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Success in The Peripheral:

Examining Black Male Student High Performance in Low-Performing High Schools

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Travis Ervin Dumas Jr.

2022

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Success in The Peripheral:

Examining Black Male Student High Performance in Low-Performing High Schools

by

Travis Ervin Dumas Jr.

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Tyrone Howard, Chair

In recent years Black male students have become the focus of an expanding body of research. However, despite the increase of research pertaining to Black male students, entrenched academic outcome disparities remain, with Black male students often relegated to the lowest ends of performance outcomes.

Applying a Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit) framework, this sequential qualitative study examines high-performing Black male students at two low-performing high schools. This approach resists the tendency of educational research to hyper-focus on Black male students' underperformance by implementing an asset-based examination while still properly contending with the challenging realities present in Black male students' collective experience. This research study uses focus group and individual interview data collected from

student participants and nominated adult participants to examine the experiences of high-performing Black male students concerning their race, gender, and performance status. Additionally, this study pointedly investigates how antiblackness is present within participants' experiences, school practices, and policies. Findings elucidate nuanced challenges facing participants and provide insight into resourcing, techniques, and supports responsive to their particularity as high-performing Black male students attending schools that struggle to promote the academic excellence of their overall student population.

The dissertation of Travis Ervin Dumas Jr. is approved.

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2022

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Definitions and Key Concepts

This dissertation utilizes several definitions and key concepts from various fields including sociology, ethnic studies, and education. I have listed and defined the major terminology I employed in this study below.

High-Performing Student: refers to students who have a 3.0 or higher GPA and who, at the time of the study, were anticipated to complete the A-G requirements by their high school graduation.

Low-Performing Schools: school(s) categorized as qualifying for School Improvement Grants (SIG) reflecting under-performance in areas of math, science, and graduation rate. The California Department of Education allocates SIGs to schools demonstrating consistent inability to meet satisfactory markers in terms of graduation rate and student performance in areas of Math and English.

Academic Performance: a set of outcomes that indicate the extent to which a student has accomplished specific goals that were the focus of activities in instructional environments—specifically K-12 school, college, and university (Steinmayr et al., 2015). Student academic achievement in 6-12 schools has traditionally been measured in terms of grade point average (GPA) standardized test assessment(s), and diploma attainment.

Black: often used interchangeably with African-American. Black refers to a racial classification of people with shared histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinships (Dumas, 2016); in particular, the term is used in reference to people of African descent. Black encompasses a wide range of diasporic, ethnic and nation-state identities, and generally refers to those individuals and communities who are raced as such.

Racism: In her 2012, *What Does it Mean to be White? Developing White Racial Literacy*, Robin DiAngelo defines racism as "a form of oppression in which one racial group dominates others. In

the United States, whites are the dominant group, and people of color are the minoritized group. Thus, in this context, racism is white racial and cultural prejudice and discrimination, supported intentionally or unintentionally by institutional power and authority, used to the advantage of whites and the disadvantage of people of color (Hilliard, 1992). Racism encompasses economic, political, social, and institutional actions and beliefs, which systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power between whites and people of color" (pg. 87).

Anti-Blackness: A concept developed in Afro-Pessimism ideology that recognizes the specific way Blackness is positioned against humanity and asserts that Black people are unable to attain true or complete humanity (Dumas, 2016; Sexton, 2008).

Introduction and Background

In her landmark work "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools" (2006), education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings reexamines the framing and language used when engaging the *achievement gap*, especially concerning patterns of differing educational outcomes across racial groups that have risen to the forefront of education-political debate and discourse. Ladson-Billings posits that the observable differences in outcomes do not merely stem from Black and Latino students underperforming in the classroom but result from an accumulation of injustice, lack of access, and denied opportunity—an "educational debt"—sustained by Black and Latino communities. Particularly, she argues that an "all-out focus on the achievement gap moves us toward short-term solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problem" (pg. 4) and that attentiveness to socio-historical factors is needed to both adequately understand and properly approach disparities in educational outcomes. Because this project makes continued references to differing educational outcome trends, particularly among Black male students, it is necessary to ground this phenomenon in a contextual understanding that

recognizes the role of structural forces, and does not conflate or affix performance, outcome, or achievement with capability.

Persistent disparities in Black student outcomes within K-12 education have remained a challenge for educators and policymakers alike. The National Center for Educational Statistic (2019) reports that in the 2018–19 school year, the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for public high school students was 86 percent. Asian/Pacific Islander students had the highest ACGR of 93 percent, followed by White students with 89 percent, then Hispanic students at 82 percent. Black students held an ACGR of 80 percent, the second-lowest graduation rate reported, underperformed only by American Indian/Alaska Native students (74 percent).

While Black students are often identified as being on the lower end of educational performance outcomes, when disaggregated by gender, Black male students are outperformed by Black female students (Brown, 2015) across several indicators. In 2018 Black men had a college enrollment rate of 33% in comparison to Black women's 37% (NCES, 2019). Additionally as of 2019 Black male students held a nationwide dropout rate of 6.8% in comparison to that of Black women at 4.3% (NCES, 2019). I present these statistics not to diminish the plights of Black female students but to contextualize the concerning outcomes facing Black male students.

While Black male students have experienced an upward trend of high school graduation, over the past decade, they continue to graduate from high school at significantly lower rates than their counterparts. In 2015 the Schott Foundation for Public Education reported, "the 2012-13 school year estimates indicate a national graduation rate of 59% for Black males, 65% for Latino males and 80% for White males. In a previous report, the Schott Foundation reported that the national graduation rate for Black males in 2010-2011 was 51 percent" (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015, pg. 7). Despite a degree of variance across annual federal, state, and local reporting of these data disaggregated by race and gender, reports consistently find dismal

graduation rates for Black male students and highlight a persisting need to increase their national graduation rates (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015).

A significant amount of research in both critical race and education studies has sought to investigate inequality in education (Dixson and Rousseau, 2018; Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2005). The centering of Black male students within recent educational research has led to increased knowledge about factors that hinder their academic outcomes and methods that promote their performance. However, within this niche of research it has become common for researchers and educators to hyper-focus on the observable patterns of under-performance by Black male students, an approach that often presents a distressing and deficit narrative about their general state in K-12 and higher education (Harper, 2014; Harper, 2007).

Despite being underrepresented, Black men are still present in every echelon of higher education and high-status careers. This is not to suggest that claims of educational under-performance are false or that the academic journeys of successful Black male students and professionals are without difficulties, but instead to highlight that, regardless of trends of underperformance, substantial occurrences of success are ever-present in the collective experiences of Black men and boys. Unfortunately, representation of Black males in education research and discourse often polarizes this demographic into two simple categories: the many that underperform in schools and the significantly fewer that are successful. This binary view obscures the variety of performance actually exhibited by Black male students. So, while these students have garnered increased scholarly attention, how they have remained understood as a collective group is still limited.

While research must contend with the disparate outcomes of many Black male students, the overemphasis on underperformance and underachievement often eclipses the less frequent, but just as important, episodes of success experienced by them in schools (Howard et al., 2016; Harper,

2015). Inquiry must be able to simultaneously investigate Black male attainment using a thorough context that, instead of isolating or positioning realities of (conventional) success against those of poor academic performance, recognizes all aspects of their collective outcomes as relevant to a comprehensive understanding of Black males in the K-16 nexus. As such, this study examined high-performing Black male students attending low-performing high schools, particularly in relation to student participants' race, gender, academic performance status, and school context. Experiences of students function as the unit of analysis within this study. Their attending low-performing is used to provide further context of the prevalent conditions common in the experiences of Black male student. This dissertation examined the challenges pertinent to student participants and the strategies they employ to support their academic success.

Problem Statement

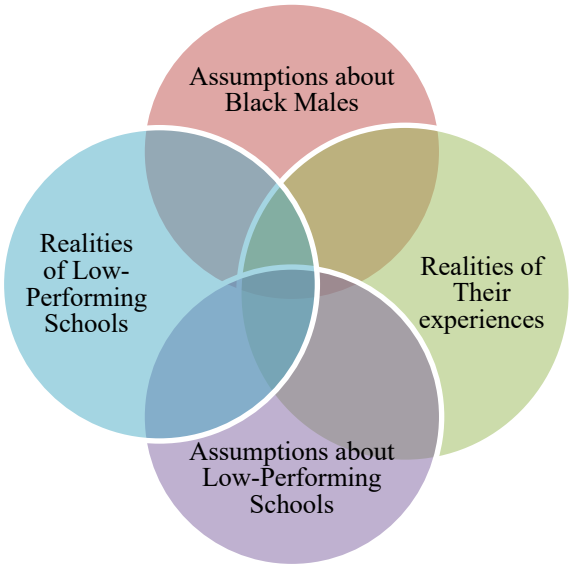
The much-cited, suggested, and identified causes for Black male student underperformance skew towards deficit explanations stemming from students' alleged deficiencies —often considered inherent or essentially self-driven (Harper, 2006; Harper, 2010)—contribute to the dominant perception of Black males as unengaged, intellectually inferior, and disruptive (Harper, 2009). Less asserted and accepted is the role of systemic and structural inequality within this particular disparity (Allen, 2015). I suggest Black male students' concentration in low-performing schools is one such inequality that contributes largely to identified gaps in student outcomes. Some of the most critical challenges facing school officials, educators, and students are most pronounced in low-performing schools (making them ideal for examining student encounters with challenges, barriers, and forms of navigation); these include but are not limited to resource accessibility, low-graduation rates, low teacher morale, and low performance on mandated achievement tests (Agunloye, 2011; Goodwin, 2000). In 2010, Ed Trust West reported that in California "Black students are six times more likely than white students to attend one of the bottom third of schools in the state" (EdTrust West, 2010).

However, this trend is not specific to California. A 2015 report by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at the University of Washington found that schools with primarily Black or poor student populations are most likely to be deemed failing (DeArmond et al., 2015). In the city of Newark New Jersey, only six percent of Black students were enrolled in a top-scoring public elementary compared to 85% of white students who attended such schools (DeArmond et al., 2015). In other cities such as Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Black students were four times more likely to be enrolled in schools with math scores that placed in the bottom quintile (DeArmond et al., 2015). The reality that Black students are more likely to attend low-performing schools (Reardon and Robinson, 2008) must be adequately considered in relation to the racial performance gap to better understand Black male students' plights and inform approaches of redressing their disparate educational outcomes.

In emerging research, scholars have brought attention to how high-performing Black male students develop and utilize resources to sustain their academic success despite the barriers they encounter (Harper et al., 2012). Yet as previously mentioned, much of the existing research on Black male's educational attainment relies heavily or solely on either students' experience with underperformance or the substantially fewer occurrences of academic success. This siloed, hyper-focus style of examination leads to incomprehensive understandings of Black male students that can over-emphasize their plights or misappropriate their existing success through ascribing the latter to meritocracy or exceptionalism (individual ability), both of which rightfully warrant pushback. Governing perceptions of Black male students also inform assumptions about them and inadequate measures of support for them. One assumption informed by the more standard perceptions of Black male students, is that high-performing Black male students do not need support academically or otherwise because they are so academically talented and resilient to an exceptional degree (Fries-Britt and Griffin, 2007; Griffin and Allen, 2006; Freeman, 1999).

The reality is that high-performing Black male students, especially those attending low performing schools, are still forced to contend with many challenges that warrant support. Black male students remain the in-class and broader campus target of negative stereotypes regarding their academic ability (Davis, 2003), which is only compounded by the stigma associated with attending low-performing schools (Leithwood et al., 2010). Black male students enrolled at low-performing schools are also forced to navigate challenging, on-campus conditions, including but not limited to low expectations of student achievement, teacher absenteeism, and adverse impacts of community poverty (Corallo and McDonald, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2010; Soumah and Hoover, 2013), all of which can impact them academically (Allen and Smith, 2014; Fleischman and Heppen 2009).

Figure 1. Assumptions and Realities Regarding H.P.B.M.S. in Low-Performing Schools



The experiences of successful Black male students within low-performing schools are made peripheral due to how divergent and overlapping assumptions about both Black male students and low-performing schools are. Considering the complex, and sometimes conflicting, set of assumptions and realities that factor into this population's daily existence as high-performing Black male students navigating low-performing schools, these males occupy a unique narratives with

distinct vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the exploration of potentially unique challenges and forms of support for high-performing students in low-performing high schools is limited, as educational research has not sufficiently attended to this population. Much of the research on high-performing Black male students focuses on those attending high-performing, well-resourced schools or colleges, neither of which applies an asset-based approach to students in low-performing schools. While there has been an increase of attention paid to high-performing Black male students across tiers of education, those attending low- performing schools are seldom represented in data or research. This dissertation addresses this gap in literature by focusing on high-performing Black male students in low-performing high schools, centering their in-school (education related) triumphs while also examining the impact of adverse conditions they are predisposed to in their school settings. More specifically, this study explicitly addresses the following questions:

Research Questions

1. What (if any) are the challenges associated with being a high-performing Black male student within low-performing high schools?
2. What do these students do to promote their academic performance?
    a. What are some assets these students use to support themselves?
    b. According to participants, what are the resources available to them at their schools that help promote their academic performance?
3. Who are the school actors relevant to the experiences of participants?
    a. In what ways have these actors impacted the experiences of student participants?
    b. How do these actors understand themselves in relation to the experiences of high performing Black male students attending their school?

Purpose of Study

In April of 2018, Houston, Texas teenager Michael Brown (not to be confused with Ferguson police brutality victim of the same name) became the subject of national debate when a video of his heartfelt reaction to receiving his 20th university admission became viral across internet and media platforms. However, the national media's ensuing conversation did not celebrate Brown's accomplishment but instead questioned if his admission to so many universities was fair.

That same week, Fox news anchors Holly Morris and Sarah Fraser ridiculed Brown during a news segment, calling what he had achieved "ridiculous" and "obnoxious." Morris went on to add that what he had done was ultimately "taking a spot from someone else." The anchors' derogatory and accusatory response to Brown serves as an example of how Black males are continually positioned against academic excellence. Brown's many acceptances were pinged as undeserving rather than proof of his success or qualifications for being admitted. The feats of Black people—academic or otherwise—trigger white fragility and (ironically) are sometimes interpreted as an injustice against dominant groups (DiAngelo, 2018) underscoring, in one way, how Black men's plights in education are directly connected to structures, cultures, and practices of white supremacy and dominance (Dumas & Anyon, 2006). Rather than being celebrated, or at minimum not attacked, for his accomplishment Brown's academic achievement was met with critique and invalidation. While it is uncommon for any student to be admitted to 20 top-tier universities, Brown's story is similar to that of many other Black male students, high-performing/achieving, in that his experience exemplifies how Black male academic achievement (in one way or another) is usually unsupported and deeply misunderstood or misinterpreted. His belittlement by white news anchors alludes to how Black male students remain susceptible to racially charge, hostile ideologies and perceptions, regardless of their performance status.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relevant challenges and navigations of high-performing Black male students within low-performing high schools. While the terms high-performing and high-achieving are essentially synonyms, I refer to student participants as high-performing because the term 'performing' refers more immediately to areas of classroom and test performance. 'Achievement' however, more readily relates to particular outcomes—specifically graduation, which is often treated as the "bottom line" goal of high school (Pinkus, 2006). For example, students can be high-performing through attaining a high GPA or performing well on

standardized tests, and not necessarily graduate from high school or matriculate into universities. To acknowledge that students can demonstrate academic prowess with or without a particular outcome, 'performance' and 'performing' are the preferred terms in this project.

This study examines the experience of student participants to elucidate potentially nuanced challenges facing this population as well as identify what has been effective in supporting their success, particularly in schools that struggle to promote the academic excellence of their overall student population. This study recognizes that factors and individuals outside of the young men themselves inform the outcomes and experiences of high-performing Black male students. As such, this study also utilizes the experience and knowledge of identified school actors (discussed in more detail in the methodology section) to further examine the experiences and performance of student participants.

Considering that student participants are situated at a specific and lesser-explored juncture of conditions, the more generalized challenges and supports for Black male students do not account for the specificity or distinctiveness of the students featured in this study. High performing students attending low-performing schools deserve the skill and intensity of attention that effectively attends to their particularity. As high achievers attending low-performing schools, their school context allows for an asset-based analysis while also contending with the complex realities facing high performing Black male students and potentially others of ranging performance-status.

Study Significance

Black male students face numerous challenges that are socially inherent to their intersecting racial, gendered, and academic identities, making them "one of the most socially and academically marginalized student groups in U.S. schools" (Palmer et al., ASHE Higher Education Report, 2014, pg. 28). Despite all that has been written about Black male students, efforts to bring the academic outcomes and attainment of this group to the same levels as their most successful counterparts have

continued to fall short (Ford and Moore, 2004). Although the recent focus on Black male students has brought an increased awareness of the particular plights they face, there is still little research that centers the voice and knowledge of students from this group. Additionally, there has been minimal change in policy and practices (Palmer et al., ASHE Higher Education Report, 2014) that reflect a substantial commitment to redressing concerning trends of educational outcomes affecting them.

As the need for intervention, methods, and supports that serve Black male students remain, it becomes increasingly imperative that educators and school officials not only understand the issues their Black male students face but also hold knowledge of what has been effective in students overcoming of barriers. Understanding the experiences of high-performing Black males who attend low-performing high schools holds specified, potential insight into effective practices and techniques of support that can further support and empower this often-invisible population. This approach informs a better understanding of Black male students by elevating the peripheral narratives of high performance from some of the most vulnerable yet academically successful members of this group.

While ideas of resilience and a suggested need for changing Black students' attitudes towards schooling are often recommended as solutions to improving their academic outcomes, when investigating instances of Black male achievement, inquiry must venture beyond self-determinism. Instead, research must also challenge “public and school failures to institutionalize supports” (Palmer et al., ASHE Higher Education Report, 2014, pg. 29) and ask how formal resources within schools can become or be more responsive to the unique and varying needs that exist among Black male students. This research study recognizes student participants as knowledge holders whose input is valuable to remedying the challenges prevalent in the educational experiences of theirs and other Black male students. This research also challenges deficit

perspectives of Black male students by highlighting instances of high performance at low-performing schools, informing support of this lesser-explored subgroup. This work also pushes research, discourse, and policy to be more responsive to the diversity that exists among Black male students.

Coming to this Work

Positionality

My research interest, and this dissertation study in particular, are heavily influenced by my positionality. I am a Black man from the Watts community of Los Angeles, was raised by a single mother, and am a first-generation college and graduate student. Watts, California— still most widely recognized for the 1965 riots—is primarily associated with economic depression, gang activity, and other unfavorable characteristics. My mother's ambition of ensuring that my younger sister and I survived and thrived enough to gain entrance to college was foremost propelled by this meaning each of us would be "escaping the hood." This allusion to my family's struggle for upward social mobility has spanned generations. Close and immediate proximity to poverty, carceral systems, and community violence has been well pronounced in my life, as is the case for many Black men (Noguera, 2000; Foy and Goguen, 1998; Fitzpatrick and Boldizar, 1993). Even as a child, I was made aware of the multitude of systematic injustices that often permeate into the lives of Black people. My understanding that Black men's predisposition to adverse life conditions is heavily related to many of the 'problems' they, or rather we, face in schools (Allen, 2014) informs much of how I comprehend the *world* around me and leverage particular frameworks and paradigms as a researcher when examining phenomenon.

