teacher who would "call you out and put you on blast in front of the class, and everybody'd be cracking up." When I probed and tried to clarify how they determined whether a teacher was just joking or was crossing a line of inappropriateness, rudeness, or meanness, they seemed to be very clear. As Khalil explained, "We can tell when a teacher's like playing and when a teacher's serious about it." Riley clarified with an anecdote about a teacher who, when a student called a classmate "stupid" responded, "that's what you are, too [stupid]." So, even when some of the anecdotes shared about negative and positive uses of humor seemed to be very similar, students were able to easily and definitively draw a sharp distinction between teachers who used humor to establish social relationships versus those who were genuinely mean.

Another important point that resonated more loudly for respondents was the idea of rigorous expectations. When asked if there was anything their teachers did that reminded them of the folks in their home or neighborhood, students shared examples of teachers “getting on you.” In other words, these were teachers who, like their parents or extended family, expected them to do their best and live up to high expectations. Russell described one such teacher, Ms. Draper: “She be real! If you slacking up, she tell you how to pick it up!” At another school, Amari similarly described his teacher, “Dr. Kuti gets on you hard!” Two points worth noting here are that one, students perceive their parents and guardians as having high academic expectations of them, and further—rather than liking the teachers who are easy on them—students respect the teachers who hold them to high standards.

The theme that resounded the most loudly throughout the student focus groups, however, was that of fairness. So many of the negative anecdotes emphasized a lack of fairness, perhaps because adolescents are especially attuned to how they and their friends are treated. To recap, Jericho recounted an incident in PE class where, even though the entire class had committed a transgression, “we had to run an extra mile but the [Latino] soccer players didn’t.” Beyond behavior consequences, respondents were incredibly attuned to fairness in terms of academic support: “She just puts it up on the board and then expects us to get it.” The most poignant example of this point about fairness, however, came from Cedric, a respondent at Central Middle School: “They won’t teach us, and then they make us say it’s our fault for not listening.”

## **Influence**

This section reports the findings regarding how teachers had developed their beliefs and effective practices. Concurrent with the classroom observations, I interviewed each teacher three

times. In order to mitigate the Hawthorne effect of teachers changing their practice based on the research topic, I conducted at least two observations of each teacher before revealing the specific focus of my research questions. In this section, I will present my findings from the interviews, which answer the question, *What factors and experiences help to influence these effective teachers' practice and philosophy?*

**Finding 3a: Teachers expressed a strong desire to effect social change by working in the district.** All four teachers shared a strong focus on social justice as expressed in their desire to work in the district. Each articulated a strong interest in working with the demographics reflected in the district as opposed to a more affluent community. In explaining what compelled her to teach in Compton, Ms. Draper explained,

Teaching in a private school or charter school—they're different types of students.

They're all really smart; they're background was different; they had no problems with homework. I need to work with different type of students, and Compton needed good teachers.

Similarly, Dr. Kuti asserted that “this [district] is where they need my help the most. The kids are at a big disadvantage; my skills are better used here than anywhere else.” Along the same lines, Mr. Doakes stated emphatically,

I love these kids and their background. I love their stories. I didn't want to go where I teach and they just get it and that's it. I wanted to work with students that I could help more so they do get it.

Of the four, the teacher who most explicitly articulated an emphasis on social justice (perhaps because of his sociology background) was Mr. Smith:

I wanted to go to law school, civil rights, ACLU, social change. But then in senior year, I heard about Teach Compton [the district's internship program] and realized I wanted to work in the inner city and to work with kids. My passion was the community and the kids and effecting social change, and over time I've fallen in love with the profession.

This theme of effecting social change through working with middle school aged adolescents echoed throughout the teacher interviews. Mr. Doakes explained, "I really liked middle school. The kids are still young enough to where you can be an influence on them and not old enough to here they're jaded." Mr. Smith and Dr. Kuti similarly expressed the importance of being role models to their students. Ms. Draper, who had had experience teaching the primary grades, enthusiastically explained the similar sentiment that middle school students are "on a totally different level."

**Finding 3b: Teachers expressed a clear focus on rigorous academic goals and a belief that all students can become *smart*.** An important dimension of these four teachers' conception of social justice was a clear focus on academic goals. Dr. Kuti beamed with pride that he had "the best science results in the district" and named off former students who had gone on to competitive high schools and colleges. Mr. Smith articulated the importance of being a teacher who not only "respected and loved" his students but also had "prepared them for college, someone who pushed them to be their best." Similarly, Ms. Draper expressed that she wanted students to see that "they're not just another student leaving the class, but that she helped me accomplish my goals." And Mr. Doakes wanted to ensure that he had simply "made math fun for them, that [he] helped them understand math."

Along a similar line, a resounding trend across all four sets of teacher interviews was a shared notion that student intelligence is malleable rather than fixed. In other words, all four teachers held the belief that “every student can become smart.” Mr. Doakes explained, “Everyone can learn; you just have to find a way for them to learn. Every student is capable; everyone has a different way of getting it.” Ms. Draper agreed, stating, “I believe that every child is teachable if you can get them to believe they can learn. A lot of kids are smart and don’t realize it. I can make you smart.” Dr. Kuti shared that students have “different styles” and expressed value for different ways his students add value to his class, such as “Michelle, a C student but an enforcer...[who] brought everyone together.” Mr. Smith strongly concurred with the idea of malleable intelligence, explaining, “All kids are smart. That’s relative. It’s about finding the right assignment, the right project. If you build off their strengths, then the other learning [modalities] will come along because you’ve built their confidence.”

Moreover, the nominated teachers expressed a desire to work with challenging students. As Mr. Smith put it,

Good students come in so many shapes and forms. Maybe they weren’t the model student before. I really enjoy students who are vocal and question things and want to know how things work. I like students who were reluctant before but where, with the right support, you can pull that greatness out of them. All students can be great.

Ms. Draper echoed this sentiment: “I’ve met kids where other teachers have said, ‘Oh you can’t teach that child;’ and that becomes my personal challenge.” Mr. Doakes explained it this way: “You have the intelligent students who get it right the first time. Then you have the smart ones who don’t necessarily get As but ask the questions. I like the smart students better than the intelligent ones.”

**Finding 3c: Teachers saw their personal experiences as instrumental to shaping their teaching philosophy and practice.** Interestingly, when asked how they developed their approach to teaching students, there was wide variance in the perceived impact of teacher preparation programs. The two participants who entered the district through the internship program expressed favorable opinions about the practical preparation they received. The other two expressed varying degrees of perceived importance of their traditional teacher preparation and student teaching experiences. One explained that it provided too much theory while the other lamented vehemently that it did not prepare him “at all for the realities of my classroom. It’s like we observed these perfect students in high-API schools—nothing at all like where I’m at now.”

What all four respondents pointed to more clearly was their personal experiences. As Mr. Doakes put it, “My sister was shot in a drive-by, so I always knew I wanted to work in the inner city. My students need role models to show that you can always do something better with your life.” Ms. Draper explained, “I grew up in Watts, raised in a single parent family. I wanted to come back to my community.” Dr. Kuti recounted his experience as an immigrant and how it shaped his approach to his students:

I was raised in Nigeria; education is a luxury there. I didn’t have an easy life. The whole family is looking up to you. You can’t come home with an F; you have to succeed. [My students] understand I care because I chew them up, and they know why—they’re not dummies. They know who cares for them.

And Mr. Smith explained that following an interest in law and social change, he saw:

the writing on the wall: my family is filled with teachers. This opportunity came about and God showed me. When I started exploring who I was, I realized I wanted to get hands on. I'd done a bit of volunteer work in my college community and was aware of the challenges in a balanced view—not just from TV or stereotypes. And not from feeling sorry or from guilt, but I wanted to give back.