My experience with academic success and how this influenced my in-school treatment by teachers and administration has also made me keen on the experiences of students like myself. For example, as someone my high school teachers viewed as undisruptive, obedient, and quick to grasp

material, at times I struggled to vocalize my need for help with more challenging material because I wanted to protect the perception that I was intelligent. There were many times that I struggled stoically for the sake of my academic reputation. Additionally, when the school day ended, I returned to my neighborhood where being a high performer in school did little to protect me from such realities as hyper-policing within my community or poverty-related stress. As a high-performing student, I am aware of how inward intellectual and psychological struggle become and often remain hidden because we are able to maintain school performance. Despite my own trajectory, much of which is privileged by my matriculation into higher education, I remained sensitive to issues impacting Black communities and how the narratives of high-performing students are presented in ways that fail to adequately account for distinct challenges facing us.

My Academic Journey

My exploration of Black male students' academic experience emanates from both my identity as a Black man and as a student of U.S. school systems, specifically one state-designated as 'gifted'. At the age of nine I was tracked into courses beyond my grade, unlike many of my peers. My mother (an educator of more than 20 years) used her knowledge of local school systems to advocate for my attending magnet schools beginning in sixth grade as opposed to my home schools—the school I am automatically assigned according to neighborhood location within a district. In the fall of 2005, I started participating in bussing programs that took me from my neighborhood of Watts, California, and seemingly far away from many of the peers, friends, and family I had attended school with up until then, to the middle-class area of Carson, California, where I enrolled in Curtiss Middle School. Unknown to me, this was where my academic trajectory would begin to significantly diverge from that of many previous classmates and neighborhood friends. Because Curtiss was a magnet middle school, I had acquired eligibility points to attend magnet high schools within LAUSD (Los Angeles Unified School District). My mother, being

fiercely opposed to me attending my home school of David Starr Jordan High School, chose to enroll me into King/Drew Medical Magnet in the fall of 2008. King/Drew is a highly competitive school composed almost entirely of African-American/Black and Latino students. Its campus is located on the border of Watts and Compton—two of the most infamous cities in Los Angeles. In April of 2005, the Los Angeles Times described King/Drew as "the holy grail of urban education" due to its 99% graduation rate and 90% college matriculation rate. I soon found myself contributing to this established tradition of high performance, enrolling in the fall of 2008, graduating in four years, and being accepted to some of the nation's flagship universities, including UCLA where I ultimately attended.

During my senior year of high school, I recall numerous occasions of people congratulating my mother a job well done, often asking, "What did you do?" They wanted to know what actionable steps she took to produce such an exceptional young Black man, signifying to me that I was different from how many other young Black men were socially perceived and received. Over the years, my academic performance has often been used to shame other Black boys and men for making decisions (or not making decisions) that have led them down such troubled or limited paths. I recall several of my past coworkers, former friends, high school peers speaking to me about how they wish they could attend college as I listened, almost feeling guilty (Covarrubias and Fryberg, 2015; Piorkowski, 1983). I wished they could too. Being labeled high-performing and thought of as a 'good' student, educator had placed me on an academic track (Oakes, 1988) that was not made available to many Black students. I had not yet interrogated why this was, but I understood it was amiss. Early in my young adulthood, I came to understand the difference between my trajectory and those of so many fellow Black boys (now men) around me was the consequence of multiple inequalities. I was able to mitigate, navigate, or disassemble many of these inequalities by having attended well-funded, high-performing magnet schools while other students from my immediate

neighborhood attended schools that had come under state intervention, pushed them out, or shut down completely. Although my personal schooling experience had been marked with success and support, a deep concern for so many others like myself, who had not received the same treatment and support from their schools, remained with me as I transitioned into college.

Engaging Critical Issues of Education

Leaving King/Drew and entering UCLA, I quickly noticed that Black men specifically were one of the most underrepresented groups on campus, even in comparison to Black women and other racial minority groups. Compounding this was knowledge that 60% of the Black male students attending UCLA at the time where student-athletes, recruited to the university as opposed to being admitted. In January of 2015, I became an undergraduate researcher as part of the Ronald E. McNair Scholars program, where I conducted a study of the impacts of stereotyping and stereotype threat on the retention of Black male students attending the university. I undertook this work while constantly reminded of the Black men in my home neighborhood and their schooling experiences. I focused specifically on students in higher education because, at the time, their population and plights as Black male undergraduates were the most visible and relatable to me. The project was driven by my concern about the significantly lower retention/graduation rates of Black male students at UCLA. Having watched the pushout of students who entered the university the same time I had, I wanted to explore potential connections between their struggles at the university and the racial hostilities facing Black male students. From the project, I found that participants' ability to successfully navigate the university and their struggles to persist were largely related to the manner they as Black men are perceived (or stereotyped) and treated by the larger campus community. Although stereotyping is not commonly thought of as hindering retention, in the case of my participants, stereotyping and stereotype threat directly related to a plethora of challenges. These obstacles have been demonstrated as barriers to degree attainment and include difficulty

establishing relationships with faculty, lack of connectedness to campus, and enduring ongoing instances of racial microaggressions. Something I anticipated arising but didn't expect to be so pronounced within data was how similar their high school and college experiences were in terms of encounters with stereotypes. From here, my research interest pivoted from primarily focusing on higher education to secondary educational experiences of Black boys and men, as this is where students experience some of their earliest encounters with racialized obstacles, many of which have lasting effects on their educational trajectories (Hayes et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2000).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Summary of Literature Review

A dominant perception of Black male students as underachievers is evidenced by numerous publications that highlight their plights and patterns of underperformance in school (Harper and Davis, 2012). Research pertaining to Black male students tends to hyper-focus on their challenges commonly experienced challenges, which while relevant and useful, when conducted in a one-sided manner serves to construct and reify prevailing ideas of hopelessness, inability, and attainment disparities (Harper and Davis, 2012; Sadowski, 2001; Smith, 2005). While such inquiry does provide insight into challenges prevalent in the experience of Black male students, this over-emphasis severely limits how Black male students are generally viewed. Such narrow and insistently negative understanding of Black males within schools is also informed by how this population is perceived by the larger US society—a perception anchored in ideas of poverty, crime, social immobility, and other adverse conditions and characteristics (Harper and Williams, 2014; Monroe, 2005). Crucial to a proper and holistic understanding of Black males in formal education is taking the occurrences and trends of high performance and outcomes they experience into account. This aspect of the Black male student narrative however, is severely underrepresented in literature. Typically, the work challenging these deficit accounts and explanations are housed in the less prominent, body of counter narrative literature, literature that opposes dominant and deficit perceptions and representations of Black males in education (Harper, 2009; Howard, 2013; Milner, 2008).

Despite this dominant perception, successful and high-performing Black male students exist and thrive across all tiers of education (Palmer and Young, 2009). Although Black male undergraduates are among the most disadvantaged groups (Harper and Kuykendall, 2012) in higher education—having a college graduation rate of approximately 33% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), the lowest college completion rate of any racial or gender group reported—there

remains a population of Black male collegians that complete their degrees. Even within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors (often revered as the most rigorous areas of study) where Black male underrepresentation is more severe, a sector of these students leverages techniques of support and resilience that enable and empower their persistence (Harper 2010). These include the creation of supportive peer networks, faculty relationship cultivation, and involvement with campus organizations (Ford et al., 2008; Kim and Hargrove, 2013). However, because Black students have not been able to close substantial disparities in academic outcomes, such as gaps in test scores, their solidified progress in various areas is often overshadowed (Anderson, 2007).

This following chapter offers an overview of seminal and current empirical research that pertains to common explanations of Black male student underperformance, structural challenges, the relationship between Black male students and low-performing schools, as well as a critique of some major aspects present in literature and discourse.

Common Explanations of Underperformance

Deficit Explanations

Researchers have documented that Black male students have continuously experienced a trend of disproportionately low academic underperformance (Ervin and Worrell, 2012; Whiting, 2009). This trend is accompanied by wide-ranging explanations regarding why Black male students are overrepresented in adverse academic and schooling outcomes. Despite the variety of factors that impact Black male student performance, deficit explanations and ideologies remain at the forefront of discourse and literature. These kinds of accounts offer inherent deficiencies or personal undoing as the reasons for Black male students' poor academic outcomes. Extant literature commonly suggests that Black male students are the orchestrators of their underperformance; more specifically, some researchers have argued that Black male students participate in a culture that

devalues education and discourages the importance of academic success (Irving and Hudley, 2008; Tatum, 2006; Ogbu, 1994). Anthropologist John Ogbu, in some of his most cited work, refers to Black student disengagement as "oppositional identities" (Ogbu, 1987), where African-American students have developed an oppositional attitude towards school due to socio-historical factors.

Although more than three decades old, the notion of academic disengagement as a widespread behavior among Black/African-American students has persisted to now govern perceptions about Black male students. In their revisit to this notion in their 2008 article, Miles Irving and Cynthia Hudley, account for the socio-historical factors that explain Black students' alleged academic disengagement. Irving and Hudley (2008) argue that due to histories of marginalization and oppression sustained, African-Americans have responsively developed a "cultural mistrust" of educational systems that has contributed to an oppositional relationship with schooling. Specifically, in regards to Black males, they write:

> As African American males' mistrust increases, their academic outcome expectations decrease. As mistrust increases, oppositional cultural attitudes also increase. Students with high cultural mistrust, oppositional cultural attitudes, and low valuation for educational outcomes have lower expectations for the benefits of their educational outcome. A presence of cultural mistrust and oppositional cultural attitudes clearly undermines educational outcome expectations. (pg. 677)

The argument that Black male students are inadequately invested in their education has also become a ready-made explanation for the concerning differences in academic outcomes between them and many of their peers. Less cited are the ways adverse conditions within systems of education position Black male students to underperform.

The notion that Black male students' attitudes towards schooling are a root cause of their academic underperformance often manifests in this population's racially biased treatment in schools (Lynn et al., 2010). For example, when examining teacher expectations, a 2016 study found that non-Black teachers of Black students have significantly lower expectations for Black students than

others they instruct, with this lack of confidence most pronounced for Black male students (Gershenson, et al., 2016). In an evaluation of the study, Jill Rosen writes:

> When evaluating the same black student, white teachers expect significantly less academic success than do black teachers, a new study concludes. When a black teacher and a white teacher evaluate the same black student, the white teacher is about 30 percent less likely to predict the student will complete a four-year college degree, the study found. White teachers are also almost 40 percent less likely to expect their Black students will graduate high school (pg. 4).

Building on this body of research, some scholars have even found that urban educators in particular have a tendency to harbor negative ideas about their students (Emdin, 2016; Strayhorn 2008; Ferguson, 2003), which is especially concerning for Black male students as they are among those most likely to attend urban, high-poverty public schools (Saporito and Sohoni, 2007). Together, this illustrates that Black male students are at a heightened risk of being taught by teachers who harbor negative perceptions about them, which can be reflected in how teachers and other school actors engage with and treat them.

The ‘oppositional culture’ theory is not only deficit-based, but also dismissive of the extensive and continued efforts the Black community has made and endured to gain access to quality education (Warren, 2010; Williams, 1989). Furthermore, recent research has found that Black students are actually highly invested in their education, viewing it as a means of bettering their lives and those of others (Harper and Davis, 2012; Aronson, 2004). Yet, ideas of "oppositional culture" and similar deficit perceptions remain prevalent in the social imagination (especially pertaining to Black male students). It is vital to challenge these racially charged assumptions and properly hold structural and systemic forces accountable for the disengagement of Black male students or the alleged antagonistic position they take towards schooling.

Other scholars and researchers have offered explanations that complicate or oppose notions of students’ oppositional identity. Some researchers have argued that the very culture of schools and typical schooling practices are particularly hostile towards Black students, that both factors

essentially force them to disengage from academia as a means of psychological defense (Griffin, 2002; Parker, 2017; Steele, 1992, 1997). Under the weight of assumed intellectual inferiority, Black male students may relinquish their investment in academic performance as a means of protecting their self-esteem (Griffin 2002; Osborne, 1999). Considering the multitude of challenges Black students face in schools, perceived disengagement can be understood as a rational response to racial hostilities and disparate treatment from school faculty and staff (Rocque and Paternoster, 2011). While this disengagement hinders students' academic productivity and performance, it is mostly the result of racist institutional forces and stems less from individual student choices or attitudes (Griffin, 2002; Orfield, 2004).

Acting White

As mentioned, some researchers have suggested that Black male students' behavior in schools and attitudes towards education primarily contribute to their poor academic outcomes (Farkas et al., 2002; Ogbu, 1995). This perspective is often propelled by recorded instances that their peers often shame Black students for attempting to achieve academically. As a result, Black students allegedly sabotage their school performance to avoid being thought of as "acting white" (Ferguson, 2002; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986) or performing/behaving in a manner less authentic to their Black racial identities. Despite its popularity, this particular idea is relatively new, with the first accounts of Black youth equating academic achievement to acting white being published in the 1980s (Tyson, 2011). Before then, the literature conveyed, no indication that the idea of acting white was likened to academic achievement (Tyson, 2011). Karolyn Tyson and colleagues in their 2005 piece *"It's Not a Black Thing": Understanding the Burden of Acting White and Other Dilemmas of High Achievement,* explains that,

> Social scientists have produced little empirical evidence to substantiate the claim that an "oppositional peer culture" or a "burden of acting white" is pervasive in the black community, or that either explains the underachievement of black students or some part of

> the black-white achievement gap. Still, there is a strong public belief in these assertions (pg. 8).

Despite a severe lack of evidence supporting the 'acting white' hypothesis, its uptake as an explanation for the Black-white student achievement gap exemplifies how deficit explanations are favorably applied within dominant perceptions and public opinion. Additionally, the stigma associated with high academic achievement among youth is not specific to Black students, with high achieving students—regardless of race—typically experiencing some degree of teasing or chaff for exceptional academic performance (Tyson et al., 2005). For Black male students, expectations of masculinity intersect with the 'acting white hypothesis' as they encounter an additional gendered dimension of this phenomenon (Majors and Billson, 1992) wherein high academic performance is discouraged because "being a high achiever and being intelligent is not masculine or is otherwise feminine" (Whiting, 2009, pg. 226). While the notion of "acting white" has been recognized as controversial and to an extent inaccurate (Tyson, 2011; Tyson, 2006), many other deficit notions regarding Black students remain largely unchallenged.

Contrary to the acting white hypothesis, some scholars have found that Black youth and students are strongly invested in their academic performance with racialized peer pressure against high academic achievement being less prevalent in schools than general impressions would suggest (Tyson et al., 2005). Across all racial groups, students are more likely to experience some positive reinforcement when interacting with their peers, with this occurring at higher rates within intra-racial peer relationships (Lewis et al., 2015). Regarding urban students, research has shown that positive peer norms that encourage high academic performance are prominent (Shin et al., 2007). These positive peer norms manifest in a variety of ways. Affirmations and peer-support groups, in addition to validating academic excellence, can promote positive racial identity development as students associate their racial identities with positive attributes rather than negative ones from these spaces (Shin et al., 2007). For urban students, positive perceptions and attitudes toward one's racial

identity that result from these positive peer norms, interactions, and relationships often function as protective factors for their self-esteem and student identity (Grant-Vallone et al., 2003; Shin et al., 2007; Tatum, 1992). Regarding Black male students, literature seems divided on the role that peer perceptions of Blackness and masculinity have on the educational outcomes of Black boys and men. This divide within the field underscores a clear need for further examination.

Lack of Grit

Another increasingly popular explanation for differing school performance across racial groups is the grit explanation, grit being the non-cognitive trait(s) that referring to students' perseverance and motivation in the face of academic-related hardships (Duckworth 2016; Strayhorn, 2014). Distinguished psychology professor Angela Duckworth has garnered acclaim for her research of grit, in which she argues that 'gritty' people persevere by leveraging their individual passion for success during difficulties (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007). Within the past decade, a growing number of researchers have applied this framework of grit to education, offering that grit and other traits such as passion and self-determinism are essential for student success. A 2013 report by the U.S. Department of Education evaluating grit, asserted that students' ability to achieve their full potential is significantly dependent on grit and other 'non-cognitive factors' (Shechtman et al., 2013).

However, there has been significant critique of grit as a concept applicable to education, mainly because it suggests that student outcomes are primarily, if not entirely, matters of individual effort. A substantial problem with the grit explanation is that it over-emphasizes individual ruggedness and places the responsibility of academic disparities squarely on students themselves while diverting attention from structural forces that cause racial disparities in educational outcomes (Gorski, 2016). This kind of framing also ignores essential differences and variations among challenges encountered by students from the same racial/gender group. Additionally, explanations

of grit deficiencies are primarily associated with students of color, suggesting that they are faring worse than their counterparts because they lack the resilience needed to navigate the competitive, but allegedly fair, arena of schooling. Golden 2015 explains that:

> A focus on grit, resilience, and other "non-cognitive" factors is framed as necessary, precisely what learners need to succeed in and through education and a competitive world. Furthermore, this focus is often associated with learners in urban schools and contexts. In research, practitioner, and popular discourses on education reform, there is an enduring discourse that "urban" students, often code for students of color (D. Watson, 2012), lack the "discipline," "culture," or intrinsic traits necessary for academic and life success (Ladson-Billings, 2006b; Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014). The popularity of what I and others call the "grit narrative of success" as the answer to systemic issues and needs in urban schools and communities is of grave concern (pg. 346-347).

In the face of systemic inequality, no amount of grit or determination can be expected to supplement under-resourcing of schools, stereotyping, or other structural challenges students of color are predisposed to encounter and navigate. Particularly, notions of grit ignore how "students in their low-income high school simply do not have access to the same path to success that is taken for granted by every student in the wealthier school districts" (Schreiner, 2017, pg. 13).

Furthermore, the common understanding of grit does not adequately account for other elements that enable individual students to translate their efforts into desired outcomes (Kundu, 2017). Specifically, grit and its effectiveness are mostly dependent on student agency, namely their ability to promote their mobility and the structures that support their mobility (Kundu, 2017). However, for many students of color and those facing adverse circumstances within and outside of school, agency and supportive social structures are significantly limited. Thus, development or even application of grit does not translate into the same outcomes for underprivileged students as it does for privileged students (Schreiner, 2017). It is incredibly dismissive and irresponsible to ignore this reality while still suggesting lack of grit (or similar traits) is a reason students are underperforming. Contrarily, urban students of color have proven to be incredibly resilient, enduring, passionate, and

committed within their education but often do not have access to the support and means needed to translate their efforts into desired academic outcomes (Lardier et at. 2019).

The use of grit to explain Black male student performance outcomes perpetuates deeply flawed notions of meritocracy in educational policy and attitudes toward urban youth of color attending troubled schools (Lardier et al., 2019). Specifically, the belief that a person should 'pull themselves up by the bootstrap'—when pandered to marginalized students—suggests their lack of social mobility results from their failure to try hard enough (Kundu and Noguera, 2014). However, the realities of many students from marginalized backgrounds teach them opposing logic wherein "students attending low-income schools or growing up in a minoritized culture in the U.S. learn early that hard work is simply not enough, which is incomprehensible to those in the dominant culture" (Schreiner, 2017, pg. 13). The widely upheld myth of meritocracy can serve as justification for educational disparities (Lui, 2011) by suggesting individuals did not work hard enough to achieve their goals, which is identical to how ideas of grit (or lack thereof) are used to suggest that students from marginalized backgrounds are not 'gritty' enough and should have simply outworked the challenges they encountered.

Structural Challenges

Among the myriad of challenges Black male students may encounter during their educational journeys, Black boys/men they are particularly predisposed to structural challenges, which they are more likely to encounter due to their belonging to marginalized groups. As opposed to individual challenges (those a student experiences due to their particular or specific life context) such as learning disabilities, structural challenges result from the combination of socio-systemic inequity and how these inequalities are perpetuated through policies, practices, and organization. Structural challenges include those related to poverty (community and or individual), covert and overt forms of discriminatory mistreatment, biased forms of student assessment, and inequitable

access, among others. The following section explains some of the most pertinent structural challenges Black male students encounter.

Challenges of Perception and Stereotype Threat

While it is widely understood that the dominant perception of Black boys and men is often negative, rarely is adequate attention paid to how this perception manifests into specific academic consequences faced within their schooling experience. Black students are constantly bombarded with and viewed through a stereotypical, negative lens (Steele 1999) facilitated by media portrayal, public misrepresentation, and their schooling experiences. Stereotype threat, as defined by Claude Steele (1995), is "the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about an individual's racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural group" (pg. 1). In regards to Black students, it has been shown that this possibility of reaffirming negative ideas about oneself or one's racial group can hinder test performance. Steele on several accounts has demonstrated that when administering tests that identify and emphasize their racial identity, Black students perform worse than those who did not have their racial identity emphasized and not placed under the risk of confirming negative stereotypes. Additionally, subjects of color who were not put at risk of stereotype threat either outperformed or performed comparable to their white counterparts. This illustrated the direct relationship between the prevailing ideas of Black students and the hindering effect this perception can have on them. Aronson (2004) posits that as early as age six, individuals are aware of a variety of cultural stereotypes and the mere familiarity with these ideologies can bias people's perception and treatment of individuals from stereotyped groups. In schools, these biased perceptions can manifest as racially biased treatment committed by peers, teachers, and other school actors to the detriment of Black students (Skiba at al., 2002).

Hyper-Criminalizing and Pushout

Hyper surveillance and policing have long been used as methods of suppressing Black communities within the United States (Browne, 2015) and the apparent disparities around discipline in schools must be understood in proper relation to this socio-historical context. Schools have a significant tendency to over-emphasize control of minority student populations, mainly via means of school discipline (Giroux, 2010; Kupchik et al., 2009; Noguera, 2003; Rios, 2011). While presented as intending to create safer school environment, some well-supported policies of school discipline have demonstrated especially adverse effects on students of color, mainly contributing to the hyper-criminalizing and pushout of Black students. In recent years research shown that Black students are suspended and otherwise disciplined at disproportionately higher rates than students of other racial groups (Ferguson, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002). This is particularly apparent with Black male students experiencing the highest suspension rates in public schools (Ferguson, 2010). Common explanations for this trend in school discipline cites the behavior and attitudes of Black students as causes for their over-suspension, typically ignoring that students of color, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are disciplined more severely than their affluent counterparts for identical behaviors and offenses (Monroe, 2006; Skiba et al., 2002). This phenomenon of excessive discipline was perhaps at its most intense with the implementation of zero-tolerance school disciplinary practices.

Zero-tolerance Policies. School discipline underwent a drastic transformation in the 1990s when zero-tolerance policies become widely adopted in schools out of perceived escalation of drug use and violence in schools (Skiba et al., 2002). The phrase "zero-tolerance" is an umbrella term that denotes the practice of meeting any undesirable and prohibited behaviors (including first-time violations/offenses) with automatic and often overly severe penalties (Levesque, 2014). Zero-tolerance policies in the U.S. began as part of a series of efforts to combat the drug epidemic of the 1980s (Heitzeg, 2009). Despite being mostly ineffective, zero-tolerance policies were soon adopted

as a response to other issues—including homelessness, trespassing, sex offending, and school discipline—in attempt to combat gang-related violence in schools (Heitzeg, 2009; Levesque, 2014). While zero-tolerance policies are commonly perceived as promoting school safety, research has shown that such policies create hostile school environments that disproportionately impact urban students of color, often leading to their subjection via severe punitive action (Skiba et al., 2002).

Zero-tolerance policies have directly contributed to the pushout of urban students of color and into legal/carceral systems. According to the Advance Project (2005),

> Zero tolerance has engendered a number of problems: denial of education through increased suspension and expulsion rates, referrals to inadequate alternative schools, lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and racial profiling of student. Once many of these youths are in "the system," they never get back on the academic track. Sometimes, schools refuse to readmit them; and even if these students do return to school, they are often labeled and targeted for close monitoring by school staff and police. Consequently, many become demoralized, drop out, and fall deeper and deeper into the juvenile or criminal justice systems. (Pg. 12)

Zero-tolerance policies increase students' proximities to carceral systems with such interactions having potential life-lasting detrimental impacts. Given that zero-tolerance policies are overly present in schools that serve majority Black and Latino populations (Losen and Skiba, 2010; Peguero and Shekarkhar, 2011), these students become increasingly susceptible to school pushout-driven incarceration. Prevailing perceptions of Black students as dangerous and criminal are continually reflected in the manner in which Black students are hyper-criminalized and, subsequently, punished disproportionately in schools (Gregory and Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2002). Similarly, a collection of scholars have identified that urban educators, in particular, tend to interpret the behavioral expressions of Black students as misbehaviors and carry deficit notions about these students (Monroe, 2006; Morris, 2016), further exacerbating Black student criminalization. As such, educators, officials, and policymakers alike must grapple with the realities of adverse outcomes of Black urban students that have resulted from racially charged and ill-informed efforts to promote school safety.

An Emerging Challenge: The COVID-19 Pandemic

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, many students from already marginalized backgrounds experienced periods of compounded disadvantage (Addo, 2020; Newman et al., 2022; Starks, 2021). Recent studies on how Covid-19 has impacted schools, and students find that issues of mental health, student absenteeism, availability of resources, and access to adequate technology were particularly burdensome for poor Black and Latinx students (Horowitz, 2020; Jæger and Blaabæk, 2020; Landertinger et al., 2021; Malkus, 2020). During school shutdowns caused by Covid-19, many students were forced to abruptly transition to remote and online learning formats, which presented a host of challenges, the most pronounced being those related to student engagement, internet and computer access (Azevedo et al., 2021; Dorn et al., 2020a). The challenges associated with Covid-19 and remote/virtual learning only intensified existing disparities in instructional time and quality between Black students and their affluent white counterparts (Calarco, 2020; Chen et al., 2022). Studies have found that well-resourced schools (often serving predominantly white and Asian student populations) were able to placate the negative impact of Covid-19 on their students by ensuring access to quality technology as well as curriculum and instruction responsive to the challenges associated with emerging remote learning formats (Calarco, 2020). This approach was opposite for many low-income public schools serving majority Black and Latinx populations that struggled to circumvent issues created by the pandemic (Becker et al., 2020; Van Lancker and Parolin, 2020). As a result, many Black students were forced to endure a schooling period demarked by a lack of access to necessary technologies, school supports, and other challenges (James, 2021; Kimble-Hill et al., 2020). The full extent to which this period of exacerbated disadvantage will have on particular cohorts of learners is yet to be understood.

For the many students experiencing extended periods of out-of-school time meant prolonged periods of separation from teachers and peers (Horsford, 2021). This again presented a challenge that reflects the impact of class disparity—the varying ability of households to supplement the

instruction time and quality lost because of the pandemic. Affluent households were, for example, able to hire tutors and afford additional learning opportunities for their children to ensure they did not fall behind in learning and curriculum (Dorn et al., 2020; Dubois et al., 2021). Poorer households do not have this ability, so the students from less fortunate economic circumstances face a heightened probability of falling behind in school (Dorn et al., 2020b). Already underfunded and under-resourced schools did not have the supports needed to compensate for disparities in technology or resource impacting students and novice remote learners. Additionally, racial and class disparities intersect with the issues impacting Black students during Covid-19; specifically, Black families and households were among those most impacted by heightened unemployment and health challenges (Blake et al., 2021). For the students from these families and circumstances, remote learning also included navigating additional stress caused by poverty and health issues (Dalsania, 2022).

Black Male Student Performance and Low-Performing Schools

Among the structural inequalities that impede Black male student achievement, concentration of this demographic in low-performing schools is especially hindering for them. Low-performing schools are typically categorized as such due to school-wide underperformance on standardized assessment but can also refer to schools unable to meet standards established and monitored by the state board of education or other external authorities (Corallo and McDonald, 2001; Duke and Jacobson, 2011). In addition to this, low performing, schools are commonly located in high-poverty communities that suffer from particular conditions that make it difficult for students to maximize their time in school (Corallo and McDonald, 2001). The very designation of 'low performing school' places stress on school faculty, reduces expectations of student achievement, and has been linked to exacerbated teacher absenteeism and turnover rates (Bruno, 2002; Corallo and McDonald, 2001).

The various challenges that Black male students encounter in their educational experiences are compounded by the fact so many of them are enrolled in low performing schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lewis et al., 2010; Reardon and Robinson, 2008). For instance, it has been shown that lesser qualified and least experienced teachers are commonly employed in schools with high-need and low-achieving student populations (Boyd et al., 2005; Peske and Haycock, 2006). As Black students are more likely to attend underperforming schools, they are at heightened risk of being taught by under-qualified teachers and being under-resourced (Davis, 2004; Noguera, 2014; Tate, 2008). Scholars have described schools such as these—ones that exhibit a combination of troubling characteristics—as dropout factories, in that a concerning number of students do not retain to graduation. In some cases, only half of the freshmen entering such schools progress to their senior year within three years (Tucci, 2009). While this issue impacts student from a variety of backgrounds, Black male students are among those most severely affected by this disparity due to intersecting forces of racism and socioeconomic status (individual and community) (Caton, 2012; Jordan and Cooper, 2003).

The terms low-performing schools and low-quality schools are often used interchangeably because both describe schools affected by similar conditions, with the designation 'low-quality schools' having a more direct reference to the resources and teacher/staff quality of a school as opposed to just school performance. While there are arguably some differences between low performing and low-quality schools, what remains consistent is that Black male students are more likely to attend these kinds of schools. Such schools are racially segregated, have high concentrations of low-income students, and have substantially fewer resources than the schools of many of their white and Asian counterparts (Connolly, 2002; Elder et al., 1995; Irons, 2004; Tatum, 2007). Wealth disparities across racial groups, neighborhoods, and communities (Borg and Stranahan, 2012; Irons, 2004; (Oliver, M., & Shapiro, 2013) largely account for the dismal state of

schools located in poor neighbors of color. Subsequently, policies such as the 'neighborhood school' policy—requiring students to attend schools in their immediate neighborhoods—disproportionately relegate Black students to low performing/low quality schools. Additionally, Black male students commonly attend schools impacted by conditions present in economically depressed urban communities, such as community violence (Jenkins and Bell, 1994; Overstreet and Braun, 2000), which further impedes their school performance (Orfield, 1999; Orfield, 2001; Reardon et al., 2012). Harsh realities of living in economically depressed neighborhoods, in addition to their concentration in low-performing schools, coalesces into a host of conditions that have direct consequences for Black male student performance (Borg and Stranahan, 2012; McDonough, 1997; Rocque and Paternoster, 2011).

It should also be noted that across schools of various performance status, classrooms are often racially imbalanced (Frankenberg and Orfield, 2012) with Black male students being grossly underrepresented in gifted/advance/rigorous classes while overrepresented in remedial/special education (Milner, 2007; Toldson, 2008). Both contribute to the *de facto* segregation of schools and further stifle the performance of Black male students. This particular disparity highlights that while most pronounced in low-performing schools, Black male students continue to encounter structural injustice across schools of varying contexts and conditions (Chunn, 1988; Tyson, 2011).

In terms of redressing consequences of Black students' concentration in low-performing schools, most are aimed towards bettering conditions of low-performing schools (Corallo and McDonald, 2001; Manwaring, 2010) or offering alternative options to schools that are located in poor Black students' immediate communities (Ravitch, 2010). For example, between the 1970s and 1990s busing programs were a popular method of increasing educational access and diversifying public schools, accounting for increased enrollment of mostly Black and Latino students in public schools (Orfield et al., 1994). While viewed as effective, this approach implies that the under-

performance of Black (and other minority) students results from limited accessibility to well-resourced schools and that merely placing minority students into 'better' schools would close racial gaps in academic performance. However, racial disparities in student performance/outcomes have persisted (Griffin and Allen, 2006). Additionally, researchers such as Simone Ispa-Landa (2013) have found that Black students who participate in busing programs are racially stereotyped and experience racially hostile campus climates in schools they are bussed to. Solutions such as bussing programs imply that outcome disparities are only matters of resource accessibility. This type of approach fails to address educational outcome disparities as the consequence of racial bias, discriminatory housing, white flight, and employment suppression they are (Rosenblatt, 2011).

Impacts on Black Men in Higher Education

A school's status as low-performing is usually attributed to low graduation rates and poor rates of student college eligibility and access (Griffin & Allen, 2006). Black men's limited access to higher education and tendency to fare worse than their counterparts at universities and college are linked to the quality of education they receive during high school (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Oakes et al., 2002). In 2016 only 28% of 12th-grade Black male students in California completed the A-G course requirements (a measure of eligibility for admissions to the University of California and California State University systems), the second-lowest A-G completion rate reported of all racial groups (California Dept. of Education, 2017). Despite some improvement in their high school completion, the rate by which Black males complete their graduation requirements while securing college eligibility remains significantly low (Howard et al., 2016). Disparities in college eligibility in one way exemplify how the impacts of concentrating Black male students in low-performing high schools extend beyond K-12 education.

While high school completion is the immediate goal of K-12 education, attempting to merely increase high school graduation rates without proper attentiveness to closing gaps in areas such as

college eligibility is a deeply flawed approach to improving the racial attainment disparities. This is especially true for Black male students as they continue graduating from low-performing schools that struggle to facilitate and support their (competitive) college eligibility. Additionally, despite the marginal increases in their enrollment in colleges and universities, collegiate Black men still lag in terms of postsecondary degree attainment (Harper, 2012). The latest report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) finds the national degree completion rate for Black male students is 34%, the lowest of any demographic reported. These disparities contribute to the racial performance gap where Black male students, by most significant measures, are outperformed by most of their counterparts (Howard, 2010; Reardon, 2011, 2013; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011).

Critique of Literature and Current Discourse

In June of 2007, then-senator Barack Obama ignited national debate and concern when he stated that “we have more Black men in prison than we have in our colleges" to illustrate the dismal state of Black men in regards to both carceral and educational systems. The sheer shock of this idea led to several statistical analyses that later proved the statement to be false, with there being more Black men enrolled in postsecondary education than prison/jail since 2000 (Bouie, 2013; Cook, 2012). The nation seemed relieved at the fact that there were more Black men enrolled in higher education than in jail/prison. However, Black men's postsecondary attainment continues to lag, and the urgency of this issue should not be assuaged by knowledge that there are more Black men in higher education than jail/prison. The fact that Black men's achievement is being quantified by how the raw numbers of their collegiate population compare to their incarcerated population (a comparison not championed or celebrated in regards to other demographics) illustrates how achievement for Black men is biased in conceptualization and deeply misunderstood.

It is becoming increasingly common for researchers, educators, and policymakers alike to appropriate or misrepresent the existing achievement of Black male students. Instances of

successful Black male students are often discussed in overly-romanticized ways (Strayhorn, 2014), suggesting that the state of Black boys and men in education is not as severe as the dominant narrative would suggest. While it is useful to challenge the often overly deficit narrative of Black male students (Harper, 2014) and even celebrate the gains Black male students have made, to do so in a matter that reduces the urgency of their state in education is harmful.

In recent decades Black male students have become the focus of an expanding body of empirical research. Often the research conducted on or about these populations hype-focused on either the underperformance of Black male students or their significantly fewer occurrences of high performance. These siloed hyper-focus approaches to examinations leads to an incomprehensive understanding of Black male students that informs assumptive ideas and inadequate measures of support for them.

Additionally, research and discourse must be considerate of less popular and recognized forms of outcome, success, and achievement. For example, the many Black college students who are enrolled in community colleges are typically understood as being less successful than their counterparts who are enrolled in four-year colleges or universities (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2002; Weis, 2018). A significant number of Black male students qualify/qualified for top universities but are enrolled in community colleges because of financial and/or personal reasons, not a lack of competitiveness (Wood, 2012). Despite their comparable skills, the trajectories of community college Black male students are underrepresented in much of the discourse surrounding Black male achievement. I suggest this is largely due to rigid standards of success and failure that do not adequately account for achievement at the community college tier or other narratives of achievement that divert from traditional perceptions of success.

Much of what has been written about successful Black male students identifies

considerations—such as individual student grit (Strayhorn 2014), community support (Epstein et al., 2011; Gutman and Midgley, 2000; Sheldon and Epstein, 2002), or supplemental and inventive ways students compensate for their school's shortcomings—as solutions to the in-school challenges Black male students face (Harper, 2005; Wells and Crain, 1999). These contributions are useful but cannot and should not be the treated as primary solutions to disparities in performance, as these, again shift responsibility from institutions and onto students themselves. It is an incredible disservice to Black male students to insinuate that their educational outcomes are, above all, dependent on their supposed innate abilities to navigate and weather encumbering conditions caused by structural inequality. This for example, includes the apparent divestment from public education by our current government administration in which public schools are not being adequately resourced (Spring, 2017), a structural inequity that cannot be resolved with student resilience or navigation. Black students are among those who are disproportionately dependent on the services of public schools (Saporito and Sohoni, 2007) and as such are especially harmed by a national disregard for public education. In cases such as this no amount of grit, parental/community involvement, mentorship, etc. can stop the impact of such social injustice.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Overview of Methodology

This chapter presents an overview of this dissertation study's methodology, including theoretical frameworks, study site selection, participant selection, data collection procedures, and data analysis plan. The primary goal of this research study was to examine the relevant challenges high performing Black male students attending low performing high schools encounter as well as the techniques, strategies, and tools they utilize to navigate said challenges. Although low-performing schools are play a central role within this project, the singular unit of analysis within this study are the student participants. Low-performing schools are included in this project because these are the kinds of schools Black male students are most commonly enrolled and as such are ideal for interrogating common and collective experiences, encounters, challenges, and contexts. Employing a multi-method, sequential, qualitative design, this study relied on the experiences and knowledge of high performing Black male students and identified school actors to address the following research questions:

1. What (if any) are the challenges associated with being a high performing Black male student within low performing high schools?
2. What do these students do to promote their academic performance?
    a. What are some assets these students use to support themselves?
    b. According to participants, what are the resources available to them at their schools that help promote their academic performance?
3. Who are the school actors relevant to the experiences of participants?
    a. In what ways have these actors impacted the experiences of student participants?
    b. How do these actors understand themselves in relation to the experiences of high performing Black male students attending their school?