**Finding 3d: Teachers believe that race does matter.** In two important and interesting areas, teachers' perspectives diverged from that of the student respondents in the focus groups: the question of the importance of race and the prioritization of the four categories of teacher practice. While 80% of students asserted that the race of their teacher does not matter, all four teacher respondents believed that race does matter to some extent. Mr. Doakes posited, "I think it [race] does play a role in certain areas. We're in the inner city, and I'm a male who grew up in the inner city, so maybe I can relate to them a little more." Dr. Kuti explained that he had more questions than answers

In terms of African-Americans, there has to be a different design, a different approach. Something isn't working out and I won't give up until I succeed. Two weeks ago we won the southern California Math, Engineering, and Science Academy competition—but there were hardly any African-Americans there.

For Ms. Draper, she saw race as important but not insurmountable:

Say you get an Asian teacher in Compton who had similar life experiences with her students and had a practical credentialing program like mine. I had a friend [in my program] who cried when she saw the experiences here and it changed her. So that versus another teacher who can just go through culture shock. Overall, if you have the

passion and depending on how open you are and are willing to do what you need to do, it won't matter so much. Like take Mr. Brill, he's White and the kids love him.

Mr. Smith looked at the question on a macro level:

I'm a person who believes that race matters. America is a country organized for White people, an elitist country in many ways. If you're a different race from the students, I think it's initially a challenge, something that teachers need to be aware of. The more open you are, you know, kids have questions like Why do White people do this or that? I'm used to being like the only White person among my friends so it's never bothered me. Some White people would get offended but I see it as a teachable moment, an age appropriate way of teaching about race.

So, while students seemed to think that "a good teacher is a good teacher" regardless of race, teachers articulated that a color-blind approach was not an effective one to take.

**Finding 3e: Teachers explicitly named social practices as prerequisite to academic learning.** One other point of divergence between student responses and teacher responses was in the prioritization of the four categories of helpful teacher practices. While students overwhelmingly named *explaining* as the most helpful type of practice, only one of the four teachers named it as the most important. Two named social and the fourth named relevance as the most important type of practice. When asked to explain their rankings, this discrepancy in priority became even more pronounced:

- "You have to make a connection to life; you have to make it real for them."
- "Being a strong teacher involves mastering relationships with students; and without strong management, you can't get to the teaching."



- “If I don’t know my students, I can’t reach them. And I need to have classroom management before I can even make connections in terms of relevance.”
- “These two [social and explaining] are actually very close. If you don’t connect with your children, then they won’t care.”

Despite a seeming prioritization of social and management behaviors over explaining and academic practices, it is important to note that these practices did not appear in isolation—neither in interviews nor in observations. Thus, this seeming divergence could possibly be read as a corroboration of the notion that students explicitly named *explaining* as the most important practice, but implicitly described the absence of *social* teacher practices as detriments to learning. Furthermore, this seeming discrepancy may be one not of substance but rather of the perception of caring, which will be discussed further in the final chapter.

## Summary

This chapter presented findings from student focus groups, teacher observations, and teacher interviews to answer the three research questions:

1. What is good teacher *practice* for Black male middle school students?
2. How do students perceive the *impact* of these effective teachers’ practices?
3. What factors and experiences help to *influence* these effective teachers’ practice and philosophy?

Students explicitly named *explaining* teacher practices as the most helpful but implicitly described the absence of *social* and *feedback* practices as detriments to learning. Teachers seemed to explicitly prioritize *social* practices as prerequisite to academic learning, but did place an incredibly high value on rigorous academic vocabulary, real-life examples, and preparation

for college. Thus, effective teacher practice seemed to wed and integrate all four types of practice (*explaining, social, feedback, and relevance*).

Teachers valued practical experiences that allowed them to reflect on their teaching philosophy. In some case, these were fostered by teacher preparation programs (especially the district internship program). However, more often, the teachers brought a high degree of reflection on their personal, lived experiences as a prism with which to view the challenges and potential of their students. They also perceived that many of their colleagues were not adequately prepared to be effective with their students.

Finally, students were highly attuned to fairness and, even more importantly, the lack thereof. They also respected and valued teachers who held them to high standards in the same way their family members did.

In Chapter 5, I will synthesize my findings and discuss the implications of my study. In particular, I discuss recommendations borne out of the idea that effective teaching for African-American males requires cultural congruence and a social change stance, along with a robust set of pedagogical strategies. Finally, I also explore the notion that humor can be an effective tool for engaging Black male middle school students in rigorous learning.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion and Implications

The advent of NCLB and disaggregated student achievement results, furthered by a pro-accountability Democratic administration, shined a bright light on educators' responsibility to close achievement gaps. In particular, the opportunity gap plaguing African-American males belies our nation's promise of equal opportunity and education's promise to be the great equalizer (Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Mann & Cremin, 1957). Not only has it become all but faux pas for liberals and conservatives alike to rest on excuses for schools underserving Black males, but also parents are now rightfully becoming savvier about utilizing Internet resources to identify how well schools are doing. Parents are also voting with their feet, opting for higher performing public schools, charter schools, and independent schools. As a result of the community's embrace of accountability, teachers, leaders, and policymakers are rightfully feeling increased urgency to find solutions to close the opportunity gap in public education.

From pre-kindergarten through university, students who are Black, male, and low-income are underserved by our nation's educational institutions (Brunn & Kao, 2005; Laird et al., 2006; Monroe, 2005; Neal et al., 2003; Planty & Kridl, 2007; Skiba et al., 2005; Watts & Erevelles, 2004). African-American males are afforded less opportunity to achieve at the highest levels throughout the educational pipeline and are overrepresented in special education and prison. Because of its crucial location in the middle of the educational pipeline and because of the critical imperative to reach adolescents in the middle grades (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Juvonen et al., 2004; MacIver & Epstein, 1990), this study sought to illuminate solutions to help educators better serve Black male middle school students.

This study used community nomination to identify and then research four effective teachers of African-American male middle school students at four school sites in the Compton Unified School District. Through student focus groups, teacher observations, and teacher interviews, the results of this research point to a picture of what effective education looks like for this important group of students.

In this final chapter, I discuss recommendations that flow from the findings of the research, and I also discuss the findings' connections to the existing literature on the African-American male achievement gap. The recommendations are organized around the key themes that developed from the data described in the previous chapter. These following sections synthesize an emerging profile of an effective teacher of Black male middle school students: exhibiting cultural congruence, adopting a stance of social change, and wielding successful pedagogical strategies. I also begin to discuss the notion of using humor as an effective tool for engaging Black male adolescents. Finally, I will discuss some limitations of this study and offer suggestions for future research.

## **Summary of Findings**

Students who participated in this research spoke candidly and thoughtfully about their positive and negative experiences as Black male middle school students. In Chapter Two, I discussed the body of literature on teachers' practices, and how they could be subdivided into four subcategories: (a) *explaining complex concepts*, (b) *social relationships*, (c) *feedback and grading*, and (d) *relevance*. Students explicitly named *explaining* teacher practices as the most helpful but implicitly described the absence of *social* and *feedback* practices as detriments to learning. Although teachers seemed to explicitly prioritize *social* practices as a prerequisite to

academic learning, they did place an incredibly high value on rigorous academic vocabulary, real-life examples, and preparation for college. This trend was consistent in both teacher interviews and classroom observation. Thus, effective teacher practice seemed to wed and integrate all four types of practice: (a) *explaining complex concepts*, (b) *social relationships*, (c) *feedback and grading*, and (d) *relevance*.

In interviews, teachers valued practical experiences that allowed them to reflect on their teaching philosophy. In some case, these were fostered by teacher preparation programs (especially the district internship program).<sup>14</sup> But for the teachers in my study, what seemed to be more influential than university coursework was a high degree of reflection on their personal, lived experiences. Moreover, they viewed their personal experiences as a prism through which they viewed the challenges and potential of their students. It is important to note here that they also perceived that many of their colleagues were not adequately prepared with this same level of reflection.