My research questions are designed to target student participants' experiences as high performing, young Black men within their respective high schools. I sought to identify the effective tools, methods, and systems of support relevant to their experiences in addition to elucidating potentially

lesser-explored challenges unique to their positionality and school context. Additionally, recognizing the significance school actors have on students' experiences and trajectories, my methodology was designed to explore the role and impact relevant school actors play in the lives of student participants.

Theoretical Framework(s)

This research project centers heavily on the educational experiences of Black male students, and is particularly concerned with the manner in which race informs their experiences as high performing students attending low performing schools. Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education provides a framework for understanding how racism and components of racism inform the inequality found in schools and influence the experiences of students of color (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009. Scholars have already identified a host of day-to-day and structural elements of racism that are prevalent in the experiences of students of color (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Vaught and Castagno, 2008) and are continually engaged in this work. As such, CRT informs much of the theoretical framework used in this project. CRT is applied as a tool of understanding and accounting for the ways race impacts participant experiences as students of color, while recognizing that as people of color, little to none of their lived experiences are unaffected by being *raced*, particularly as Black (Taylor et al., 2009).

While CRT functions as a base point to examine and centralize Black boys' racial and ethnic identities, when accounting for the specific racialized oppression experienced by Black people, Black critical scholars have identified CRT as somewhat limited. A collective body of researchers, theorists, and philosophers critical of the racial inequity and violence sustained by Black communities have identified antiblackness—rather than just racism—as a more precise element animating Black people's specific oppression and societal strife. Again, Black critical race scholars in particular critique the sometimes-broad approach of CRT, arguing that it does not pointedly

address how antiblackness influences education policies, practices, outcomes, etc. (Dumas, 2014). In response, Black critical race scholars offer BlackCrit theory. BlackCrit as a theoretical framework is not designed or intended to replace broader/larger critical race theorizations such as CRT when examining matters pertaining to Black people; instead, BlackCrit theorists posit that I, and similar theorizations are located within the larger critical race project. BlackCrit (like many other raceCrits) offers a necessarily specific lens of analysis that tends to the unique conditions experienced by a particular group, with BlackCrit contending with how people who are raced as Black experience antiblackness. To most effectively investigate the experiences of Black male students, Black Critical Theory or BlackCrit also informs the theoretical approach of this work. In terms of educational research, BlackCrit provides the foundation for inquiry that pointedly addresses how antiblackness undergirds inequity in schools that impact Black students. This challenges traditional research, where it is typical for examinations of inequality in schools to be framed largely as a burden shared equally and identically between Black students and other oppressed groups, an approach that does not adequately account for the full implication of Black students' marginalized positionality.

Both CRT and BlackCrit functioned as key, applied tools in this study to understand the multifaceted experiences of student participants, their responses, interpretations, and understandings. BlackCrit was also used to evaluate responses of adult participants, specifically to examine how adult actors responsively supported the young Black men of this study or (as findings reveal) to what extent they were unfamiliar with how antiblackness presented in the experiences of student participants. I begin this chapter with a description of CRT and its importance in examining the experiences of students of color, particularly Black male students. Then I discuss the central ideas of BlackCrit, the elements of the framework that informed the data collection approach and analysis procedures employed during this study. CRT and BlackCrit are used in combination to

leverage the strengths both frameworks offer while also compensating for the limitations present in each framework.

A Note on Intersectionality

To examine the experiences of Black male student participants, it is essential to properly centralize their intersecting identities. Intersectionality moves researchers beyond singular or one-dimensional analysis to nuanced analysis of how systems of privilege and power associated with varying identities operate to simultaneously marginalize and dehumanize particular groups (Collins and Bilge, 2016). Specifically, as this study centers Black male participants, I argue that an intersectional approach and awareness are crucial to understand how multiple intersecting identities (specifically of race, class, and gender) inform the experiences and encounters young Black men reported in their schooling.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

CRT has its origin in mid-1970s legal studies as scholars, activists, and professionals attempted to develop new language, and descriptions that identified true causes of people of color's continued oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The ideological project of CRT began to solidify as focus shifted from legal studies (the interconnectedness of law and racism) to how race and racism are present in the everyday experiences of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

In educational research, CRT explicitly aids in challenging normalized—often deficit—ideologies, policies and practices that contribute to the marginalization of students of color within systems of schooling (Solórzano, 1998). The five tenets of CRT in educational research are described by Solórzano and Yosso (2002):

> (a) Foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. However, it also challenges the separate discourses on race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color; (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of color; (c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color.

> Furthermore, it views these experiences as sources of strength and (e) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, humanities, and the law to understand the experiences of students of color better.

Collectively, CRT's five tenets support a contextualization of experiences of students of color that properly accounts for the role of race, racism, other intersecting identities, and power structures.

Within this study, CRT informs both data collection and analysis procedures (discussed in further detail later in this dissertation). As this study centers the voices and experiences of high performing Black male students, their narratives of success function to counter and oppose the dominant ideologies and negative accounts associated with them (detailed in the previous chapter). CRT provides the foundation of a critical race methodology; specifically counter storytelling or counternarrative methodology (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) wherein voice is given to those whose experiences are often untold. In CRT, counternarrative is also wielded as a tool of recognizing, deconstructing, and analyzing deficit master narratives of marginalized people (Harper, 2009; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) describe three types of counternarratives: personal stories, other people's stories, and composite stories. In this study composite stories—stories reliant on "data collected from multiple persons of color who have experienced a particular context or similar phenomena" (Harper, 2009, pg. 702)—were used. This study specifically featured narratives and reflections of multiple high performing Black male students attending low performing high schools. Additionally, to qualify as counternarrative, elements of CRT must be incorporated in procedures of data collection and analysis. This study's interview and data collection protocols incorporated the following tenets of CRT in these ways: (1) Foreground of race and racism—the first tenet of CRT recognizes race and racism as real and present in the realities and experiences of students color. (2) Challenge traditional and dominant research theories and explanations by highlighting Black male students as high performers and applying a research approach that centers student voice, while recognizing them as experts in a phenomenon because they experience it. (3) Apply lens of analysis that centers on the racialized and gendered

experiences of students of color—an approach pertinent to this study as it focuses on Black male students.

Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit)

Framing Ideas of BlackCrit

Many critical race theories, including other recently developed raceCrits, have maintained the tradition of contextualizing and organizing frameworks in terms of tenets. Although BlackCrit is informed by several critical Black theories, such as Afro-Pessimism (Sexton, 2016; Wilderson, 2010) and Black Optimism/Optimist thought (Moten, 2013), BlackCrit theorists prefer to organize BlackCrit in terms of *framing ideas* instead of tenets. BlackCrit theorists argue that the notion of tenets implies a kind of fixedness and rigidity that (at least currently) is not best suited to conceptualizing BlackCrit. Given the nuance and novelty of BlackCrit, current theorists are resisting the use of tenets to "leave space for further scholarship and collective deliberation" (Dumas and Ross, 2016, pg. 429). The following is an explanation of the three foundational framing ideas of BlackCrit.

Antiblackness as Endemic

The first foundational framing concept of BlackCrit is a more specified version of the CRT tenet, asserting that racism is a normal and permanent aspect of US society (Bell, 2018; Delgado and Stefancic, 2000). Building upon this, BlackCrit scholars have argued that antiblackness, as a distinct marginalizing force, permeates virtually every aspect of both Black and non-Black people's lives. This framing idea borrows heavily from Afro-pessimism, positing that Black people still exist in the social imagination as less than human, having "little right to life" (Dumas and Ross, 2016, pg. 429) which contributes to the dehumanizing treatment they are continually subjected to.

In her *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) Black critical race theorist Christina Sharpe provides an exceptional explanation of this essential BlackCrit framing idea. Sharpe

employs weather as a metaphor to illustrate the pervasiveness of not only white supremacy but, more specifically, antiblackness. She describes antiblackness as the 'total climate' in the United States, in that it is as enveloping and persisting as the actual climate. *In the Wake* is (among other achievements) an extensive contemplation on the legacy of slavery that Black people are living (or arguably existing) in. Her metaphor of the 'weather' counters suggestions that racial issues have ended or that they are even a set of conditions that can truly *end* considering how much of US society is contingent on antiblackness' prevalence. Instead, Sharpe addresses antiblackness as a singularity, recognizing it as infinite rather than bounded by the singular occurrence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. She writes:

> In the United States, slavery is imagined as a singular event even as it changed over time and even as its duration expands into supposed emancipation and beyond. But slavery was not singular; it was, rather, a singularity—a weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances. Emancipation did not make Black life free; it continues to hold us in that singularity. The brutality was not singular; it was the singularity of antiblackness. (p. 106)

Sharpe's analysis of 'total climate' speaks to both the sheer force of antiblackness (equating it to a literal force of nature) as well as the normality of antiblackness within society. Just as actual weather is understood as an everyday, ever-present component of daily life that at most times is invisible, so antiblackness also often goes unseen and to a more dangerous extent, unchallenged. The normalizing of antiblackness sustains its very pervasiveness and makes recognizing and subsequently combating it difficult.

Despite antiblackness being understood as this force that permeates all aspects of American life, racial disparities— specifically on those occurring within schools, —are seldom framed as instances of antiblackness. Even within research pertaining to micro-aggressions and harmful campus climate, antiblackness is rarely used to describe or contextualize these occurrences. Instead, they are typically described as results of institutional racism, social disconnections, or individual ignorance (Worthington et al., 2008), all of which articulate how structural forces enable acts of

racism but fail to address how these instances act in opposition to Black life and freedom. BlackCrit recognizes this element of racial inequality and contextualizes the persisting barriers faced by Black students (and people), not as passive residuals of slavery but as antiblack iterations of 'social death' (Patterson, 1982) that have taken a contemporary form.

This framing idea of BlackCrit extends beyond merely identifying acts of racism, but also contextualizes ongoing racism as part of a larger antagonistic relationship between Black life/humanity and oppressive social forces (as well as the people who constitute them) (Dumas and Ross, 2016). This framing idea of BlackCrit urges proper consideration for the extent of antiblackness, inviting contemplation and inquiry that interrogates how everyday occurrences, policies, structures, etc. not only marginalize Black people but also contribute to their continued dehumanization (Dumas and Ross; 2016).

Antiblackness in Tension with Neoliberal-multiculturalism

The second major framing idea of BlackCrit addresses the national failure of promoting racial equity—specifically how, in the neoliberal-multicultural imagination, increased racial diversity within market forces has been used to suggest the end of racial injustice. Here BlackCrit argues quite the opposite; that market forces' increased diversity within the post-civil rights era was used as justification for the nation to abandon its active role in dismantling overt racial discrimination. Dumas and Ross note this maneuver's damaging reality:

> With the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, the state began to retreat from an active role in addressing racism. It instead entrusted the market with advancing diversity and opportunity for all. Emergent neoliberal multiculturalism celebrated the opening of various markets to a broader range of racially diverse consumers. It is presumed that racism is no longer a barrier to equal opportunity; thus, those groups that do not experience upward mobility and greater civic (and buying) power are presumed to have failed on their own, as a result of their own choices in the marketplace and/or their own inability to internalize national values of competition, and individual determination and hard work. (pg. 430)

In summation, BlackCrit recognizes that increased diversity of economic participation, market participation, or consumerism does not necessarily signify a bettering of Black people's collective

conditions or that racism has been remedied. During the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while other racial and ethnic populations became increasingly participatory in economic markets, violence and exclusion was used to prevent, stifle, or destroy the economic gains of Black people. BlackCrit warns of the dangers of equating multiculturalism to antiracism, with this common confusion often conflating the specific struggles of Black people with a universal struggle for racial equality, thus making invisible the unique barriers Black people continue to face. This framing idea gives consideration to Black people's specific plight in terms of upward mobility. It also warrants consideration of how Blackness is positioned against whiteness in a way that renders Black people the least assimilable group in the US (Harris, 1992). BlackCrit situates Black people's denial of assimilability (particularly in economic markets) in relation to their socioeconomic disadvantage, ironically while the "relative successes of some other groups of color are offered as evidence of the end of racism" (Dumas and Ross, 2016, pg. 430). This notion also holds significance for Black students as the academic success of other students of color are often used to validate notions of meritocracy and scapegoat the actual structural causes of Black student under-performance. This framing idea of BlackCrit is not to suggest an opposition to racial solidarity or coalition. Rather, it acknowledges how notions of a "post-racial" society have been co-opted in a manner that contributes to Black subjugation by invalidating notions of continued Black oppression and antiblackness.

The Necessity of Black Liberatory Imagination

The third framing idea of BlackCrit urges the creation of Black liberatory fantasy—a model of thought that resists dominant/euphemized accounts of history and holds racially dominant groups accountable for the (inconceivable extent of) brutality inflicted onto Black people. This framing idea demands a departure from paradigms and understandings dominant in the US and US systems of education, as these have served mainly to control the sense-making processes and bodies of

Black people (Woodson, 2006), stifling Black liberation as opposed to promoting it. This component of BlackCrit invites the imagining of educational reform that favors Black liberation but is not contingent upon (or necessarily desirable of) white commitment to racial equity. Here BlackCrit borrows from the revolutionist Frantz Fanon (1963) and validates methods of resistance such as peaceful protest, while also inviting imagination of revolutionary realities where Black oppression can be eradicated through a spectrum of means including "necessary chaos" (Dumas and Ross, 2016, pg. 431). BlackCrit validates necessary chaos as a rationale response to the continued state-sanctioned violence and death of Black people.

Critique/Limitations of BlackCrit

BlackCrit, while offering a much-needed specificity to antiblackness as a concept and scholarship, is also limited by its novelty. To a transformative extent, CRT (among other frameworks) has adequately served as a conceptual, methodological, and theoretical construct (Howard and Navarro, 2016) because it has been developed and applied for decades. However, BlackCrit, to a significant extent, is still developing and as such, is positioned as not having the same degree of immediate applicability as other critical theories. In fact, BlackCrit being organized across framing ideas as opposed to tenets is a recognition by BlackCrit theorists of the framework's novelty—acknowledging its need for "further scholarship and collective deliberation" (Dumas and Ross, 2016. pg. 429), and highlighting that for the time being BlackCrit works most optimally as a framework for theorization and conceptualization. Because BlackCrit does not (currently) possess the same methodological applicability as other critical race theories, how it can immediately inform interventions is also reduced. This, however, should not undermine how BlackCrit can be useful in the theorization, conceptualization, and analysis of challenges faced by Black students as well as how resulting contemplation can inform interventions and approaches that promote equity.

Critique of Third Framing Idea

Among the three framing ideas of BlackCrit, the third, drawing from the work of philosopher and revolutionist Frantz Fanon (1963), is the most substantial departure from traditional approaches of intervention. Although it shares significant similarity to CRT's third, that calls for need of liberatory or transformative solution to subjugation, it drastically takes this idea further. The third framing idea invites, perhaps urges, consideration of complete eradication of existing systems and institutions that themselves can be understood as part of a larger colonial project. This third framing idea exists in a degree of tension with the other two, which closely align with notions of critical evaluation as opposed to a kind of imaginary lending itself to radical action. The first and second framing ideas, while still seeking to evaluate and transform structures and institutions to promote equity rather than marginalization, can exist with current structures and institutions. I question if the third framing idea can manage this also. As all three framing ideas constitute the fundamentals of BlackCrit, it is incumbent of current and forthcoming BlackCrit scholars to negotiate and resolve the framework's tensions and the, at times conflicting, variety of approaches all three framing ideas collectively invite.

BlackCrit as a framework allows me to root the analysis of data in the understanding that antiblackness impacts structures, institutions, and people. Because antiblackness underpins student experience, it is important to employ a framework that pointedly addresses how antiblackness is at play in Black students' experiences. Again, this is not to suggest that BlackCrit should replace CRT, but rather recognizes the need to apply a framework of analysis designed for the cultural specificity and history of Black people and people raced as Black. CRT in education, while designed as the foundation to an analysis of race, does not specifically attend to antiblackness; the incorporation of BlackCrit supplemented this limitation. Methodologically, BlackCrit was used to inform the coding scheme developed for data analysis, and provided a basis for my interpretation techniques during the coding and analysis stage—specifically working to identify how participant responses relate or

do not relate to the framing ideas of BlackCrit. A BlackCrit-informed coding scheme allowed me as the researcher to venture beyond identifying general racist practices, encounters, and experiences of Black students and recognize them within the broader and deeper context of specific and sustained violence enacted against Black bodies.

Antiblackness and Disparate Academic Outcomes

BlackCrit recognizes how framing issues of disparate academic outcomes solely in terms of inequality or disproportionately is reductive of how Black students are specifically harmed by antiblackness. When examining these outcomes, reasons, and potential solutions, BlackCrit becomes an especially useful analytic framework because the theory intentionally addresses the role of antiblackness within the phenomenon. For these reasons, BlackCrit is useful in ameliorating educational disparities because it: (1) properly contextualizes the particularity of Black Students' struggles within schools; and (2) highlights how many policy and intervention efforts to remedy inequality in schools have largely proven insufficient for successfully impacting Black students because they do not directly address the effects of antiblackness in schools.

A Case for BlackCrit: Black Students and School Discipline

In this section I discuss the utility of BlackCrit theory, using hyper-disciplining of Black students as an example of how BlackCrit can be applied to elucidate elements of antiblackness within student experiences.

A growing number of scholars have identified that Black students are hyper-criminalized and, subsequently and disproportionally, punished in schools (Skiba et al., 2002; Gregory and Weinstein, 2008). Similarly, a collection of scholars has posited that urban educators, in particular, interpret the behavioral expressions of Black students as misbehaviors and harbor deficit notions about these students (Monroe, 2005; Morris, 2016), contributing to both hyper-surveillance and hyper-criminalizing of Black students. Over-surveillance and over-policing have long been used as

methods of suppressing Black communities within the United States (Browne, 2015), and the observable racial and gendered disparities around discipline in schools must be understood in proper relation to this socio-historical context. For instance, Black girls in schools are disproportionately disciplined for infractions related to their dress, attitude, and hair (Morris, 2016). It has been shown that Afrocentric features, the physical and personality traits of and commonly associated Black girls, influence the ways they are punished by teachers, often leading to more severe consequences for minor infractions. (Blake et al., 2011). While this issue disproportionately impacts Black female students, Black students, in general, are susceptible to this intensified type of scrutiny. One recent example is that of then 16-year old Andrew Johnson, who, while a student Buena Regional High School in New Jersey in December 2018, was forced to have his dreadlocks publicly cut by referees to continue his high school wrestling match. His hair was deemed 'abrasive' and a 'hindrance to his opponent.