In the focus groups, students were highly attuned to fairness and, more importantly, the lack thereof. Students also respected and valued teachers who held them to high standards; they noted that this practice reminded them of how their family members had similarly high expectations of them. In other words, the African-American male middle school students in my study wanted teachers who would hold them accountable for rigorous academics *and* provide them with the opportunity and support to meet those expectations. In the next sections, I will discuss the recommendations that flow from these findings, as well as their connections to existing literature. These recommendations coalesce into an emerging profile of effective

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<sup>14</sup> Two of the teachers completed credentialing coursework through a district internship program. The program resulted from a collaboration between Compton Unified and a local university. It started during the last decade, during a time when the district needed more teachers than it was able to recruit via traditional routes. The program has since been discontinued.

teachers of Black male middle school students: (a) exhibiting cultural congruence, (b) adopting a stance of teaching as social change, and (c) wielding successful pedagogical strategies. I also begin to explore the ways that all four teachers in my study used humor and code-switching to engage their students. Throughout my recommendations, I also discuss the connections to previous research on the Black male opportunity gap.

### **Effective Teachers Exhibit Cultural Congruence**

The most resounding set of findings in my study points to a need for teachers to exhibit cultural congruence and synchronicity with their Black male middle school students. Cooper and Jordan (2003) discuss the importance of Black male teachers who are able to act as role models for Black male adolescents. They discuss the significance of rapport as a way to build student motivation. They posit that rapport can be more easily developed when the teacher shares, and can therefore tap into, the background knowledge and cultural knowledge of his students. However, they also explore the implications of arguing for cultural congruence in America, “a pluralistic society that ostensibly values and celebrates diversity” (Cooper & Jordan, 2003, p. 11). The hesitation to enact race-specific interventions, including race-specific recruitment and hiring, within the school reform movement is symptomatic of the misguided notion that equality is color-blind. This is the same belief that posits that we live in a post-racial America where racism was eradicated as a result of the Emancipation, the Civil Rights Movement, and the election of a Black president. The color-blind approach is also manifest in the idea that talking about race is synonymous with being racist. However, cultural synchronization, shared knowledge with, and implicit understanding of their students can help teachers forge deeper relationships and bolster motivation to learn.

Students in this study seemed to understand the importance of cultural synchronicity and congruence, but they also seemed to be grappling with the notion of color-blindness. On one hand, when asked directly about the salience of a teacher's race, 80% of students responded that race doesn't matter and that "if you're a good teacher, you're a good teacher." On the other hand, they identified three teachers who are Black and one White teacher who majored in African-American studies. The students in my study also emphasized the positive aspects of teachers who were "real" and who could code-switch and speak in verbal and nonverbal language that connected with theirs. In other words, from the student perspective, there seemed to be a positive significance to a teachers' cultural congruence, or at least his ability to exhibit cultural synchronicity.

When asked this same question regarding the relevance of race, all four teachers asserted that race does matter to some extent. They saw race as an important but not insurmountable factor to teaching their students effectively, especially their Black males. So, contrary to the belief that color-blindness can remedy inequity, both students and teachers recognize the importance of cultural congruence and synchronicity. In fact, teachers posited that educators who did not take their race and culture into account tended to be less successful with their students.

The discrepancy between students' and teachers' explicitly stated perspectives on whether or not race matters may have to do with the level of sophistication each set of respondents is using to define race. For the eighth graders, they may be defining race simply as skin color. And because they were able to identify both effective and ineffective Black teachers as well as effective and ineffective teachers of other races, their explicit response was that race does not matter. For the teachers, however, their definition of race is more complex than social

group membership. Within their responses, the teachers were incorporating notions of shared lived experiences and cultural congruence: hence, their response that race does matter.

Given the complex nature of race, a social construct (Omi & Winant, 1994)<sup>15</sup>, the question of cultural congruence and synchronicity deserves further examination and study. However, I did observe what I infer to be an empirical manifestation of this cultural congruence: the use of humor to engage students.

**Effective teachers utilize humor in a culturally congruent way to engage their students.** Throughout my research, I observed teachers using humor consistently to de-escalate minor misbehavior, illustrate academic points, and establish rapport with students. In the classroom observations, I noted that all four teachers used humor to provide interesting, real-life examples of abstract academic concepts such as slope, solar systems, and factoring. They also employed humor to refocus students when they weren't paying attention. All four teachers seemed to understand the fine line between playfulness and mean-spiritedness when they employed humor to “put someone on blast”—or to publicly call attention to them in order to persuade them to refrain from minor misbehavior and refocus on the lesson topic. Although a teacher who did not exhibit cultural synchronicity could potentially either (a) cross the line and cause a student to become offended or (b) utilize humor with which the students did not connect, all four teachers in my study were adept at wielding humor effectively for both teaching and classroom management purposes. The four teachers in my study deftly navigated this line and elicited nearly total participation from their Black male students.

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<sup>15</sup> Omi and Winant posit the theory of racial formation. Rather than defined by objective or biological criteria, the concept of race is a construct that is situated in ever-changing historical and social contexts. In other words, society, not biology, defines racial categories and assigns meaning and implications to those racial categories.



The use of humor as a manifestation of effective cultural congruence also came up explicitly in how students described their effective and ineffective teachers. During the focus groups, students articulated an incredibly acute sense of fairness and lack thereof. They described the differences between teachers (Black or otherwise) who used humor to engage them versus teachers (Black or otherwise) who used humor to attempt to humiliate and shame them. To an untrained ear, the differences in the examples recounted by students seemed quite similar. But to the students, the line between teachers' appropriate and inappropriate use of humor was bright and unmistakable. For African-American male students, the most effective teachers knew how to effectively navigate this line, while the least effective ones (Black or otherwise) did not.

Because the four nominated teachers in my study exhibited cultural synchronicity with their students, they knew how to navigate this line effectively. And they did so in order to help their Black male students master academic concepts. They skillfully code-switched and used humor, all while maintaining a high level of academic rigor, in order to engage their class. As a result, students responded; Black males in particular exhibited phenomenally high rates of participation in class.

The idea that effective teachers of Black males make learning entertaining has been identified in other research (Howard, 2001; Jones & Caston, 2004). It is, however, the nuanced ability to understand the fine line between appropriate and inappropriate use of humor (the fine line between playfulness and mean-spiritedness) that speaks to the importance of cultural congruence. Cooper and Jordan (2003) articulate the importance of cultural synchronization, coupled with a teacher's ability to execute effective pedagogical strategies, as key to succeeding with Black male secondary school students. Just as the students and teachers in my study asserted, they posit that although a Black male teacher was more likely to exhibit such cultural

congruence, it was also possible for non-African-American teachers to be culturally in sync with their Black male students.

This finding reminded me of the dynamics of a game of *dozens* where the rules are unspoken—but clearly understood by those in the know.<sup>16</sup> In focus groups, students implicitly identified Black and non-Black teachers who exhibited this level of cultural congruence, as well Black and non-Black teachers who did not. Perhaps there is an aspect here of congruence not just with culture vis-à-vis race, but also socio-economic status and developmental needs of adolescents. This would be an apt topic to be further explored in future research.

It is important to note here that while these four teachers all used culturally congruent humor to strategically engage their students, humor may have been these teachers' tactic of choice for establishing rapport with their students. The important point here is that in these four teachers' classrooms, as well as in the other effective classrooms described by student respondents, the classroom offered a safe space where teachers connected with and affirmed their students. Future studies could examine whether this use of humor to communicate with and to positively affirm students is particularly important for middle school students, given their developmental stage.

Another important point emerging from this theme is the finding that students identified many specific, poignant examples of non-congruent teachers. Along the same lines, teachers emphatically noted that most of their colleagues were out of sync with their students. These teachers either used humor to denigrate their students or were unable to connect with their Black male middle school students. This finding speaks to the need to recruit, select, and train teachers

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<sup>16</sup> The dozens is a game involving mental and verbal acuity. It involves the trading of insults, often beginning with, "Ya mamma..." and the winner is the one deemed to exercise the highest degree of self-control, wit, and verbal agility. While the insults may seem hurtful to members of the out-group, the in-group understands the cultural context of signifying.

who either (a) already come with a cultural congruence with their students or, more realistically, (b) are willing to strive for cultural synchronicity with their students.

**Cultural congruence is shaped by lived experiences.** During interviews, all four teachers spoke to the power of their lived experiences that shaped their approach to teaching. While shared lived experiences might be hard to replicate, all four teachers did speak to the possibility and promise of well-developed teacher training programs. One such example included a district internship program that collaborated with a local university. The teachers who participated in this district internship credited the program with engaging teachers in reflecting on their students' cultural experiences vis-à-vis their developmental and learning needs.

The evidence from my study highlights the need to recruit and select candidates who are willing to eschew *color-blindness* in favor of an approach that takes into account the cultural capital and cultural ways of thinking students bring with them to school (Beebe-Frankenbeger et al., 2005; Lane et al., 2006; Rivers et al., 2004; Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003; Tharp-Taylor & Gall, 2005; Yosso, 2005; Zusman et al., 2005). I want to be clear here that this practice is different from necessarily recruiting only Black males to teach Black males. Rather there is a need to seek out teacher candidates who are willing to recognize and learn the cultural codes to which their Black male students might better respond. This might mean looking at candidates who, regardless of their major, exhibit an interest African-American Studies, Ethnic Studies, American Studies, Comparative Cultures, Sociology, or other similar minors. A propensity for and interest in studying cultures could potentially translate into a teacher who, rather than adopting a misguided color-blind approach, is reflective about his culture and the culture of his students.

This finding could also mean revising interview protocols to include questions that test explicitly for fit with the district. For example, asking a candidate “Why do you want to teach here?” could yield insight into a candidate’s motivation for entering the profession and, more specifically, entering the district. All of the effective teachers nominated and studied in my research spoke quite compellingly about why they chose to teach in Compton.

Of course, I do not want to suggest that either sharing the students’ race or having majored in African-American Studies are automatic guarantees to success in teaching Black male students. Rather, the important point here is that a reflective and conscious stance towards culture appears to correlate with the potential to teach Black male students effectively. Being able to articulate compelling reasons as to why someone wants to work with a specific group of students obviously does not guarantee that a candidate will be successful with Black male students, but it could be an important first step. The question becomes, then, *Can this consciousness be taught?*

While they seemed to be primed with lived experiences that helped forge their cultural congruence with their students, all of the teachers in my study spoke explicitly about teacher training experiences that facilitated their reflection. Programs like the now-discontinued district internship program fostered an environment of reflection upon the issues their students were facing in relation to their learning needs. So although it may be unfeasible to recruit *only* from a teacher candidate pool that directly reflects the shared experiences of Black male students, the results of my study suggest that a component of reflectiveness and reflection needs to be sought out and cultivated in the teacher candidate pool.

This component is one that can be replicated in all teacher education programs—particularly those that serve teachers of students in low-income districts and districts that serve

large numbers of students of color. Along the same lines, districts and universities could establish apprenticeships to support new teachers as they merge their personal experiences, pedagogical training, and day-to-day experiences with their students.

### **Effective Teachers Adopt a Stance of Social Change**

Perhaps equally important as a teacher's stance to culture is his mindset about the profession of teaching. All of the teachers in my study resoundingly credited their personal experiences as critical to shaping how they approach their craft and their students. Specifically, the teachers in my study recounted personal life experiences that led them to develop a social justice stance toward teaching. Furthermore, because of this view of teaching as an act of social change, they embodied a view of students' intelligence as malleable rather than fixed.

Although half of the teachers had only taught in Compton while the others had taught in other, more affluent districts, they all made a conscious choice to teach in a low-income urban area. Whether it was because of a resemblance between their family and the families of the students in Compton, or experience working with low-income students, or reflections upon their own schooling, all of the nominated teachers in my study felt compelled to teach in the district because they felt the students there needed them.

To be clear, this sentiment is different from one of condescension or of a missionary ethic. Rather, the teachers in my study expressed a strong desire to effect social change on a systemic level by teaching in this district. There was a clear sense that they relished the challenge of working with their students. Even when given the opportunity, the teachers in my study explicitly rejected teaching in higher income districts because they felt that those students would be successful even without the most effective teachers. In other words, they entered the

district with a clear understanding that fostering academic success with their students, given the external social factors, would be a challenge. Moreover, they were committed to stepping up to that challenge in order to effect change and equity.

This finding confirms previous research findings that effective teachers explicitly view teaching as a political act grounded in social justice and therefore exhibit more personal responsibility for student outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lynn, 2002; Milner, 2003; Traynor, 2003). As a result of this increased commitment to equity, the teachers in my study adopted a greater sense of personal responsibility. They also adopted the mindset that student intelligence is malleable rather than fixed, and they relished in the responsibility of helping students become *smart*. This observation is consistent with previous research about the self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon (Clark, 1997; Dweck et al., 2007; K. Lee, 1996; Rist, 1970). This body of literature demonstrated that teachers who believe that their students can become smart through hard work and practice work to develop their capacity. Conversely, teachers who believe that students are essentially born with a fixed academic competency end up fulfilling that prophecy.

The concept of malleable intelligence was another clear and related trend reflected in the results of my study. During the course of the interviews, when asked to describe a *smart student* all four teachers articulated a difference between the traditional notion of a smart student versus one who worked towards achieving academic success. Each described traditionally smart students as ones who had ample parental support at home, came to school with sufficient resources, and immediately mastered academic concepts on their first try. By contrast, the teachers in my study offered up counter examples of *their* view of intelligence: those who did not come with adequate academic capital, but who were hungry to be successful. These were the students their colleagues often dismissed as lazy or incapable. In contrast, the teachers in my

study believed that all of their students wanted to be successful and that it was their responsibility as teachers to get them to become successful. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, all four teachers actually *relished* the challenge of working to *make* non-traditional students smart.

Similar to the previous recommendations regarding cultural congruence of teachers, these twin findings of teaching as social change and perception of intelligence as malleable are qualities that should be identified and cultivated in potentially effective teachers. Here again, revising teacher candidate interview protocols to include questions like, *Why do you want to teach?* and *Why teach here?* could offer insight into whether a candidate shares the social justice stance to teaching exhibited by the teachers in my study. Also, based on my research, there would be value to asking candidates to describe their conception of a *smart student* or of *intelligence*. As described above, not only can effective teachers distinguish between the traditional notions of intelligence (as fixed), but they also seem to favor and enjoy working with students who need extra support to help them become successful academically.

One other point to add to this theme is the student perspective. In focus groups, students gave examples of teachers who afforded them multiple chances to be successful. They also offered up counterexamples of teachers who gave them the work, expected them to understand it the first time, and then assigned them a failing grade when they did not. I will discuss this further in the next section about pedagogical strategies, but this distinction articulated by the students speaks to a teacher's stance towards his responsibilities, as well as his view of intelligence as malleable or fixed.

During an interview process, it would therefore make sense to include questions that probe how a teacher candidate would approach students who struggle initially. A teacher's

approach to learners who struggle would, after all, become the tangible manifestation of both her stance towards teaching as well as her conception of intelligence.

Teacher training and induction programs could also place more emphasis on the concept of malleable intelligence. An individual's conception of intelligence as malleable or fixed might be defined by the time she enters a teacher training program; however, this would be an important foundational component to include in the training of new teachers or the continuing education of veteran teachers.

Stemming from this idea, greater emphasis could be placed on multiple opportunities for student success and academic growth over time in teacher training, mentorship, and evaluation programs. Although effective mindsets might be hard to teach, it would be crucial for schools of education and district departments to align their training and evaluation criteria with the explicit manifestations of those effective mindsets.

### **Effective Teachers Wield Successful Pedagogical Strategies**

In this section, I discuss the tangible practices that are exhibited by effective teachers from my study. A final theme that emerged from my research is that although effective teachers exhibit cultural congruence and adopt a stance of teaching as social change, these mindsets alone are not enough to make a teacher effective. Teacher beliefs had to be accompanied by teacher actions. Students in my study were quite adept at identifying which teachers they liked versus who was ineffective versus who was effective. In other words, students clearly understood the difference between a teacher who was nice or cool and one who helped them learn. Moreover, they preferred the teachers who held them to high academic standards and then wielded an arsenal of pedagogical strategies to help them meet those standards. In other words, students



respected the teachers who “got on them,” or held them accountable for meeting their rigorous demands. The important corollary here, though, is that students also wanted their teachers to be fair and to offer them multiple opportunities to succeed.