Browne (2015) draws the connection between former, explicit, antiblack surveillance policies (such as lantern laws) and modern surveillance technologies. Just as lantern laws and other regulations worked to restrict Black people, the punishing of Black students for Black hairstyles is more than harsh punitive discipline but essentially a punishing of Blackness (Wun, 2016). Such mistreatment creates a similar effect (explored by Browne) of rendering the Black body visible but silenced, controlled, and powerless (Browne, 2015). Just as Simone Browne links current issues impacting Black communities to antiblack surveillance culture, so must the controlling of Black students' appearance and presence be understood as part of an extensive history of policing Black bodies. It is incredibly irresponsible and dangerous to reduce policing of Blackness to a matter of dress code violation. According to Dumas and Ross (2016):

> The disciplining of Black children must be understood in the context of larger systems of repression. This is necessary to begin thinking about strategies to combat the failure of public schools to educate Black children effectively, and their success in reproducing dominant racial ideology and the repression of the Black body. (pg. 435)

BlackCrit as a framework accounts for antiblackness within school policies and offers future research an opportunity to properly recognize disparities in education, such as the hyper-criminalizing of Black students as a continuation of state-sanctioned degradation and control of Black bodies.

Conclusion/Implications for Future Research

The field of education, while becoming more critical of racial disparities still does little to address the specificity of antiblackness or its impact, has also continued to stifle the development of adequate solutions and contributing to Black students continued marginalization. As a theoretical framework, BlackCrit explicitly examines the role of antiblackness in varying phenomenon and offers a solution to this theoretical gap. Additionally, future research in critical race studies could use BlackCrit as a tool to examine how antiblackness contributes to racial disparities regarding student outcomes in addition to the continued marginalization of Black students.

Sequential Qualitative Methodology

Research Design

This study followed a sequential qualitative methodological design in which the first component informs the second component (Salañda, 2009). This two-part design was intended to allow for a comprehensive examination of the experiences of high performing Black male students attending low performing high schools. To do so, this study applied a phenomenological research approach for both data collection and analysis (discussed later in this chapter). Phenomenology is a type of inquiry that aims to examine the common experiences of a select group of people as well as their own understandings of such experiences (Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). More so, phenomenology is an investigation into the major components of a shared social phenomenon that underpins qualitative research (Worthington, 2013). Particular attentiveness to encounters with common experiences was critical to this study, given Black boys' predispositions to educational

hardships informed by antiblack racism and systemic inequality. A phenomenological research approach was selected for this study to understand the lived experiences of participants (Creswell, 2017), specifically regarding their race-, gender-, and performance status-informed experiences within low performing high schools. This study targeted the understandings and knowledge of participants as a means of examining high performing Black male students. I applied a phenomenological approach because "important findings derived from phenomenology are an understanding of a phenomenon as seen through the eyes of those who have experienced it" (Worthington, 2010, pg. 1). This research design lends itself to the collection of rich and insightful self-reports of the studied phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As De'Nay Speaks (2018) describes it, "Phenomenological research can be robust in highlighting the presence of factors and their subsequent effects for individual cases…This methodology is not intended to create generalizable knowledge, rather it is meant to bring understanding to a particular phenomenon" (pg. 42).

Phenomenology research has also investigated phenomena through the perceptions of the actors involved in the situation of study (Lester, 1999), making it a suitable approach for this dissertation as my participants also include individual school actors, who are not high performing Black male students attending participating school sites, but have been identified as having relevance to the experiences of student participants.

Part 1: Student Participant Semi-Structured Focus Groups

"Listening is the art by which we use empathy to reach across the space between us…[G]enuine listening means suspending memory, desire, and judgment—and, for a few moments at least, existing for the other person" (Nichols, 1995 as quoted in Cornier, Nurius, and Osborn, 2009). Particularly when conducting research examining young Black men, I recognize the necessity of using a humanized approach to interviewing and data collection, an approach that affords them a

type of consideration and tenderness they are too often denied due to the racialized and gendered demands placed on them. As such, the interview methodologies of this study utilized Michael Nichol's approach of listening to provide participants with a safe and adequate space to discuss and share pertinent their experiences, interpretations, and viewpoints.

The first phase of this study utilized a series of semi-structured focus group interviews of two separate groups of student participants. I recruited six from the first school site and three from a second school site, all then enrolled in grades 10 through 12. Each group participated in their own three-part series of focus group interviews. Focus group interviews were chosen because they allowed participants to share the interview experience; it created a more comfortable environment, promoted participant engagement, and helped capture more in-depth responses. Focus groups allowed participants to build off each other's responses and capture ideas, thoughts, and points of view that could have otherwise gone unprompted in conventional one-on-one interviews. I conducted three separate focus interviews with each group of participants outside of school hours via the video conferencing platform Zoom. Researchers that aim to adequately explore topics with participants they are unfamiliar with via “one-shot meetings” tend to lose important context and information in their interviews (Seidman, 2006). Three focus groups were conducted with both groups of participants to avoid loss of important context and allow for: (1) a proper rapport to develop between the researcher (myself) and participants; and (2) allocating an adequate amount of time and opportunity to thoroughly engage with interview participants.

Interviews lasted between 54 and 87 minutes in duration. Semi-structured interview techniques were used in the focus groups to promote authentic participant reflection while maintaining a degree of focus, structure, order, and direction (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Protocol items were designed to target factors that have contributed to their participants’ performance and

other germane experiences that occurred within schools as well as relevant out-of-school experiences.

Focus group protocol items were organized for the interview series to begin with topics I assessed as the least difficult to discuss and least potentially distressing to participants, progressing to heavier topics as the focus groups went on. Protocol items featured in the first focus group interviews are designed to answer the first research question (**RQ 1**), specifically addressing their experiences as high performing students in attending low performing schools. The initial focus group interview was particularly pivotal to the study as it introduced student participants to their fellow interviewees and informed a conducive climate for students to fully engage throughout the study. The protocol items employed during the second focus group also addressed **RQ 1**; these protocol items have a particular emphasis on the racial and gendered experiences of participants. The third and final focus group interview was designed to address **RQ 2 and RQ 3**, asking student participants to discuss what have been the resources, tools, methods, techniques, etc. that they have utilized to support their academic performance.

While a specific itemized interview protocol was used, responses were allowed and anticipated to become conversational to an extent and progressed outside the specifics of protocol items. The semi-structured approach afforded participants the opportunity to provide the information they deemed fit and appropriate rather than forcing them to filter their responses through the protocol items' parameters. Many of the questions were open-ended, designed to allow participants to speak at length about their experiences as candidly and thoroughly as they were willing to do so.

Nomination Process:

Following the completion of the focus group interviews, student participants were asked to nominate school actors (certificated adults within the school) they deemed relevant to their

experiences. The adult actor nomination process used in this research study is modeled after Michele Foster's community nomination process. Sometimes in such participant recruitment approaches, PIs develop an instrument or tool (such as a nomination survey) used to assist nominators in their vetting and identification of nominees. Within my particular study, however, I continued to acknowledge student participants as experts in their experiences and afforded them the ability to nominate adult interviewees based solely on their understandings of their relevant experiences. In lieu of a nomination tool, the only criteria I prescribed was that the adult(s) any student selected be employed/certified by the school and hold some relevance to their experiences as Black, male, high-performing students attending their particular school. Although nomination criteria were open to a variety of school actors, I anticipated students nominating such school staff as counselors, coaches, teachers, administrators, and security personnel, as these have been identified in literature as school actors with a substantial impact on the experiences of students. However, I refused to limit students in their nomination options, and I also wanted adult participant criteria to be open to actors who may not be especially recognized in previous research and literature. Upon each selection of an adult actor, I asked that student participants to share in detail their rationale for the selection of adult nominees. Although I recorded students' reasoning, I do not consider this exchange an additional interview, but rather as a supplemental protocol item included with the final focus group. The discussion of adult nominees was not substantial enough to constitute holding another focus group but did provide insight into students' reasoning for nominating them, a valuable data point.

Part 2: School Actor Individual Semi-Structured Interviews

The second phase of data collection consisted of individual interviews with adult participants (those who were nominated by student participants and agreed to participate in interviews). I chose to conduct individual interviews with adult participants to account for any

variation of both the roles these adults occupied as well as the differing reasons students stated nominated them. Considering these variations, a group setting that would have lumped such participants together would have undermined the identification that made them appropriate for the study. To properly attend to their specific roles and interpretations, conducting individual interviews was the favored method. The structure of individual interviews allowed for creation of a one-on-one setting between participants and myself to probe their interpretations of how they contribute to the experiences and outcomes of student participants. Individual interviews also functioned as in-depth follow-ups to student participants' specific responses. Protocol items for individual interviews were designed to most immediately answer **RQ 3b**, addressing how these actors understood themselves in relation to the experiences. Data collected from adult participants also provided complimentary information on the navigation strategies and tools student participants used to support their academic performance.

Participants

This dissertation study included both student and adult participants. The inclusion of both groups of participants was designed to enable a comprehensive examination of high performing Black male students recognizing relevance of school actors to their experiences.

Student Participants.

All nine student participants are self-identified Black male high school students. Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2017; Bogdan and Biklen, 1998) was used to identify and recruit appropriate participants for this study, specifically those who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell and Clark 2007). To recruit participants who possessed anecdotal or experiential knowledge relevant to this investigation, student participants had to meet all requirements of the following criteria:

1. Identify as Black or African-American

2. Attend one of the participating school sites
3. Be a sophomore, junior, or senior student
4. Have a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 3.0 or above
5. Be College Eligible or Projected to Be College Eligible (having completed or projected to complete A-G requirements by the end of high school career)

At the time of student participant recruitment, I used my pre-existing rapport with school officials (principals and counselors) to aid in my recruitment of student participants. Specifically, I collaborated with school officials to identify and outreach to potential student participants. With the help of counselors and community mentors, I disseminated recruitment flyers and contact information. Upon being successfully connected with potential participants via school personnel, I provided in-depth explanation of my research project's nature and purpose during a virtual 'info session'. At the close of the session, I invited those interested to participate. The students who expressed interest in being a part of the study were then issued consent and assent forms that was completed and returned before participation in any interviews.

Adult Participants

Adult participants consisted of certificated employees, including teachers, coaches, and counselors. Using a secondary-participant nomination process, modeled after Michele Foster's "community nomination" (1991) methodology, student participants identified in-school staff and personnel who were pertinent to their experiences. The community nomination process recognized Black male student participants as knowledge holders capable of evaluating their experiences. These students are and were able to provide an "insider view" (Foster, 1991) and identify employees appropriate for interviewing. This nomination approach also served to counter the tendency for educational research to devalue or ignore student voice initiating this process with students being able to determine who was or had been relevant to their trajectories and experiences as Black, male, high performing students. I contacted nominated adults via school messaging systems to initiate communication. Additionally, I utilized existing relationships with school personnel (those who

assisted with my student participant recruitment) to outreach to adult participants. Upon agreeing to participate in the study, nominated adult actors were asked to sign a consent form to partake in individual semi-structured interviews held virtually via Zoom. I recruited a total of four adult participants (three from the first school site and one from the second school included in this study).

Site Selection

A particular national emphasis on 'turning around' low performing schools is evidenced by several policy reform efforts such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and, most recently, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB). According to NCLB, low performing schools are those classified as in need of improvement or corrective action, or that do not meet the standards established and monitored by the state board or other external authority (Herman et al., 2008). However, even this definition is relative as state standards and assessments vary greatly, often leaving the "burden to craft the operational definition of *low-performing schools*… on states themselves" (Carpenter et al., 2017, pg. 271). As such, this project uses the criteria implemented by the state of California (the state this study took place in) to identify low performing schools for participation.

In late January of 2020, the California Department of Education (CDE) released the state's list of its lowest-performing schools as required by the *Every Student Succeeds Act*. To identify the lowest-performing schools, the CDE used the California School Dashboard, an online database that features performance reports and measurements of California schools and districts. The California School Dashboard uses segmented color-coded circles to represent students' performance level informed by current performance (status) and improvement over time (change). The scale ranges from Blue/5 segments (highest performance), Green/4 segments, Yellow/3 segments, Orange/2 segments, and Red/1 segment (lowest performance). The minimum state goal for all indicators included in the Dashboard is the Green/4 segment performance level. Any performance level below

Green (i.e., Yellow, Orange, or Red) indicates that improvement is needed. Schools ranked as red in all indicators, (denoting the lowest of five rankings) or a combination of red and orange (the second-lowest) were designated as in need of support (EdSource, 2019). Schools continually unable to meet the satisfactory performance level are also designated *Title 1* and School Improvement Grant (SIG) qualified. SIGs are authorized for schools demonstrating substantial need and that require "assistance in order to substantially raise the achievement of students in their lowest-performing schools" (US Dept. of Education, 2018).

My research project was conducted at two participating school sites within the Los Angeles County, East High School (pseudonym) and Anderson high school (pseudonym). Both schools in this study are *Title 1* and School Improvement Grant (SIG) qualified. Additionally, while both schools share low performing status, they have different demographic compositions. East High School has a student body population that is 75.4 % African-American (one of the only majority African-American/Black public high schools remaining in Los Angeles) and 19.6 % Latino. Anderson High School has a student body population that is 25.3% African-American and 69.2% Latino. I've chosen to mention African-American and Latino student population percentages because, at both schools, these are the largest racial/ethnic demographic groups. Complete breakdowns of student populations for both high schools during the 2018/19 academic years can be found in Figure 2. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, California suspended Dashboard reporting of state and local indicators for 2020 and 2021 academic years. Student demographic data from the 2019 academic year is the latest reported by the California School Dashboard.

Figure 2.

Name	Total	African American	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Filipino	Hispanic or Latino	Pacific Islander	White
East	899	**75.4%**	0.1%	1.2%	0.1%	19.6%	0.2%	3.3
Anderson	879	**25.3%**	0.1%	0.5%	1%	69.2%	0.1%	1.7%

This project sought to thoroughly explore the racial component of student participants' experiences. Considering how BlackCrit warns of conflating racial diversity with anti-racism, and that non-Black people of color contribute to antiblack racism experienced by Black students, sites for this study were selected to compare Black student experiences across demographic contexts, specifically comparing the racialized experiences of Black males at a school where Black students are the majority (East) to a school where they are not (Anderson).

Data Analysis Plan

Student Participant Focus Group Data

As the principal investigator, I exclusively coded and analyzed this study's data. I followed Green's (2006) prescribed five essential phases of analyzing semi-structured interview data: transcription (preparing the data for analysis), description (coding and thematic analysis), analysis (examination of relationships in data), interpretation (description of results), and displaying of findings and assertions for readers. Modeling my data analysis after Green's recommendations, upon completion focus group and interviews, audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim into word documents. Data management and interpretation was an integrated, emergent process that included multiple phases of coding and analysis as ideas and connections developed during examination of data. During the initial phase of data analysis, I read interview transcripts from each focus group interview verbatim. In reviewing transcribed interviews, reflective comments, or marginal remarks Miles and Huberman (1994) of emerging interpretations of data were recorded within Word document versions of interview transcripts. These reflective notes and analytic memos (Saldana, 2015) informed my preliminary data interpretations. Additionally, initial review of transcripts afforded me the opportunity to make a record of substantial occurrences from the interviews such as pauses, inflections, and non-verbal cues that were key to holistic understanding of participants' responses. In the phase of focus group data analysis that followed,

transcripts were uploaded and sequentially arranged in a qualitative data analysis software (Dedoose) to manage, organize, code, and re-code data.

Here the software was used to code for similarities and differences of patterns and trends within the data. Specifically, tags and *in vivo* code words (informed by emergent codes) were assigned to passages of text whose organization was informed by the initial reading, review, and annotation of transcripts. This phase of coding was used to inform identification of common ideas, experiences, and interpretations, as well as to assist in development and organization of finalized codes and themes. The explanation of final codes and themes was recorded in the form of secondary analytic memos (Saldana, 2015). Use of memos helped highlight the connection between expanded codes and developed key themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

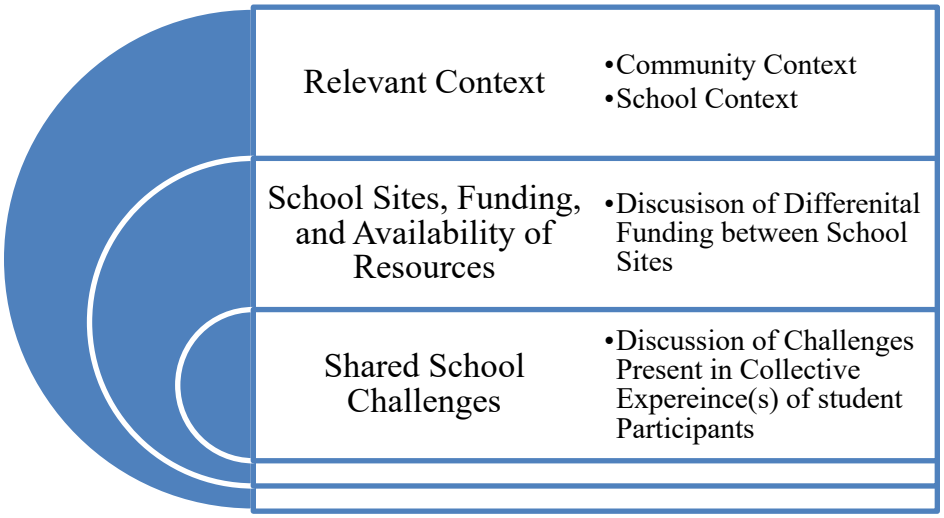
Adult Semi-Structured Interview Data

Responses from adult participants were intended to capture how they understand their roles and relation to the experiences of high performing Black male students attending their schools. Analysis procedure of this data was the same as those performed for student focus groups, which followed a Green (2006) model of (1) transcription (2) description, (3) analysis (4) interpretation, and (5) displaying. Data collected from adult participants helped expand and further contextualize themes emergent within student participant data—specifically how adult actors related to the supports students utilized (discussed further in later chapters).

CHAPTER 4: BLACK BOYS IN LOW-PERFORMING HIGH SCHOOLS

In this chapter I first provide relevant description and discussion of both the community and school contexts of this research project's participating sites. Community and school contexts help situate the major similarities and dissimilarities between both sites, the most pertinent of these factors being the substantial difference in funding and resource availability between the schools. After providing description of relevant contexts, I detail how the ways each school site is funded and resourced has impacted the experience of students participating in this study. This chapter then elaborates on the challenges students at both schools collectively encountered. The findings presented in this chapter directly address the first guiding question of this study; What are the challenges associated with being a high performing Black male student within low performing high schools? Discussion of community and school contexts, the impact of divergent funding and resourcing approaches, and issues identified by participants at both schools provides accounts of how race, location, and school inequity inform the challenges student participants experience. Figure 3 provides a thematic map of the content and findings presented in this chapter and their arrangement.

Figure 3. Arrangement of Chapter Findings



Community Context

I conducted my comparative study at two high schools located in the Los Angeles (L.A.) County. Los Angeles County, widely known for its many parks, beaches, and nearly year-round warm weather is home to approximately 10.04 million residents, making it the most populated county (of 58 counties) in the state of California. The racial demographics of L.A. County are 70.7% White, 48.6 % Hispanic or Latino, 15.4% Asian, 9% Black or African-American, and 1.4% American Indian and Alaskan Native (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In 2019 the approximated median household income of Los Angeles County households was $68,044, significantly lower than the median household income of the state, which is approximately $75,235 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Despite this differential between state and county median household incomes, L.A. County hosts several affluent neighborhoods. Both of the participating school sites featured in this study are located in an affluent L.A. County neighborhood. However, despite the commonalities of both schools being located in affluent neighborhoods and state-designated as low-performing, data analysis revealed a profound variation in the material conditions of each campus and, at times, the experiences of their respective students.

School Site Contexts

East High School

Data collection for this dissertation began at East High School (pseudonym). East High is located in the beach-facing city of El Tercero (pseudonym) and is in close proximity to several colleges and universities. At the time of the study, El Tercero's median household income was approximately $110,000, significantly higher than both the state and county median household income (U.S Census Bureau, 2020). The racial demographics of EL Tercero residents were 71.8% White, 16.2% Hispanic or Latino, 10.2% Asian, 3.7% Black or African-American, and .2% American Indian and Alaskan Native (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). However, East High's the

student racial demographics are strikingly different from those of El Tercero. East High School is one of the last predominantly Black high schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, with 74.6% of its students identifying as Black or African-American, and the second largest demographic being Latinx students (18.3%), with 1.2% identifying as Asian and 73.2% of all students considered socioeconomically disadvantaged (California School Dashboard, 2021). Many of the students attending East High School do not live in the immediate area of El Tercero but instead participate in one of the school's three magnet programs. Magnet programs are specialized initiatives within public schools designed to draw students to a particular school from across residential boundaries and assigned school zones. It should also be noted that magnet schools often serve as an alternative option to students' local schools.

Anderson High School

The second school site included in my study was Anderson High School (pseudonym) located in the city of Roseland (pseudonym). Roseland, population of approximately 142,000, is regarded for its vibrant, airy aesthetic, appealing neighborhoods, architecture design of marque buildings, and shopping districts. The city is most known for its sports stadium, which is a popular venue for college sports games and city parades. The median household income of Roseland is $83,000, lower than that of El Tercero but still significantly higher than both Los Angeles County and the state of California. The racial demographics of Roseland consists of 50.8% White, 34.9% Hispanic or Latino, 17.2% Asian, 8.8% Black or African-American, and .3% identifying as American Indian and Alaskan Native (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Anderson High School is (and was at the time of my study) predominantly Hispanic (67.6%); Black people or African-Americans are the second largest student demographic group at 24.1% of the campus population, followed by 4.6% White, and .4% identifying as Asian. Similar to East High, Anderson High has a disproportionately low representation of white and Asian students compared to its

overrepresentation of Black and Latino students. Some 86.5% of students attending Anderson High School are also considered socioeconomically disadvantaged.

For the purposes of this study, the mere racial/ethnic breakdown of student population percentages is not what is most concerns me as a researcher. Most concerning is that for many years, both schools have been state designated as low-performing as reflected in the schools' continued Title 1 designation, SIG qualification status, and unsatisfactory performance scores in areas of math, English, and graduation rate (according to the CA Dashboard). Additionally, there has been an observable concentration of low-income, Black and Latino student enrollment at these schools. Simultaneously, when comparing the racial demographics of the schools to the cities where they are located, an arguable avoidance of these schools by white and Asian community members is apparent. It has been evidenced that parents associate schools serving predominately Black and Latinx populations with fewer resources and lower school quality, even when data suggests there is no actual disparity in resources between a 'white' and 'Black' school. Still, white parents prefer their children to attend other schools that are majority white (Hailey, 2022). Although most people have an affinity for their own racial group, Hailey (2022) argues that in terms of school choice, race is more substantial than a passive preference. Hailey (2022) finds that racial stereotypes—particularly about Black students—are perpetuated in schools and that this drives the school preferences of white and Asian parents. Although conducted in New York, a 2020 study found that the shared tendency of white and non-white parents living in racially diverse neighborhoods to avoid sending their children to "Black neighborhood schools" contributes to ongoing racial and ethnic segregation in schools. This phenomenon is observable at both East High and Anderson High. Despite the neighborhoods both schools are located in being largely white, white students comprise one of the smallest student demographics recorded at both schools (between 1.7% to 3.3%). By contrast, Black and Latinx student comprise the majority of these schools' student

populations. Student participants voiced awareness of how white and Asian community members avoid attending their schools.

School Sites, Funding, and Availability of Resources

All student participants in this study were high-performing (defined by a 3.0 GPA and projected completion of California A-G requirements), Black male students attending low-performing schools, and across data, identified several challenges experienced by all participants (discussed in further detail later in this chapter).

Table 2: Student Participants

	School			
	East High School		Anderson High School	
	Participant Pseudonyms	Grade	Participant Name	Grade
1	Jackson	11th	Daniel	10th
2	Damon	11th	Chris	10th
3	Michael	11th	Rodney	10th
4	Gene	11th		
5	Austin	11th		
6	Kyle	10th		

However, I begin the findings section with discussion of the significant difference in school funding and resource availability of resources between students enrolled at East High School and those attending Anderson High School. Despite my findings speaking to substantial commonalities in the experiences of my participants, I have chosen to open this section by prefacing that despite shared experiences, identities, and conditions, Black male students should not be treated as a monolith. Additionally, most or every aspect of their academic experiences should not be expected to mirror or parallel each other. Rather, the shared aspects of Black male student experiences should be taken into account while properly considering the diversity that exists among them, within their student experiences, and (as data has suggested) within schools considered low-performing. Throughout analysis of data, the presence and impact of these differing school contexts were most pronounced

in participants' descriptions of their schools' material conditions. By material conditions, I am referring to the state of their physical facilities' quality, learning materials, and other resources either available to students at their schools or directly associated with their schools.

When asked about the particular challenges facing them as students, all participants at East High immediately agreed that lack of funding was a core issue within their school. Specifically, students expressed frustration at the lack of funding available for needed facility repair, quality learning materials, support of extra-curricular activities, and access to additional resources and materials to support their academic endeavors. Within the past few decades there has been a clear divestment from the interests and support of public education (Leachman et al., 2017), with low-income, Black, and Latinx students being disproportionately impacted by this divestment[1]. The impact is more pronounced at low-performing, urban schools serving majority Black and Latinx populations, which have experienced a continual trend of under-funding and under-resourcing in comparison to schools and districts serving majority white, affluent populations (Ostrander, 2015). In California, despite being the nation's wealthiest state and fifth largest economy in the world, public school funding has largely been insufficient to meet the educational goals and needs of students (Hahnel, 2020). Student participants attending East High discussed the effects of both local and national funding allocation disparities within their experiences. For example, Jackson explained:

> [W]e are underfunded or we don't get enough money. What I'd say I think maybe another issue we haven't talked about, it's probably our management within the school. I think the money that we do get it doesn't really go to the right places for our school.

What is particularly interesting about Jackson's response is that he does not discuss a simple lack of funding but also alludes to potential mismanagement or misallocation of funds. East High, as a low-

[1] "23 Billion." *EdBuild*, edbuild.org/content/23-billion

performing school, qualifies for improvement grants and funding. However, observations from students indicate no direct translation between qualifying for these funds and improvements within the school actually being made.

Kyle, also a student from East High, added that the athletics programs and facilities of his school are particularly underfunded, adding:

> I agree with [Jackson]. A lot of our athletic programs are being underfunded, like football. Almost every LAUSD School is getting their football fields replenished and getting a new track. I know St. Steven's (pseudonym), down the street from us, is under construction for their football field and getting lights and getting turf and a new track. Then we look at our school, and it's like, "Well, we're literally right down the street. How come we're not doing the same thing that they're doing?" Uniforms are just passed down.
>
> There's a lot of factors in the athletic field that needs to be improved, and that's just one aspect of the school being underfunded or not using their funding wisely.
>
> The physical condition of the school campus, we barely got new desks and seats like a month before we got out of school in March, so I don't know. This is just like a lot of things that need to be improved then. I'm not an administrator. I'm not a manager of the school, but we can be using our funding wisely.

Again, like Jackson, Kyle, having come into direct contact with the consequences of his school's funding issues, expressed his concern and critique of how funding for East High was being managed. Even without the designation or knowledge of an administrative personnel or a school official, both students astutely articulated that something (even without being able to name specifics) seems to be amiss with the ways their school was either funded overall or was using available funds. In further discussing challenges with inadequate classroom material and supplies, Michael from East High stated:

> I agree with what [Jackson] is saying, especially with the athletic aspect, but even if you think about it educational-wise, the books have been passed down and have gotten to a point where you have to ask somebody else to see what page because it has been ripped out of the book or has been damaged to the point where it's unusable.

In addition to the immediate need of support for East High's athletics programs, Michael also pointed to the physical conditions of the campus and poor quality of school supplies and materials (such as textbooks) he as a student is expected to work with. Materials such as books that have

become so weathered that they are now “unusable”. When following-up with participants about their descriptions and asking how these issues impacted them personally, several students gave accounts of how maneuvering their academic rigor and demands was made more difficult by issues related to school funding and poor-quality materials. Kyle described being frustrated by the reality of other neighboring schools having programs college preparation and career development not available to him. He explained:

> In a way, it impacts me individually because I know there are other schools that have a bunch of programs being provided for their students that can help them excel in a certain field, 1 like I know [of is] El Segundo. I went through the application process there, but I didn't get accepted.
>
> [T]hey (El Segundo HS) have this pathway program that helps students interested in certain fields like medicine, or government or performing arts and theater that could help them determine the major that they want to major in in college and just help them decide their interests.

Kyle’s comments on his school’s lack of available extra-curricular activities and college preparation resources reflected that his interests and intrigues were going unmet. He expressed a concern with the quality of preparation he was receiving for his matriculation and eventual navigation into college. Additionally, Kyle described why there should be resources available to him that could have assisted in developing his career interests and pursuits. However, such resources again, were not immediately available to him on campus. As an aspiring first-generation college student, for Kyle (and many students like himself) participation in extra-curricular was and is essential to developing competitive eligibility for flagship colleges and universities. Specified resources that assist underrepresented students in navigating such decisions as major selection can be crucial to their retention and post-baccalaureate plans. However, with a lack of in-school college preparation resources and limited funds for extra-curricular options, Kyle was concerned that his opportunities for college preparation and career development were being hindered.

It should also be noted that within his response, Kyle specified that he applied to attend El Segundo High School but was denied. His response appears to signal an equity issue within school lottery systems that directly connects to how Black, low-income students are concentrated into low performing schools by specific policies. Despite appearing to support equal opportunities between students, in actuality school lottery systems allow some students to be admitted to highly sought after schools while those unselected are relegated to lesser quality schools. In 2015, then president Barack Obama signed into affect the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), a bipartisan measure intended to support the nation's supposed commitment to equal opportunity for all students. However, persisting policies and practices, such as the school lottery system referred to by Kyle, exist in tension with the equity-based idea that all students, regardless of circumstance, should have genuine access to quality education and schools. Instead, many existing policies perpetuate inequality and manifest as direct challenges to the academic trajectories of Black students and those of other vulnerable student populations.

When interviewing students attending Anderson High, their discussion and reflections pertaining to facilities and school funding were nearly the opposite of those of East High participants. In fact, where all participants at East High agreed that their school was in need of better funding, all participants at Anderson High spoke to some extent about how well resourced their school was. One Anderson High participant, Chris, shared:

> There's a lot of community [support] in our school. There are not all the issues at our school that people say there is. Our school has a lot of community, basically, and teachers and students have relationships that help kids out getting better grades and improving themselves as a person.

When reflecting on the variety of extra-curricular activities and other opportunities available to Anderson students, Chris went on to share about the school's largesse in this area:

> There's lots of programs at our school. Even when I walk into school, I see banners on the wall saying that there's ASB, saying that there's scholarships and what room to go to for scholarships. Yes, so there's lots of things. There's lots of things people don't even know about that people need to find out about and get involved with the school.

Chris's response was of particular interest to me because he highlighted how supported and backed Anderson High is by its surrounding community. Chris's comments were in stark contrast to the sentiments of students from East High School who felt their school is abandoned, ignored, and in contention with its surrounding community. Jackson, from East High more specifically stated that:

> [S]chools like El Segundo and everything, they're higher income families. Those people could donate to the school, but our school is (audible pause) I know a lot of people, and I don't want to say poor or anything but lower classes. We can't really get like donations and everything.

Following up to this response, Kyle from East High added:

> I agree with [Jackson]. When you look at other schools in lower income funding, they're gentrified but the schools are so not improving... and other communities around the area are being improved, and then we're still this.

Perhaps most poignant about Kyle's reflection is his description of his school as *this*, an exemplification of how despite funding being allocated to neighboring schools and efforts to gentrify surrounding areas, his school has remained under-resourced. In many ways, Anderson High is similar to "those other schools" that East High students have described when referring to adjacent, better-funded schools, located in majority white and Asian areas. As Daniel, an Anderson student shared:

> At [Anderson] High School there's a lot of help, a lot of resources there. If you really go through the school and look through the school, there's a lot of stuff that most schools don't really have. Like our film room, we have a green screen, a news reporter. That's something cool that I've seen my first day coming there.

Rodney, the final participant from Anderson, also spoke to how well resourced he considered his school", stating:

> [T]here's a lot of programs. There's a after-school program for the juniors and the seniors to write their college...admission essays. With our counselors, there's an app that we can use that you can easily set a time for and you can always meet with your counselor. There's also office hours with your teachers. There's also a lot of programs that I don't really know but just in general, there's a lot of support, more than you need.

Daniel's and Rodney's descriptions of the facilities and resources available to them at Anderson High School are especially striking because some of the items and resources they specified as their

school having plenty of (i.e. college preparation, councilors, adequate facilities, and funding for extra-curricular), East High students named as items they wished their school had. In fact, when asked if there was anything they wanted to change about their school, Kyle from East High named these very items, when he stated:

> I'd change the funding towards athletic programs, and then more active resources for college, more school counselors, better access to after school programs, more extracurricular activities that could motivate students and keep them at school, keep them distracted and occupied from the environment that they're growing up in, but things that could cheap down moving, school related things. The schools El Segundo, Mira Costa, and Venice High School, they are obviously being funded more because they have more programs and opportunities and better athletic directors and better resources. And then you take a look at our school and we're not on the same level as them when should be. That's what holds us back as a whole, I think.

When considering the responses of all student participants regarding school funding and resource availability at their schools, data analysis both corroborated existing research that identifies poor facilities and resource scarcity as challenges facing many students attending low-performing schools, but not all. In some schools (such as Anderson) students perceive their school as well-resourced and are knowledge about a variety of supports available to them.

Although participants from Anderson spoke to having or accessing a variety of resources and opportunities available at their school, like the East High participants, Anderson High participants identified a different host of shared, challenges and conditions. These included in-school and personal challenges that participants experienced individually and collectively.

Shared School Challenges

While specific challenges with school funding and resource availability were specific to the participants at East High School, throughout the remainder of the study, my data analysis revealed several school related challenges that all participants encountered. At both sites participants shared challenges with the remote learning and virtual platforms their schools employed, as well as challenges with school engagement as distance learners. Findings in this section further address my

first research question aimed at identifying challenges faced by students. Data analysis directly points to issues heavily related to COVID-19, remote learning, and how the impact of these issues are at times compounded by conditions in low-performing schools. Findings in this section highlight the vulnerabilities and pitfalls high-performing students are susceptible to, and that are often masked by their performance status. Findings in the section further reemphasize the need for awareness of burdens that impact all Black male students and the need to support their navigation of these difficulties.

Ineffective Remote Modes of Remote Learning

Throughout the past three years several indicators that the US was woefully underprepared to deal with the full impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have emerged. The suspension of employment and extended shutdowns of facilities, specifically schools, have demarked cohorts of students. Many students in US schools found themselves forced from learning in their classrooms and into emergency remote schooling formats, including the participants in this study, who at the time of our focus group series were attending school via a virtual or hybrid format. As actively enrolled high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most pronounced issues that students from this study identified as challenging were the ineffective and difficult modes of remote learning they were mandated to endure when continuing their education during a global pandemic. Students at East High shared how, in their evaluation, their school responded poorly to COVID-19's various impacts. Kyle from East High School echoed this sentiment:

> There were some teachers anticipating that we were going to go on with it [transition to remote learning] then watching the news and seeing other schools closing down, we [East High School staff and administration] didn't take any precautions to make sure that everything online would be done efficiently. Personally, I have friends at private schools where their schools were anticipating online learning, so they took steps...so that their students could adjust to that and navigate their way around online learning because it's a completely different thing now. I do think that our school should have taken extra safety measures...things that could have helped us out, things that they could have provided for us in order for us to be comfortable instead of everything being so spontaneous and having to figure out things on our own.

Kyle's especially pointed critique of his student experiences at East High are due to his previous attendance at private schools and comparing that setting with the low-performing, under-resourced public school he was attending at the time of this study. Throughout our interviews, he made multiple comparisons between the schooling he was experiencing at East High and those of his peers who remained in private schools. In this particular instance, he described (via his conversations and networks with private school peers) being aware of how neighboring private schools took anticipatory action during pandemic shutdowns to mitigate the difficulties students would have transitioning to remote learning. With this knowledge, Kyle expressed his frustration and concern that his school should have taken similar action—or any kind of action—to prepare students for remote learning rather than leaving them to troubleshoot the range of issues that arose. While individual public schools did not have the authority to suspend in-person learning, Kyle's description of his school being aware of a possible shutdown and foregoing preparation illustrates how the slow response and inaction on the school's part authorities created an exacerbated state of disadvantage experienced by certain students. The full extent that consequences of loss instructional time and quality will have on Black low-income students is yet to be revealed. Additionally, Kyle's response also highlights the standing inequity between schools such as East High and better-funded, more autonomous private schools. Kyle's response demonstrates what emerging research has identified as national and local hesitancy to take proper action to adequately support students through the COVID-19 pandemic (Hatcher, 2020). Student participants went on to discuss the specific challenges that followed their schools' transitions to remote learning.

Students expressed concern for how their learning and school experiences were negatively impacted by the abrupt transition to remote learning due to numerous technical issues. When I explicitly asked participants about their virtual learning experiences, students immediately issued a collective groan, illustrating the group's collective frustration regarding this topic. Damon, a

student at East High school, articulated how his transition to remote learning was abrupt and disruptive:

> Right of the bat, it's just Zoom itself. The first week of school when we had our first Zoom meeting with our teacher, the school crashed and we couldn't get on Zoom, and I missed the first two periods because I couldn't log on. Even now, after they fixed it, I still have trouble logging on and stuff.

Damon emphasized how the video conferencing software and program his school employed for remote learning was lacking. In his accounts, since Zoom was first implemented, he has had persistent issues with logging on and being able to attend his classes virtually. Such particular trouble with Zoom is not specific to Damon, as he even detailed that in the first days of his school's transition to remote learning, the video conferencing program crashed entirely; he and other students were unable to attend all of their class periods. Other participants, including Austin and Gene from East High School described the issues they encountered as remote learners:

> **Austin**: I'll say one of my biggest issues is my Wi-Fi. Sometimes, the teacher might be explaining whatever he is explaining, and it's going to be cutting out, so I'm not going to get everything he says. Most of them don't give a rundown or a summary of what presumed said after class or whatever. Most of the time, I have to go on YouTube and find a video about whatever we did during the class. I have a whole other session just to learn what I was supposed to learn during a Zoom session. That's a double work for me.
>
> **Gene**: I agree with [Austin] because I experienced those same problems. Sometimes, it won't even be just my Wi-Fi, it'll actually be the teacher's Wi-Fi. For example, my APUSH class, our teacher will go through something very important over the lesson, and he'll cut out for half of it. He won't be able to hear us when we try and tell him he cut out, and the same goes for my AP English teacher.