Students reported overtly that *explaining* was the most important pedagogical practice to helping them as learners. This finding confirms previous research demonstrating that teachers who were able to break down complex concepts into comprehensible chunks were more successful with their students (Sheppard, 2006). Even as students resoundingly named *explaining* practices as the most important to their learning, they depicted vividly the absence of *social, feedback, and relevance* as detrimental to their learning. Respondents’ most poignant anecdotes recounted the lack of fairness they perceived when they experienced a dearth of feedback and opportunities to succeed. Students drew a sharp contrast between the teachers who “don’t do nothing—just give [them] work and that’s it” versus those who “make sure [they] understand the work.” This observation is consistent with research showing that even experienced teachers who relied on end-of-course assessments could not help learners who struggled because the help came too late or never came at all (Ash & Levitt, 2003).

In teacher observations, this theme resonated in the amount of high-level academic vocabulary used by teachers and, more importantly, students. Strikingly, there was nearly 100% participation by Black male students throughout my classroom observations. Furthermore, students not only answered questions, but posed them as well. This outcome, overwhelming participation by Black males, speaks to how the effective teachers in my study developed and wielded multiple tools in their pedagogical arsenal in order to keep their students engaged. Teachers code-switched, used humor, offered real-life examples, and employed banter to keep their Black male students out of the principal’s office and in their classrooms. Moreover,

teachers ensured that Black male students thrived there. This finding resonates with previous studies that showed effective teachers were able to create caring, entertaining, relevant learning environments (Flowers, 2006; Gardner et al., 2001; Howard, 2001; Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Wilson-Jones & Caston, 2004;).

While this theme may seem obvious—that students want teachers who can teach well—it is actually an important point in the context of the earlier two themes. Any of the three sets of findings in isolation are not enough to comprise an effective teacher for African-American male middle school students; all three are necessary and work in concert. In other words, it is not enough for a teacher to share cultural congruence with his students, nor is it sufficient to exhibit a social justice stance to teaching. The results of my study show that the nuts and bolts of pedagogy are also critical to effectively teaching Black male middle school students. Just as students will potentially have a hard time connecting with a well-trained teacher who is culturally out of sync with them, students understand that fundamentally, the job of a teacher—even one who takes on a social justice stance—is to teach them. Like a three-legged stool, all three of these components are necessary to teach African-American male middle school students effectively: cultural congruence, social change, and an arsenal of pedagogical strategies.

This interdependence helps to explain an earlier point. Over the course of my research, I was initially surprised to find that students overwhelmingly chose *explaining* practices as the most helpful. In contrast, teachers seemed to prioritize *social* practices as the most fundamental. As I conducted observations, however, I started to see that perhaps both groups were actually saying the same thing, but from different vantage points. The most effective teachers come from a place of fundamental awareness of cultural and equity issues; these were their core beliefs. The way they express these beliefs, however, is through their actions—by wielding every tool in

their pedagogical arsenal to effect systemic change by ensuring their students' academic success. And this pedagogical efficacy was clearly borne out in the classroom observations I conducted during my research.

Students, in contrast, primarily experience their teachers' commitment to equity (beliefs) vis-à-vis pedagogical practices (actions). From their perspective, teachers' willingness to explain difficult concepts and afford them multiple chances at success is paramount. Students are, however, adept at discerning between someone who simply *cares* but has limited teaching strategies versus someone who expresses his care through an effective skill set. Thus, both students and teachers speak to the importance of all three legs of the stool.

I have discussed the implications of my findings on the recruitment and selection of teacher candidates above, but given the nature of this three-legged stool, it is important to note that questions to probe *fit* alone are not enough to predict teacher effectiveness. The key point emerging from this section of the research is that effective teachers must also have an effective skill set. Therefore, it is critical to recruit teacher candidates who (a) know their subject matter well, and (b) are well-equipped with strategies for connecting new knowledge with students' prior schema. This finding underscores the importance of attracting and selecting highly qualified candidates who have majored in the subject they will teach.<sup>17</sup>

Another recommendation coming out of this set of findings is the need to structure the units, quarters, and years so that students are afforded multiple opportunities for success. Over and over, respondents in my study drew a distinction between the teachers who helped them grow over time and those who expected them to *get it* the first time. Students perceive the old model of taking a final summative assessment for a grade as punishment for "failure"—when it

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<sup>17</sup> Recruiting math and science majors has proven to be a particular challenge when it comes to math and science teachers, given their ability to attain higher-paying jobs in the private sector.

is really the system that is failing. This is an approach that fails everyone except the ultra-gifted students who hear something once and immediately comprehend. If educators are serious about closing achievement gaps, greater emphasis needs to be placed on formative assessment as a tool for identifying students' challenges and subsequently course-correcting instruction before it is too late.

### **Summary of Implications for Educators and Policy Makers**

In this section, I summarize the aforementioned recommendations that emanated from my study's findings:

- Recruit high performing college graduates from programs that explicitly emphasize cultural reflection, awareness, and congruence. This *could* mean seeking out students of color and students from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), but it could also mean examining candidates' transcripts for American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Comparative Cultures, and Sociology courses.
- Specifically attempt to recruit high performing Black male college graduates into the teacher candidate pool.
- Maintain an emphasis on recruiting highly qualified candidates who have majored in the subject they will teach.
- Revise selection interview protocols to probe for a social justice outlook, a mindset of malleable intelligence, and a willingness to eschew color blindness in favor of cultural synchronicity.
- Design selection interview protocols to test for ability to explain complex concepts. This could be a sample teaching lesson during the interview process, or it could be a

question that forces a candidate to explain an academic concept to the interview panel.

- Include an interview question that probes what a teacher candidate would do for a student who struggles initially.
- Design a school calendar that emphasizes multiple opportunities for student success and academic growth over time; eschew one-shot pass or fail final exams that punish students for not comprehending concepts the first time.
- Provide professional development and mentorship experiences that heighten teachers' ability to reflect upon their mindsets—especially regarding their role as change agents and their conception of intelligence.
- Continue to provide professional development and mentorship experiences that build teachers' arsenal or pedagogical tools to engage students and explain concepts.
- Revise evaluation tools and rubrics to encourage and reward the three legs of the stool and sanction the lack thereof: cultural congruence, social change stance, and effective pedagogical strategies.<sup>18</sup>

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study is student recruitment and selection. IRB precluded me from recruiting directly and instead had me work through each school's staff. While I received consent and assent forms from many students and parents at each of the four sites, the inability to follow up directly, especially with students or parents who might initially have been hesitant to participate, potentially limits the voices and perspectives included in the study. Although I was

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<sup>18</sup> Given some of the shifts suggested by my research, it will be necessary to engage teachers unions to redefine their role and their conception of the role of teachers.

able to speak with 53 student respondents across the four sites, it would have been valuable to interview students and parents who did not volunteer initially to be part of the study. This would not only have ruled out any selection bias, but would also have further ensured that multiple voices were represented.

A second limitation of this study was the selection of one teacher per school. Interviewing and observing more teachers could potentially have led to even more robust findings. Although the trends in the findings may not have necessarily been markedly different, more of the nuances between teachers could have been teased out with a larger number of teachers in the sample.

Another limitation to consider is my own bias and reality as a researcher. The qualitative nature of focus groups and interviews lends to my assumptions and experiences framing my interpretations and analysis. Further, my questioning may have influenced the student and teacher participants' responses. The qualitative nature of my study makes this an important consideration. In qualitative research, the subjectivity of the researcher is unavoidable but can be mitigated through rigorous design, meticulous data collection, and disciplined analysis (Merriam, 2009; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Some of the steps I took to mitigate my own bias include the following: maintaining neutrality in word choice, voice tone, and body language; consistently asking clarifying and probing questions to ensure that I was not overlaying my own prior assumptions onto participants' responses; constantly looking for disconfirming evidence and alternative explanations to ensure that I was not fulfilling my own prophecies; and conducting a member check to act as one final checkpoint for the credibility of my findings.

Finally, as someone who does not share the same race as the students, my race had the potential to limit their responses. During the focus groups, students spoke candidly and were

forthcoming with their experiences, both positive and negative. However, given the nature of the research questions, as well as the complex nature of race, it is important to consider the possibility that my race played a role in influencing some of the students' responses (Bailey, 2008; Milner, 2007).

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study represents one step in furthering the research on effectively serving the needs of Black male students. Given its aforementioned limitations, incorporating extended term mixed methods (ETMM) into future studies can shed additional light upon what effective teaching for Black male middle school students looks like (Chatterji, 2005). A broader longitudinal study could yield even more robust observational data from different points in the year.

Subsequent research could also explore further explore the nature of humor as a teaching tool. Given the rich tradition in Black culture around *playing the dozens*, there could be a rich exploration here in how this cultural tradition translates into the classroom. There is also perhaps an aspect of cultural congruence to be explored not just with culture vis-à-vis race, but also socio-economic status. In other words, *Does a teacher's socio-economic status make a difference?* Finally, another question that could be explored is the efficacy and predictive value of my suggested interview protocol questions.

Additionally, future studies could triangulate the community nomination process with teachers' actual value-add to students' academic growth. As more states and districts experiment with and refine value-added growth models for quantifying a teacher's impact on student learning, such measures could be incorporated into a study's sample selection methods.

Future studies could also examine differences between the more effective teachers and teachers identified as less effective. Observing and interviewing a group of effective teachers along with a group of less effective teachers could serve to provide a control group, which could help to more definitively answer the question of what constitutes effective teaching for Black males.

A broader study could also increase sample size and sample selection. Such a study could include multiple districts, including suburban and rural areas, as well as areas where the student body is predominantly White.

Further, a larger study could benefit from quantitative methods, including student questionnaires. Incorporating such an instrument could mitigate the potential researcher bias associated with purely quantitative methods of data collection. And it could also garner findings that are more broadly generalizable.

Finally, subsequent research could directly compare responses from Black male students with those of Black females and students of other ethnicities. Doing so could more clearly and definitively answer the question of whether there is a difference in what teaching styles work for African-American male students versus students of other ethnic backgrounds.

## **Public Engagement**

The current and growing trend of accountability, along with the technological advances that allow the public to readily examine disaggregated achievement results, have put the learning of African-American males front and center for multiple audiences. This research points towards a picture of effective education for Black males, and audiences are eager to learn from studies like this.



One primary audience for this type of research includes schools and districts that serve significant populations of African-Americans. Superintendents, middle school principals, and human resources officers are all interested in learning what works in closing achievement gaps. They will therefore be able to learn from the findings of this study. As a result, I will disseminate an executive summary to various district and school leaders. I will also prepare to conduct presentations about my findings. Further, I anticipate being asked to translate my study into professional development for classroom teachers and to train districts' curriculum specialists in leading those workshops throughout their middle schools.

In addition, I intend to reach an even wider audience of educators, leaders, and policymakers. The topic of Black male achievement, coupled with the currency that Compton's name carries, will be sure to pique the interest of many practitioners and policymakers. In my current work, I have established professional connections with organization such as the *California League of Middle Schools*, the *California School Board Association*, *Schools That Can*, the *National Title I Association*, *Teach For America*, and the *Education Trust*. Over the last few years, I have spoken at and led workshops for each of these organizations' state and national conferences, and I intend to leverage these networks over the next few months and years to provide an effective platform for my findings and to speak directly to teachers, leaders, and policymakers who can directly improve the educational outcomes of students.

Listening to the voices of Black male middle school students should crystallize our commitment to educational equity. Their insightful observations of what works—and what doesn't—should fuel our fire to become better educators, leaders, and advocates. Hearing from respondents in the lowest performing groups, in particular, should remind us of the urgency of our work. Their desire to be successful and their honest reflections on what they need from their

teachers need to be amplified, listened to, and acted upon—quickly—especially given how many students we lose over the course of the middle school years.

Until public education as an institution can live up to its promise to be the great equalizer, we have more work to do as a nation. My hope is that this study can contribute to that work.

## **LIST OF APPENDICES**

**Appendix A: Student Focus Group Protocol**

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**Appendix I: Principal Consent Form**

## Appendix A

### Student Focus Group Protocol

Welcome and thank you for participating. As I mentioned to you when we first met, my name is Mr. Lozier, and I'm a graduate student at UCLA. I'm interested in what you have to say about good teachers and good teaching. Over the next 45 minutes, I'll be asking you questions about good teachers and good teaching, and I want you to be as honest as you feel comfortable. If at any time, you don't feel comfortable answering, you have the right to pass. I want to assure you that your responses will be confidential; I will not reveal your names to anyone so that you can hopefully be very honest. On that note, while I can't guarantee it, I want to ask you all to respect each other's confidentiality and to not repeat what others in here say to anyone else outside of the room. I want to hear from everyone, and even if you disagree with someone, that's 100% OK. What I do ask, though, is that if you disagree with someone, you respect them and use positive—not negative language and avoid laughing at anyone's response. Finally, I ask that you speak one at a time so that we can all hear what others have to say. As I mentioned to you before, all of your names will be kept confidential, and I will never print any of your names in my study. Also, once I finish writing up my study, I will erase this recording so that no one can trace back your comments to you as an individual. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

#### 1. How has your school year been so far?

#### 2. What do you think the best teachers do to help you learn?

- a. Why?
  - i. Examples?
  - ii. Agree? Different perspective?
  - iii. What else?
- b. Do you think most students would agree with you?
  - i. Why/not?
- c. What about
  - i. social/relationship/management
  - ii. explaining/helping
  - iii. relevance
  - iv. feedback/grading
- d. Out of X, Y, Z, which one is most helpful?
  - i. Why/not?
  - ii. Agree? Different perspective?
- e. How often do your teachers do X?

#### 3. On the flip side, what do you think is less helpful to learning and wish teachers would do less of?

- a. Why?
  - i. Examples?
  - ii. Agree? Different perspective?
  - iii. What else?

- 4. Are there any things any of your teachers do that remind you of anyone at home?**
  - a. Examples?
  - b. Do you think your teachers at school family have similar or different expectations as your family at home?
    - i. Why?
    - ii. Examples?
    - iii. Agree? Different perspective?
    - iv. What else?
  
- 5. Out of all of your middle school teachers, who do you think best embodies the helpful practices you've been describing?**
  - a. Why?
  - b. Example?
  - c. Agree? Different perspective?
  - d. Would your opinion change if we were just talking about a teacher who was helpful to Black male students?
    - i. Why/not?
    - ii. Agree? Different perspective?
  - e. What words do you think best describe that teacher?
  - f. Are there things that teacher does that help you as a Black student? As a male?
    - i. Why?
    - ii. Different perspective?
  
- 6. Anything else you want to share?**

## Appendix B

### Teacher Interview Protocol

#### **FIRST INTERVIEW: background, teaching philosophy**

1. How long have you been teaching?
  - a. At this site?
  - b. What subject/s?
  - c. What did you study?
2. Why did you go into teaching?
  - a. Why here at this site/district?
3. What would you be doing if you weren't teaching?
4. What do you hope your students will say about you at the end of the year?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Agree? Other perspectives?
5. Why do you think your students identified you as helpful to their learning?
6. How would you describe your philosophy of teaching?
7. What are the strengths and challenges to the teaching philosophy that you use with students?
8. How have you come to construct your philosophy of teaching?
9. Out of the following, what do you think is most important?
  - i. social relationship, caring, management
  - ii. explaining and helping
  - iii. making material relevant to students' lives
  - iv. grading, giving feedback
  - a. Why?
  - b. Example?
10. What does this look like in your interactions with students?
  - a. In the classroom?
  - b. Beyond the classroom?
11. What do you do when a student challenges your authority?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Example?
  - c. Agree? Different perspective?
12. What's your idea of a good student?
13. How do you know if a student is smart?
  - a. How would you define smart?
14. Do you think most teachers interact with students the way you do?
  - a. Why/not?
  - b. What could the school or district do to encourage more of X kind of teaching?