In addition to technical issues creating barriers for student attendance and engagement, Austin and Gene's experience with Wi-Fi issues illustrate how technical challenges directly impeded on the quality of instruction students received during the initial 2020 shutdown of schools. Gene emphasized that Wi-Fi issues occurred on due to tech challenges on the teachers' ends as well as students', with audio cutouts being so severe at times that participants were unable to alert their teachers to the sound issues or the information they were not receiving. The students also reported

that constant streaming disruptions and instances of inaudibility also made it difficult to capture or understand the entirety of school lessons and class discussion. With their teachers often foregoing any additional reviewing of materials, Austin pointed out being forced to supplement his instruction with his own individualized learning efforts, specifically accessing online lessons and explanations of topics. Although he called this 'double work,' I recognized three dimensions of Austin's supplemental self-teaching: (1) gathering what information he can during his actual school lesson; (2) locating supplementary material online, and; (3) individually facilitating his grappling with and comprehension of a topic. While it is not uncommon for students to use online resources to aid their learning, to do so in response to the lack, absence, or inaccessibility of teachers' lessons, as in Austin's case, draws attention to issues of instruction quality related to virtual learning as well as how students compensate for this ongoing shortfall. Continuing with how technology and Wi-Fi issues have impacted students, Kyle from East High School also added that:

> I have two cousins that are taking Zoom classes at the same time as me, and a bunch of other things like technical difficulties. I already have a C in two classes just because I missed those periods because when they were taking attendance I wasn't there. I've emailed both of the teachers that I wasn't able to get on because my Wi-Fi was down. Apparently, that's not an excuse when it comes to Zoom meetings. It's hard because attendance plays a huge role now even though there could be a lot of things hindering you from getting on. I just feel like some teachers need to be more understanding of that.

Kyle described how he shared his learning space with his two cousins. Having multiple devices share a single Wi-Fi connected created technical difficulties and he was unable to attend his remote classes, which ultimately caused his grades to fall. The narratives of Austin, Gene, and Kyle demonstrate the detrimental impacts of school inequity, particularly as they have occurred during a global pandemic. Disparities in campus resource availability is evidenced by how lower income schools serving predominantly Black and Latinx students are unable to supplement the quality of instruction and learning lost during the emergency shift to remote learning formats.

As concerning as the loss of instructional time and quality created by Wi-Fi and connection issues was to students, the new attendance policy Kyle identified—which carried heavy penalties for absences—was also troublesome. Intended to incentivize students to log into their remote classes, the new attendance policy did not account for the ways attendance can be hindered or prevented because of issues with Wi-Fi or Zoom itself. In Kyle's case, his school's penalties led to the 10th grader having a C in multiple classes early on in the school year because he could not attend his classes due to Wi-Fi issues at home. Kyle was not truant; he was disadvantaged, and in need of support. This stringent attendance policy serves as another example of several school policies and responses enacted during the COVID-19 that did not properly consider the needs and vulnerabilities of marginalized students.

Lack of Considerations from Teachers

The unintended consequences related to remote learning formats that Kyle described are also compounded by a lack of consideration for him as a student on part of his teachers. Of critical importance is Kyle assertion that "teachers need to be more understanding" when expressing that teachers should respond with consideration and understanding to students' difficulties with remote learning because these are unprecedented difficulties. However, as he described, this is often not the case. His concerns and explanations were instead undermined when he attempted to articulate his tech challenges. Kyle's frustration at his teacher's lack of consideration and disregard for a student being unable to access virtual learning exemplifies how students' concerns were not adequately addressed and even ignored at times by some teachers. Other responses from participants in my study show that often in scenarios where students do not navigate a virtual platform correctly due to unfamiliarity with the medium or Wi-Fi issues, teachers often interpreted these instances as failures on the students' behalf rather than offering grace and support for remote learning difficulties.

Although focus group interviews with students at Anderson High School took place months after those with East High School students, Anderson students also identified challenges related to their schools' remote learning formats. Chris, a tenth grader and first-year remote learner at Anderson shared that:

> The teachers tried their best with us, but if you're sitting in front of a computer, for me, I don't know about other students, all the words just start getting in in one ear out the other. It's hard to pay attention rather than being in class.

Here, Chris described how disengaged he was by virtual learning and that he found it difficult to focus on, and retain the information being covered. The extended periods of time at his computer and working in a stationary manner were especially challenging for Chris, so much so that he described it as a key contributor to difficulty comprehending classroom material.

It should be noted that unlike the student participants at East High School, who were interviewed while attending high school solely as remote learners, Anderson students attended a hybrid model of school where their schedule rotated between in-person instruction and remote instruction. This distinction resulted from the timing difference between when students were interviewed. East High students were interviewed earlier within the pandemic when many Los Angeles County schools transitioned to remote learning for the remainder of the academic year and anticipated returning to in-person instruction at the start of the following academic year. However, with the pandemic still ongoing, it was deemed too dangerous for schools to fully re-open the following year and so several, including Anderson High, adopted a hybrid model of instruction. Anderson student perspectives were insightful as these students simultaneously experienced in-person and remote learning, allowing for direct comparison of the two instructional models. In fact all participants attending Anderson High School, when reflecting on the challenges they experienced at *school*, discussed how remote learning came with more challenges than in-person learning. Rodney from Anderson High School explained that:

> I have the hybrid schedule, so I go to school half the days, which would be Tuesday and Wednesday, and the other group has Thursday and Friday. After being back to my natural habits at school, the remote system seems 10 times worse now actually compared to actually being in the classroom environment with my teachers getting help because it's just way more comfortable for me at least and it feels more like school compared to "Type this, submit by midnight."

Even with part of their instruction facilitated in-person, Anderson students were still impacted by the shortcomings of remote learning formats. In Rodney's assertion, in-person instruction, the format he was most accustomed to and comfortable with, was his 'natural' learning habitat. For Rodney, attending school partially in-person actually highlighted his difficulty with remote instruction because the difference in quality of instruction was much more pronounced and experienced. Rodney was explicit that he was able to get help from his teachers more easily when attending school in-person and that his preferred mode of learning in fact 'feels more like school.' By comparison, in his remote learning Rodney was tasked with following generic and disengaging instructions such as 'type this by midnight' in lieu of teacher facilitation. Rodney identified his classroom environment and select teachers as reasons for preferring in-person learning. As a remote learner he was separated from his teachers and peers for more than a year. Many students stated that they benefitted from collaborative and interactive learning environments, so an abrupt shift to a highly individualized style of learning would by no surprise impact their ability to engage with learning materials. Additionally the virtual learning formats offered as a response to COVID-19 failed to accommodate diversity of learning style. Such was the case for Daniel from Anderson High School, who also shared sentiments that were similar to Rodney's:

> I'll also say the same about online and going to school because I also had the same schedule as Rodney with Tuesday and Wednesday, and yes, it's way better in school. I feel more comfortable instead of having everything on the internet. I'm a visual learner instead of an online in-class learner.

Daniel described himself as a visual learner and much-preferred in-school, in-person instruction to virtual learning. When teaching, the needs of students rarely remain constant from one situation to the next. The rigidity of remote learning formats described by participants at both high schools was

particularly challenging for students like Daniel who stated that during half of his instructional time he was unable to engage his preferred learning style due to the individualized, non-interactive approach of remote learning. Both Rodney and Daniel used the word 'comfortable' to describe their learning environments when physically attending school. This particular descriptor stands out because although participants engaged most of their remote learning from their homes and other familiar locations. I interpret this as students severely missed the benefits of their classroom spaces, live teacher-students interaction, and peer networks. In a later section I discuss that students identify both supportive teacher relationships and peer networks as pivotal to their navigation of school demands and challenges.

Challenges with Engagement

As previously discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many K-12 schools across the nation to suspend in-person learning and abruptly employ remote, virtual, or hybrid forms of schooling. These emergency response formats of teaching required many students to learn and work from home. Much of the emerging literature focused on remote learning during COVID-19 has identified student disengagement from school as a primary challenge, particularly impacting Black and Latinx students (Besecker and Thomas, 2020; Dorn et al., 2020). The dramatic and national decline of K-12 student engagement since mid-March of 2020 has resulted in many students "go missing", wherein they disengage completely from remote and hybrid models of course instruction, leaving their whereabouts unknown by school officials (Santibañez and Guarino, 2021). While these are the more extreme cases, they do exemplify the severity of student engagement issues impacting pandemic learners. Across interview data, student participants detailed how their disengagement with schooling during distance learning were related to issues as varying distractions, time management, and their at-home work environments.

Distractions

Constructing a productive remote learning environment has proven difficult for many students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Many young people who were uprooted from their classrooms and placed into improvised learning environments struggled to engage fully and properly with their schooling. Regarding their at-home environments, student participants said that they constantly encountered daily distractions from and interruptions to their instructional time, many of which would normally be mitigated by class being held in-person. Gene from East High School described how his difficulty with full engagement through distance learning because of various distractions:

> I also feel like I get distracted very easily, so I could be in the class, and something could happen two classes down, and when I hear something, I'll put all my attention to that. I just need to figure out how to keep myself focused in class and all.

Gene described being easily distracted and how this led him to feel as though he needs to exercise a better degree of focus when participating in remote schooling. Chris and Daniel from Anderson High School made similar assertions about remote learning, specifically how they were more distracted by electronic devices. The two shared:

> **Chris**: [W]hen we're in school, I'm not about to be on my phone or anything. Then the teachers are really engaging. They go around making sure that you have all your work done and if you need help. That's the complete opposite of when we're remote because the teachers, they don't check up on you. They just give you the work and just log off.
>
> **Daniel**: The same for [Me]. Online, it's like you can do it, but then here comes all the distractions like your phone, the game, and people are asleep, then here comes watching TV, but at school, there's hardly any distractions because you really can't be on your phone like that because teachers are right there. If you are, they confiscate your phone and stuff like that, but at home, it's different because you're at home, you have way more freedom than at school.

In their descriptions, both Chris and Daniel drew attention to several key differences between their remote and in-person learning experiences. Specifically in the former, less structured, learning environments, they had open, unregulated access to streaming services, social media, games, and their phones. In this particular exchange, Daniel expressed appreciation for practices such as his

school's no-phone policy. It should also be noted that in both instances Chris and Daniel highlight the benefit of having a teacher instruct them in a designated physical learning space because they benefit from instructors' classroom management. With their teachers absent from their physical learning spaces, students repeatedly talked about how they experienced decreased classroom structure, student conduct accountability, and school policy enforcement, all of which exacerbated the possibility of them being distracted or interrupted. Chris also describes how there is less classroom management in remote learning as his teachers are also less present. Chris found that when teaching remotely, his teachers often assign work with minimal instruction, clarification, or support, compounding the drastic difference in instructional engagement (and lesson quality) between in-person and remote learning. Rodney, the final member of the Anderson participant group, expressed identical sentiments to those of his peers:

> I agree with [Daniel]. It's not like you don't want to do the work or whatever on your phone is that interesting, it's just when you're sitting there and there's just nothing else to really do to engage you or you're not in an environment like normal school, it's hard not to use your phone. You know what I mean? It is hard not to.

The emphasis students placed on being constantly distracted while undergoing distance learning underscores how the rollout of distance learning did not properly account for or anticipate the challenges these modes of teaching and learning are susceptible to. While student phone use during school occurred prior to remote learning, it was not a severe issue until they transitioned to at-home learning environments. Rodney was not disinterested in his schoolwork. Rather, the issue is that in a less engaging environment, so unlike 'normal school' as he named it, he and other students said they were more susceptible to the overlapping effects of distraction and disengagement.

I also recognize that students being distracted during instructional time does not mean participants purposefully disengaged out of disregard for their learning, or that students were not prioritizing their learning. Rather, within the unfamiliar space of virtual learning, against the

turbulent social-political milieu that has been 2019 through today, student attention has been divided. When Rodney asked, “You know what I mean?” I interpret this as him asking me—an interviewer and adult—to comprehend why he is understandably distracted in an unregulated remote learning environment.

Both East High and Anderson High students identified open and unregulated access to their electronic devices during usual school hours as core distraction they encounter. Jackson from East High School described that:

> **Jackson**: [S]ometimes I just ... I'm not focused on the right things at the right time. I'll be doing something I probably shouldn't be doing, like playing video games when I know I need to be doing homework or whatever. So I'd say my time management skills is probably a challenge that I face.

While Jackson named his video game as a main distraction, his discussion of time management in relation to disengagement highlights how such challenges were not limited to everyday distractions. Rather findings capture how student disengagement coincided with issues of time management, motivation, and procrastination.

Manifestations of Disengagement: Issues of Time Management, Procrastination, Diminished Motivation, and Zoom Fatigue

Time Management

Failure to experience optimal engagement via remote learning platforms, student participants described how they found themselves struggling more with time management, a lack of motivation, and heightened procrastination. Gene from East High School shared that he his challenges with time management that were similar to Jackson’s:

> One of my problems would be pretty much my schedule because there would be days where I'll go to sleep at three o'clock and I'll wake up halfway through our first period in Zoom. I don't know how to really manage my time because I oversleep a lot.

Gene sleeping through his class periods, while a clear sign of disengagement, also calls attention to how his inability to maintain a healthy sleep schedule conducive to his academic demands. Austin and Kyle from East High School, added to their peer’s discussion of time management problems:

> **Austin**: I think, like they said, I think it's a big issue, time management. Some people like me, I've got sports to deal with. Some people got to deal with jobs and stuff. That's a big thing to deal with, time.
>
> **Kyle**: I agree with [Austin], because, time management is a big factor in getting things done efficiently, and having practice after school and other things that you deal with at home, it's hard to balance yourself and school and set boundaries as to "What am I going to do this day?" or, "Am I going to keep on doing this, this weekend? I'm not going to have time for myself." Sometimes you need to make sacrifices, just because of the extreme workload some teachers give, and because of extended practices or some programs that you're a part of, the extra-curriculars that could get in the way of certain things that you want to do.

Student participants identified ways the rigor and demands of their academic and personal lives had both changed and remained the same during remote learning. Austin pointed to still having to balance his school studies with his sports commitments; despite the changes and challenges of remote learning, he still expected to balance his multiple commitments. He also acknowledged other competing demands that his peers must negotiate, such as employment. Austin's observation is particularly salient as recent studies show that mounting financial hardships during the Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately impact low-income Black and Latino households (Karpam et al., 2020). Kyle responded to Austin, supporting his statement that they were negotiating multiple demands, some of which are not school-related but still informed the issue of time management impacting them as students.

Procrastination

Students also drew direct connections between being disengaged from remote learning and that disengagement causing them to delay or postpone completion of their schoolwork. Chris from Anderson High School gave a specific account of this:

> The challenges, just, for example, today, with this straight online, it's you basically just procrastinate all your work. For me, I'm a big procrastinator and when it comes to the hybrid part, it helps me, but the days we're not in school, it's just me procrastinating the work and getting distracted.

Although interviewed in separate sessions and attending a different school, Gene from East High echoed Chris' sentiments. Gene shared that his tendency to delay starting and finishing school work is exacerbated by the hybrid format:

> When assignments are due Let's say days from now, I'm like, "I'm home all day and will just lay off." Because I have all the time to myself. I'll just keep procrastinating and wait until the last 20 minutes.

The relationship between time management and procrastination has been well documented (Ocak and Boyraz, 2016) showing that procrastination is often a result of time management challenges. As such it could be anticipated that students describing disengagement and time management issues are also experiencing issues with procrastination. Damon from East High School, when adding to his peers' comments about struggling with procrastination, elaborated:

> I strongly agree with Jackson and Gene. And for me, it's really the will to want to do the assignments, because sometimes if I know I got to write an essay, and it's just the fact that I have to write an essay, which is I think, "I don't want to do this, no."

When taking into account that students have described technological challenges with virtual learning formats, competing demands, and distractions, the physical and emotional tolls paid by remote learners have been extensive, making it difficult their adequate engagement in school a moving target. Damon's description of not having the *will* to complete his assignments signaled challenges with procrastination and as well as motivation.

Motivation

In participants' collective discussion, students identified intensified difficulty with being properly motivated to engage and complete schoolwork during remote and distance learning. Students often drew direct comparison to how their motivation for school dwindled significantly during remote instruction compared to their motivation when attending in-person. Damon and Kyle from East High shared unfortunate experiences with motivation:

> **Damon**: It makes me feel like annoyed because I ...on Zoom I can't interact. It's just the thought of it being an online Zoom. It's like there's no motivation to do it basically.

> **Kyle**: I agree with [Damon's] response. There is that lack of motivation when it comes to online learning. Just knowing that you don't necessarily have to do the work or you just have the mindset of things are optional, even though really nothing is optional because we are still in a regular school year, it's just different now. I think that just knowing that there's a difference in learning this year, it's bringing everybody else's perspective on school in a bad way. Nobody really wants to put in effort anymore. I know before when I was physically in school, I used to always be determined and get through things, put as much effort as I can into work. I'm doing that now except it's just a little bit harder. Then also with the physical school environment, you're also lacking social interaction with friends and other teachers. Just having everything done virtually, it's weird. It's hard to explain, but it is just not the same.

Across remote learning, a lack of standardized procedures and policies of how virtual instruction should be carried out remains. Within this lack of uniformity across virtual classrooms, expectations of students differ greatly. As such, some students found their academic demands fluctuating between rigid and flexible. Damon and Kyle detailed how softer deadlines and work expectations caused their attitudes towards their schoolwork to change drastically. Whereas in their in-person learning, Damon and Kyle approached their work with a sense of urgency, in remote learning their schoolwork seemed to be optional much of the time, impacting (decreasing really) the immediacy or urgency with which they engaged their assignments. This attitude shift is something students adopted from their schools' larger treatment of remote learning, with ambiguity and flexible deadlines communicating to students that virtual school's academic demands were not are pressing. Over the course of virtual learning, Damon stated that he began experiencing annoyance and anxiety at the mere anticipation of attending a virtual classroom session because his motivation had dulled. With curriculum and instruction that imbued less urgency regarding classwork and homework assignments, students were less motivated to complete their work. Additionally, Kyle was adamant that the lack of interaction between himself, his peers, and teachers hindered motivation to engage when working virtually. With a severe lack of personal interactions, the virtual learning space is one that students find unappealing and void of meaningful exchanges, and they are unenthused to participate in it.

Chris and Daniel, students from Anderson High School, found that the culmination of Wi-Fi issues, being isolated from their peers, and a multitude of distractions had diminished their motivation to complete assignments and fully engage virtual learning:

> **Travis**: Okay. Just a quick follow up then, what where some reasons that you went through this period of feeling unmotivated within school?
>
> **Chris**: Wi-Fi issues, computer issues. Consistently waking up every morning just to hop on a computer screen for hours and hours, that's very unmotivating, instead of being at school learning in-person. That's what unmotivated me the most.
>
> **Daniel:** Yes, that impacted [me] very much, because when we was in school, I was motivated and I usually didn't like getting up and going to school. From my friends, the people I hang around with, they motivate me to get up and get to work and never slack. I don't want to say it's like a competition, but it is like a competition to really get some knowledge in school and do better and don't be lazy. Now that it's online, I haven't had the motivation; I've been a lot late more, lazy. It's just been a tragic for most of the people online. That we're in bed and a lot of distractions like phone, TV, the game and all this other stuff.