#### **SECOND INTERVIEW: educating Black males**

15. Where and how were you prepared to teach Black males in the manner you use?
16. Do you attempt to incorporate Black culture in your teaching style? If so, examples?
17. Do you believe Black students bring unique attributes to the classroom? Black males?
18. How would you describe an effective teacher of Black males? Why?

19. Have you found specific strategies to improve the academic ability of your Black students? Black males?
20. Are there certain texts/literature that you've found more helpful in reaching your Black students? Black males?
21. What would you identify as some of the more effective ways of communicating with Black students? Black males?
22. How would you prepare more teachers to effectively teach their Black male students?
23. How does this compare with how you were prepared?
24. We continue to hear about the dismal performance of Black males in schools across the nation—lower reading and math scores; overrepresentation in special education classes; underrepresentation in gifted class and in higher education; overrepresentation in suspensions and expulsions. What do you think when you hear this?
  - a. How should teachers respond to this?
  - b. What role do teachers play?
  - c. What role do parents play?
  - d. Can individual teachers make a difference?
  - e. What do you think are the causes of these educational trends?
  - f. What can be done?
25. Anything else to add?

**THIRD INTERVIEW: follow up on practices observed (based on observations)**





## Appendix D

### Classroom Observation Samples

Talladega 12.7.10

Comments	
<b>Standard:</b>	
<b>Objective:</b> to relate to the text by identifying text-text, text-self, and text-world connections	measurable, outcome-based, and focused...nice progress from how you articulated prior reading comp. objectives! In future lessons, you <i>might</i> consider zeroing in on text-text connections (see below).
<b>Lesson component(s):</b> hook intro to new material guided practice independent practice closure	
<b>Room environment:</b>	

Time	Teacher actions	Student actions	Comments
9:40	...that you were able to connect to self, world, or something you read?	5-7 hands up	
	Go ahead	....	
	So you're mom doesn't sleep much... You made a text to self. Go ahead...	...because my dad snores	
9:43	...OK, look out for...Ruby	R reads	
	Thank you, everyone...	90-100% class reads in unison	nice way to vary reading, get in some fluency practice, and keep kids accountable
9:44	Thank you stop there, Daniella	D reads	
9:45	Go ahead, Heaven	H reads (100% class silent, reading in novel)	so on-task and engaged
	As you read, was there anything you connected to? Sometimes you have to go back. Giselle, I haven't heard from you...thank you for participating	G shares	
9:47	OK...	I did text-to-self	push them to some text-text connections
9:48	Has anyone read a story where...		Ah, nice...you read my mind! Keep pushing them and don't let them get complacent with text-self (too easy). Keep pushing them to text-text (much more challenging)...keep it up!
	Yes...I've read lot of Roald Dahl...		

Comments	
<b>Standard:</b> RWA 1.4	
<b>Objective:</b> SWBAT use comprehension strategies questioning, predicting, summarizing, and clarifying as they read <i>Escape</i>	posted...keep it up! How will you measure this? What will your assessment look like? Consider honing in on a specific skill if you are targeting comprehension—for example, <i>SWBAT pinpoint textual evidence for their predictions.</i>
<b>Lesson component(s):</b> hook intro to new material guided practice independent practice closure	
<b>Room environment:</b>	

Time	Teacher actions	Student actions	Comments
8:42		100% of class talking with each neighbor	
	class, class	yes, yes	
		10-15 hands up	
		...farm life...they don't have to use that much gasoline	
	I'm gonna stop you at the tractor part. I want you to expand that...can you give me in a complete sentence please	...to help them grow corps...	
	...to help them plow...Estrella		
	I like how you're very specific		awesome! very specific praise and positive reinforcement of higher order thinking
	What else do we know about farm life	10-15 hands up	tons of participation!
	Can you be a little more specific		nice probing question to push students' thinking
8:44	...especially Mexican farms...depends where you're at...	...hot water...	
	I like how she provided evidence for her thoughts specifically	...they...	
	You're kinda building on...can we all agree that farm life is difficult...Why do they do it is the food for thought. Bring you back to our objective today. It's time for you to start mastering these reading strategies...without me telling you. You still are gonna receive the task cards...break into groups...reciprocal teaching	4-6 kids: yes	nice big question  your kids are so engaged!  awesome use of structured collaboration
8:47	What kind of clarifying...	mindbreakers...	again, you are pushing your kids' thinking!
8:48	...need to make me think deeply...		
	Start of as whole group...then receive a task card...not something you're comfortable with		awesome use of structured collaboration...and guiding their interdependence with one another

## **Appendix E**

### **Principal Interview Protocol**

1. How long have you been a principal?
  - a. At this site?
  
2. What do you think makes for an effective teacher?
  - a. Of African-American males?
  - b. Why?
  
3. Which teachers at this site do you think are the most effective teachers?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Of African-American males?
  - c. Do you think students would agree?

## Appendix F

### Teacher Consent Form

University of California, Los Angeles  
**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**  
*Effective Teacher Practices for Black Male Middle School Students*

We are asking you to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Robert Cooper, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Department of Education at UCLA and Frank Lozier, Ed.M., a graduate student in the Department of Education at UCLA. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a teacher of African-American males attending middle school. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

#### **Why is this study being done?**

This study aims to understand what good teaching looks and sounds like.

#### **What will happen if I take part in this research study?**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

1. participate in three 30-60 minute individual interviews at a location of your choice; questions will aim to learn your philosophy of teaching, your process of teaching, and how you developed your teaching practices and philosophy
2. be observed by the researcher four times in your classroom for 30-60 minutes each

#### **How long will I be in the research study?**

Participation in the study will take a total of about 3.5 hours within the next month.

#### **Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?**

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts, but if you are uncomfortable at ANY time, we will immediately stop the activity. You may also skip any questions you do not want to answer.

#### **Are there any potential benefits if I participate?**

You may benefit from the study because it will encourage you to think more about your teaching philosophy and process. At a broader level, the results of the research may add to our understanding about effective teaching for African-American males.

#### **Will I receive any payment if I participate in this study?**

You will receive no payment for your participation.

#### **Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained by never placing your name on any forms, audio recordings, or transcripts. At the end of the study, all records will be erased.

#### **Withdrawal of participation by the investigator**

The investigator may withdraw you from participating in this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so. If your schedule does not permit you to participate, you may have to drop out, even if you would like to continue. The investigator will make the decision and let you

know if it is not possible for you to continue. The decision may be made either to protect your health and safety, or to protect the health and safety of others.

**What are my rights if I take part in this study?**

You may withdraw your assent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty or loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled. You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may leave the study at any time without consequences of any kind. You are not waiving any of your legal rights if you choose to be in this research study. You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

**Who can answer questions I might have about this study?**

In the event of a research related injury, please immediately contact one of the researchers listed below. If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact Frank Lozier at XXX.XXX.XXX or XXXX@XXX.com or Professor Robert Cooper, Ph.D., at 310.267.2494 or cooper@gseis.ucla.edu.

If you wish to ask questions about your rights as a research participant or if you wish to voice any problems or concerns you may have about the study to someone other than the researchers, please call the Office of the Human Research Protection Program at (310) 825-7122 or write to Office of the Human Research Protection Program, UCLA, 11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 102, Box 951694, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694.

**SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT**

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT**

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Contact Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix G

### Parent Permission Form

University of California, Los Angeles

#### **PARENT PERMISSION FOR MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

*Effective Teacher Practices for Black Male Middle School Students*

We are asking your permission to allow your child to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Robert Cooper, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Department of Education at UCLA and Frank Lozier, Ed.M., a graduate student in the Department of Education at UCLA. Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because he is an African-American male attending middle school. Your child's participation in this research study is voluntary.

#### **Why is this study being done?**

This study aims to understand what good teaching looks and sounds like.

#### **What will happen if my child takes part in this research study?**

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, we would ask him to participate in one focus group (a group interview with about 4 to 5 other students). He will be asked what he thinks a good teacher does, and why. He will also be asked to identify who he thinks are good teachers at his middle school, and why.

#### **How long will my child be in the research study?**

Participation in the study will take a total of about one hour within the next month.

#### **Are there any potential risks or discomforts that my child can expect from this study?**

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts, but if your child seems uncomfortable at ANY time, we will immediately stop the activity. He may also skip any questions he does not want to answer.

#### **Are there any potential benefits if my child participates?**

Your child may benefit from the study because it will encourage him to think more about his learning process. Also, we generally find that adolescents enjoy sharing information about their lives and experiences. At a broader level, the results of the research may add to our understanding about effective teaching for African-American males.

#### **Will my child receive any payment if he/she participates in this study?**

Your child will receive no payment for his participation.

#### **Will information about my child's participation be kept confidential?**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify your child will remain confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained by never placing your child's name on any forms, audio recordings, or transcripts. At the end of the study, all records will be erased.

**Withdrawal of participation by the investigator**

The investigator may withdraw your child from participating in this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so. If your child’s schedule does not permit him to participate in the focus group or if his behavior disrupts the focus group, your child may have to drop out, even if he would like to continue. The investigator will make the decision and let you know if it is not possible for your child to continue. The decision may be made either to protect your child’s health and safety, or to protect the health and safety of others.

**What are my rights if my child takes part in this study?**

You may withdraw your permission at any time and discontinue your child’s participation without penalty or loss of benefits to which you or your child were otherwise entitled. You can choose whether or not to allow your child to be in this study. If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, you may withdraw your permission at any time without consequences of any kind. You are not waiving any of your or your child’s legal rights if you choose to allow your child to be in this research study.

**Who can answer questions I might have about this study?**

In the event of a research related injury, please immediately contact one of the researchers listed below. If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact Frank Lozier at XXX.XXX.XXX or XXXX@XXX.com or Professor Robert Cooper, Ph.D., at 310.267.2494 or cooper@gseis.ucla.edu.

If you wish to ask questions about your child’s rights as a research participant or if you wish to voice any problems or concerns you may have about the study to someone other than the researchers, please call the Office of the Human Research Protection Program at (310) 825-7122 or write to Office of the Human Research Protection Program, UCLA, 11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 102, Box 951694, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694.

**SIGNATURE OF PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN**

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to allow my child to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Parent or Legal Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING PARENTAL PERMISSION**

In my judgment the parent or legal guardian is voluntarily and knowingly giving permission for his/her child to participate in this research study.

---

Name of Person Obtaining Parental Permission

---

Contact Number

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Parental Permission

---

Date



## **Appendix H**

### **Youth Assent Form**

University of California, Los Angeles  
**YOUTH (Ages 13-17) ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

*Effective Teacher Practices for Black Male Middle School Students*

We are asking you to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Robert Cooper, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Department of Education at UCLA and Frank Lozier, Ed.M., a graduate student in the Department of Education at UCLA. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are an African-American male attending middle school. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

#### **Why is this study being done?**

This study aims to understand what good teaching looks and sounds like.

#### **What will happen if I take part in this research study?**

Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to participate. We will also ask your parents to give their permission for you to take part in this study. But even if your parents say “yes” you can still decide not to do this.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to participate in one focus group (a 45-60 minute group interview with about 4 to 5 other students). You will be asked what you think a good teacher does, and why. You will also be asked to identify who you think are good teachers at his middle school, and why.

#### **How long will I be in the research study?**

Participation in the study will take a total of about one hour within the next month.

#### **Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?**

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts, but if you are uncomfortable at ANY time, we will immediately stop the activity. You may also skip any questions you do not want to answer.

#### **Are there any potential benefits if I participate?**

You may benefit from the study because it will encourage you to think more about your learning process. Also, we generally find that adolescents enjoy sharing information about their lives and experiences. At a broader level, the results of the research may add to our understanding about effective teaching for African-American males.

#### **Will I receive any payment if I participate in this study?**

You will receive no payment for your participation.

**Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained by never placing your name on any forms, audio recordings, or transcripts. At the end of the study, all records will be erased.

**• Withdrawal of participation by the investigator**

The investigator may withdraw you from participating in this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so. If your schedule does not permit you to participate in the focus group or if your behavior disrupts the focus group, you may have to drop out, even if you would like to continue. The investigator will make the decision and let you know if it is not possible for you to continue. The decision may be made either to protect your health and safety, or to protect the health and safety of others.

**What are my rights if I take part in this study?**

You may withdraw your assent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty or loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled. You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may leave the study at any time without consequences of any kind. You are not waiving any of your legal rights if you choose to be in this research study. You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

**Who can answer questions I might have about this study?**

In the event of a research related injury, please immediately contact one of the researchers listed below. If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact Frank Lozier at XXX.XXXXXXXX or XXXX@XXX.com or Professor Robert Cooper, Ph.D., at 310.267.2494 or cooper@gseis.ucla.edu.

If you wish to ask questions about your rights as a research participant or if you wish to voice any problems or concerns you may have about the study to someone other than the researchers, please call the Office of the Human Research Protection Program at (310) 825-7122 or write to Office of the Human Research Protection Program, UCLA, 11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 102, Box 951694, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694.

**SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT**

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING ASSENT**

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly agreeing to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Assent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Contact Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix I**

### **Principal Consent Form**

University of California, Los Angeles  
**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**  
*Effective Teacher Practices for Black Male Middle School Students*

We are asking you to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Robert Cooper, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Department of Education at UCLA and Frank Lozier, Ed.M., a graduate student in the Department of Education at UCLA. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you work with teachers of African-American males attending middle school. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

#### **Why is this study being done?**

This study aims to understand what good teaching looks and sounds like.

#### **What will happen if I take part in this research study?**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we will ask you to participate in one 15-30 minute individual interview at a location of your choice. Questions will aim to identify who you perceive to be the most effective teachers of African-American males. You will be asked what you think a good teacher of African-American males does, and why. You will also be asked to identify who you think are good teachers at this middle school, and why.

#### **How long will I be in the research study?**

Participation in the study will take a total of about 15-30 minutes within the next month.

#### **Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?**

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts, but if you are uncomfortable at ANY time, we will immediately stop the activity. You may also skip any questions you do not want to answer.

#### **Are there any potential benefits if I participate?**

You may benefit from the study because it will encourage you to think more about good teaching philosophy and process. At a broader level, the results of the research may add to our understanding about effective teaching for African-American males.

#### **Will I receive any payment if I participate in this study?**

You will receive no payment for your participation.

#### **Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained by never placing your name on any forms, audio recordings, or transcripts. At the end of the study, all records will be erased.

**Withdrawal of participation by the investigator**

The investigator may withdraw you from participating in this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so. If your schedule does not permit you to participate, you may have to drop out, even if you would like to continue. The investigator will make the decision and let you know if it is not possible for you to continue. The decision may be made either to protect your health and safety, or to protect the health and safety of others.

**What are my rights if I take part in this study?**

You may withdraw your assent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty or loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled. You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may leave the study at any time without consequences of any kind. You are not waiving any of your legal rights if you choose to be in this research study. You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

**Who can answer questions I might have about this study?**

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact Frank Lozier at XXX.XXX.XXXX or XXXX@XXX.com or Professor Robert Cooper, Ph.D., at 310.267.2494 or cooper@gseis.ucla.edu.

If you wish to ask questions about your rights as a research participant or if you wish to voice any problems or concerns you may have about the study to someone other than the researchers, please call the Office of the Human Research Protection Program at (310) 825-7122 or write to Office of the Human Research Protection Program, UCLA, 11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 102, Box 951694, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694.

**SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT**

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT**

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Contact Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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