In addition to insistent technological issues (which Chris references) that often frustrate students, Daniel (much like Kyle from East High School) elaborated on the impact of being isolated from other students. He noted the absence of meaningful interactions with his peers as a primary reason for his lack of motivation. He was explicit in his comparison of his at-school learning environment and his at-home environment. Specifically, when engaged in distance learning, he is separated from his peers who motivate and hold him accountable to his work. Daniel described his peer relationships as having an element of quasi-competition that maximized their school day and helped him complete tasks. School-time separation from his peers and subsequently the support and accountability these peer networks offer has led Daniel to be much less motivated. He called these circumstances tragic for online learners. Daniel later went on to explain that:

> Well, in school my focus was great and everything was on track. With at home learning everything just went left and I just was unfocused and distracted. Sometimes wasn't even in class and just didn't have a motivation to get up because I was laying in the bed.

Again Daniel described how the differences in his school and home environments translated into differing degrees of motivation. Daniel stated that when he physically attended school, his attention and focus was great. His experience working remotely has been far less beneficial. He explained that he often works from his bed and that doing so also negatively affects his motivation to do work as it is a lackadaisical space.

Fatigue

Related to a diminished sense of motivation, students described exhaustion from working extendedly at their computers with limited motion. In response to nationwide school shutdowns, there was a tremendous uptake of virtual and video conferencing technologies to substitute in-person teaching. Extended use of video conferencing by many students inexperienced with the technology has exposed numerous drawbacks remote learning presents when executed in less-than-ideal circumstances, namely the burnout caused by extended periods of video conferencing. Popularly referred to as 'Zoom fatigue,' several student participants spoke to how the particular tiredness caused by video conferencing contributed to their larger issue of disengagement. For example, at the close of one focus group session, multiple students from East High School provided explicit accounts of how 'Zoom fatigue' contributed to a decline of motivation:

> **Travis:** A lot of folks mentioned Zoom fatigue, which is, "I'm just tired of sitting at my computer, talking to a screen." Do you all have any comments on that?
>
> **Damon:** It's most definitely fatigue because, for me, my eyes start to burn after staring at a screen for so long, and then it's just hard to stay focused for me. It's just really hard to stay focused and stuff.
>
> **Kyle:** It's really tiring. There's a demotivation at the end of the day when you're done with all of your online periods. Just hearing students talk and your teacher talk through the speaker coming out of your computer or your device, it's so irritating.

The prolonged use of Zoom in Damon's case caused more than just the exhaustion usually associated with Zoom fatigue. He also experienced other physical symptoms, including eyestrain, which made it difficult to focus during his virtual class sessions. His peer Kyle then added that since

the ongoing use of Zoom has tired him out, he feels less motivated to engage with his other class periods. The exhaustion Kyle is experiencing has tarnished his motivation. Additionally, Kyle described a recently developed degree of irritability toward remote learning because of accumulated fatigue. The reflections shared by Damon and Kyle were subsequently echoed by their peers, including Michael who added:

> **Michael:** It's not just the fatigue. It's hard to describe. It's not just sitting honestly. It's just the way your body after, how your body feels after being on Zoom for six hours doesn't feel right. Do you know what I mean? You're going to have to get up and stretch or do something.
>
> **Damon:** Piggybacking off of what the previous participant said, about the physical, at school, you're moving around and stuff, nutrition and lunch. At home when you're just sitting down all day, you're not getting any physical activity. When school's over, you've got to do homework and stuff. For me, when I'm done with that, it's too late and stuff to maybe go outside and play ball or something like that.

Michael and Damon, much like Kyle, shared that they experienced physical consequences over the course of remote learning. Specifically, attending six or more consecutive hours of class with minimal physical movement created discomforts for remote learners. The physical tolls and exhaustion students highlighted have hindered their engagement with school, forcing them to manage physical pain, discomfort, and burnout during instruction and other mandated class time. In addition to the fatigue remote learning caused participants, there seemed to be a clear absence of protocols and procedures established and enforced by school officials to help mitigate the impact of students' Zoom fatigue. Instead student participants detailed how they had to develop their own remedies to distractions, fatigue, and other issues that lessened their engagement. The physical toll distance learning has taken on students cannot be ignored or understated as it directly impacts a student's capacity and ability to optimally engage with remote learning technologies. Although schools have now started to physically re-open class spaces, continued use and integration of video conferencing into educational practices is expected to continue. As such proper anticipation and

accommodation for students who experience adverse affects of when navigating virtual formats of learning must occur.

Away from School and At-Home Learning Environments

Researchers have found that the often divergent contexts of school and home environments significantly impact how students engage and learn school material (Chiu, 2020). Most of the previous research conducted on remote and virtual learning has focused on students in higher education (Bedenlier et al., 2020; Hsu et al., 2019). With the recent uptake of remote learning by K-12 schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic, increased attention is now being paid to how K-12 students navigate, optimize, or struggle with remote learning. Emerging research on remote learners, particularly those within K-12 schools, have found that their own challenging home learning environments present a major challenge for students. In fact, students' challenges with their at-home learning environments relate directly to observable patterns of virtual learning disengagement. The issues with their at-home environments were concurrent with challenges in being away from school—namely limited engagement with their teachers and extended separation from their peers. Participants have specifically described working from home as a challenge in itself that made it difficult to maximize remote instruction. Their at-home learning environments were typically devoid of adequate technologies and resources needed to fully engage in all elements of distance learning. Additionally students reported that their remote-learning environments failed to offer a comparable degree of connectedness to their schooling when compared to their in-person learning environments, which further stifled their engagement. With the emergency move from traditional classrooms to online learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, students' at-home learning and working environments were a major challenge present within participant experiences.

Student participants' at-home learning environments could more accurately be described as improvised arrangements that (on their own) were simply inefficient for the tasks at hand. Enduing

surrounding, disruptive noise while working virtually was a common issue students encountered when learning from home. Damon from East High, when describing his at-home work environment shared that "Then just the environment around me too because I have a noisy house environment, so it's hard juggling online school and then paying attention to what's going on around me".

The noise occurring in Damon's house (which now doubles as his work station) impedes on his attention to his school lessons and work. Other students also discussed how disruptive noise was often coupled with issues present in the at-home learning environments. For instance, Austin from East High School stated:

> I would say my learning space at home was one of the things that's hard for me because I have many siblings and they got to have their space going to Zoom stations, I got to have my space. Yes, the noise was just in the background and stuff but it was like when you want to ask questions in class, you might just want to go up to the teacher and ask the question. On Zoom, you might not want to sound, I don't know, sound different or sound stupid or something. I think that's something too.

Austin was direct in identifying his at-home work environment as a strained setting for learning and schoolwork because he has to share the space with his siblings. Although they have their own "Zoom stations" as he labels them, his home could be constricted due to limited learning space as multiple students simultaneously attended their virtual class sessions. Austin expressed a need to feel less confined within his environment to maximize his engagement; he had "to have his space" as he described. Austin went on to explain how remote learning made it difficult to engage with his teachers, specifically to get clarification regarding subject lessons, materials, and assignments. He recounted, in addition to a noisy background, a fear of sounding stupid, which I interpreted as an indication that he was uncomfortable in his virtual classroom or at least not comfortable enough with his teacher to ask for assistance. Austin said that the noise in his home made him reluctant to ask his teachers questions because he was worried his question or comments would not be understood. In his in-person classroom session, Austin had the option of approaching a teacher with discretion. However, in remote classrooms if he chooses to ask for clarification he is simultaneously

revealing his areas of difficulty, opening himself to judgment, and his home environment to spectating. To avoid appearing less intelligent or to obscure his household's background noise, Austin became apprehensive to ask questions and openly communicate with his teachers. Rodney, an Anderson student, shared similar sentiments of how remote learning had (in many instances) adversely affected teacher-student relationships:

> When you just have a whole entire new group of teachers that you don't know, that you see through a computer screen, and you're just at home, not in the right environment, at least for me personally. I know some people, who did benefit, but me personally being at home was not right for me, it just really sucked to put it simply.

Rodney explicitly stated that his home is not the right learning environment for him. He described that learning from home is not his ideal circumstance as a student and that this particular challenge is coupled with the disconnect he feels from his teachers. In following up about the frustrations he expressed at the many challenges with distance learning, Rodney detailed some of the more subtle yet significant tolls of remote learning:

> **Travis:** How do you think the virtual format has impacted, not even just yourselves, but students at your school? Especially for folks like you who tend to do so well, has this been a challenge? Has it impacted your ability to perform? Has it had any affect on you?
>
> **Rodney:** I feel just besides like I mentioned earlier, we're actually doing an essay about this in English. There is a lot of people that I can understand them benefiting, a lot of people take online college courses, or things like that, so they may have prior experience. I feel as the majority, based off of what I've seen on social media, in person, people that I know very well, that overall it was worse. Being at home for some people is really bad for their mental health. I know that going to school or doing sports, it's their get away from the issues at home, so I can understand why they would say that being at home compared to on a campus is worse for them.

Rodney acknowledged that at his school a handful of students more adept with remote learning because of prior experience with online classes and computer literacy. However he was firm in his assertion that for many students, he included, remote learning has been arduous. Among his points, Rodney emphasized the particular mental and emotion tolls associated with his in-home learning environment—including isolation, mental fatigue, and at times difficult home life circumstances

that several students relied on physically attending school to buffer. Rodney's account illustrates the socio-emotional challenges present in students' at-home learning environments.

Another challenge students identified with their at-home learning environments was isolation from their peers. Specifically, students were quick to note that within their at-home learning environments, extended periods of non-interaction with other students dampened their engagement, enthusiasm, and motivation regarding school overall. Kyle from East High spoke to this:

> Then also with the physical school environment, you're also lacking social interaction with friends and other teachers. Just having everything done virtually, it's weird. It's hard to explain, but it is just not the same.

The commentary on their relationship with their peers and the significance of these relationships should not be underestimated. Especially in the case of Black male students (across the K-16 nexus), use of peer relations and support groups (with other Black boys/men) has been a staple technique in their navigation of educational challenges and tools to support their academic outcomes (Carter, 2007; Datnow and Cooper, 1997). For students in this study, the abrupt and yearlong separation from their peers was largely felt when working in a siloed manner within their at-home learning environments.

It should be noted that students' discussions of their at-home learning environments do not reflect deficits of Black families, their homes, or the care and support of Black children. Rather, data highlights the particular difficulties students faced when executing school-related demands in environments not designed for traditional schooling or instruction. The information participants have shared supports the contextualizing of their experiences as young Black male students traversing pandemic learning conditions.

Conclusion

Across remote, virtual, online, distance, and hybrid learning, many of the students stated that they had difficulty fully or even partially engaging in classroom learning via these formats. Particularly for the student participants of this study, their placement into remote schooling was a direct response to nationwide school shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus the academic years of 2020-2022 were demarked by a global pandemic, economic recession, and social unrest, all of which can dramatically impact the lives of students, especially their engagement with school. Amidst the pandemic and economic recession, those most adversely affected have been low-income Black and Latinx families—communities in which all students featured in this study belong to. Institutional response to COVID-19's experienced and anticipated impacts has highlighted existing disparities between Black and Latinx students and their white, affluent counterparts as well as the disregard for unique vulnerabilities of minority students. Immediately into their discussion of school engagement challenges, participants identified accessibility to technology, material, and support as needed to navigate remote learning optimally. Many students endured internet connectivity issues and were unfamiliar with navigating virtual schooling formats. As first-time virtual learners, students could have benefitted from structure and guidance that is responsive to their challenges with unregulated work schedules and increased independent learning. Despite drastic change to the format of school learning, expectations and support from teachers and officials did not pivot to accommodate the change in learning circumstances students underwent. On several occasions participants identified that many teachers had been unwilling to adjust deadlines, offer supplemental support, or account for how remote learning can change student engagement. For many Black students, the 2020-2022 years have brought significant change to their life circumstances with many being forced to navigate difficulties at home such as unanticipated or additional illness, financial challenges, and emotional stress. Additionally, the anxiety created by the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt across the nation, creating unprecedented emotional

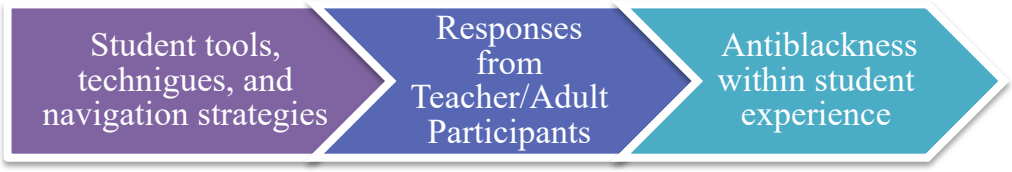
challenges for many households and directly impacting student capacity to learn from home. While there is variation in the experiences and conditions of student participants, collectively the young Black men featured in this study identified a specific set of challenges that have coalesced into a set of conditions that made engaging with school difficult.

What I find important here is that student gave name and description to the challenges they have been forced to navigate within their schools and learning. As high-performing students, their academic outcomes can hide or dismiss the challenging conditions they encounter. Additionally, high performing Black male students are often considered an exception to the general trend of Black male student underperformance. Findings presented in this section illustrate that despite difference in performance outcomes, high performing Black male students can in fact struggle with the same issues mostly associated with students of lower performance outcomes. For example, it is easy to ascribe procrastination and disengagement as characteristics of low-performing students, but as data analysis shows, students across the performance outcome spectrum—including high performing students—are also impacted by these struggles. The findings presented in this chapter again expand upon the identified challenges present in student participants' experience, addressing the first of this study's research questions and aims.

CHAPTER 5: GETTING THROUGH—STUDENT NAVIGATIONS, TEACHER RESPONSES, AND RELEVANCE OF ANTIBLACKNESS

In this chapter I present the remaining of this dissertation's findings. I begin this chapter with discussion of the most pronounced tools and techniques students employed in response difficulties they have encountered. Next, I present findings based on analysis from school actor data. Data analysis of student navigation strategies in concert with teacher responses directly attends to this study's second and third research questions. As this project centers on the racialized experiences of Black students, employing a BlackCrit framework to examine the relevance of antiblackness, I conclude this chapter with data analysis that situates how antiblackness undergirded student experiences and prompted specific reactions. Examination of the relevance of antiblackness addressed this study's goal of further expounding how aspects of students' experiences are racialized in a manner unique to their Blackness. Figure 4 provides a thematic map of the content and findings presented in this chapter and their arrangement.

Figure 3. Chapter 5 Arrangement of Thematic Findings



Navigation of Challenges

Black scholars and researchers have long documented the adverse (and intentional) impacts of structural inequity and intersectional violence on the outcomes of Black students (Morales, 2014; Morris, 2016). Persisting economic disenfranchisement and racial discrimination have been central to the marginalizing conditions too common in the experiences of Black students including (but not limited to) unequal school funding, resource availability, and poor teacher quality (Duncan and Murnane, 2011; Noguera, 2017). In this study, student participants spoke to their encounters with issues such as these and others within their schools. However, despite persisting inequality, Black students (and subsequently Black professionals) are present at every echelon of educational and

career attainment, highlighting instances of triumph and success (by conventional metrics). Consistent with Black student achievement research, student participants of this study shared how they devised, accessed, and employed strategies to navigate unequal schooling conditions. Collectively students demonstrated a maximizing of available supports, resourcefulness, and resilience as responses to the challenges present in their schooling experiences. Data analysis found three major techniques and strategies that were utilized by all student participants to support their navigation of difficult schooling conditions maintain their high academic performance; (1) the accessing of partnership programs, (2) supportive relationships with teachers and staff, and (3) the optimizing of peer networks. The identification and explanation of these tools and resources addresses the second guiding question of this project wherein I examine the pertinent tools and resources students used to manage school-related challenges and support their academic outcomes. Additionally by contextualizing the pivotal role of select teachers and staff, findings in this chapter also address the third and final research question and aim of this study, which sought to identify school actors relevant to the experiences of student and provide context of their impact on students.

Partnership Programs

Black students are among the groups most affected by structural inequality of schools (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Troyna, 2012). In recent decades numerous specialized programs have been created and partnered with underperforming schools to combat the educational and resource inequality facing students from marginalized backgrounds (McElroy and Armesto, 1998). In their discussion of navigating challenges, participants described how they utilized programs partnered with their schools to offset the lack of resources available to them. Rodney, from Anderson High reminded me that across our interview sessions, he and his peers made several references to the Mentoring & Partnership for Youth Development (MPYD) program, stating “We mentioned multiple times before, there's MPYD. Aside from that, there's a lot of programs.” The MPYD

program is a nonprofit mentoring program that stations itself on the campus of Anderson High School. The program was created as a response to low test scores, truancy, violence, and other issues impacting male students specifically at Anderson. In his description of MPYD Rodney shared that unlike other support programs there are no required criteria for participation other than enrollment at or association with Anderson High School:

> MPYD is a program that we have after school for the Black students, and they have summer jobs that you can participate in. They don't go based off of grades or this and that. The summer jobs that you can get during the spring break, it's just required...they know you and who you are as a person compared to your grades or anything like that.

Since its inception in 2002 MPYD has been comprised of community leaders, educators, and Anderson alum collaborating to offer students' academic advising, summer opportunities, job placement assistance and other resourcing. The programs' intention of foregoing eligibility requirements highlights its' dedication to increasing resource accessibility for students, of which participants cited as a notable support.

Participants at East High School also described specific partnership programs they utilized to support their academic journeys and supplement the resources otherwise unavailable to them. East High students showed a particular interest in college preparation programs to bolster their academic performance and chances of admission to competitive colleges and universities. Universities have long pointed to a lack of college preparation of students at the K-12 level as a primary reason for the underrepresentation of Black students in higher education (Tunstall, 2011). To overcome this hindrance Jackson and Michael named their participation in the Upward Bound Program as something that has helped them succeed academically despite the disadvantages their school face:

> **Jackson**: Its a program...Upward Bound. I'm part of that I'd say, because its a social status academic program. So when I was in 8th grade, 8th grade going to 9th, you stay at LMU every summer, and although they have all those little things, but, when it was that first summer from 8th grade to high school, it introduced me to all these people that actually go to East High School. And their ... its like a really supportive community.

> **Michael**: I'm also in this program and I definitely agree that they have a supportive relationship with us and they tried to help us with not only educational wise, they also helped us socially. And it is the same exact program [that Jackson referenced]...so that also helped me.

Researchers have documented that low-income students of color often have difficulty attaining the proper information and guidance needed to navigate the college-going process (Cabrera et al., 2000). Person and Rosenbaum (2006) further assert that students in low-income, urban areas (such as East High student participants) too often do not gain the needed information to navigate the college application and enrollment process adequately. Jackson and Michael both stated that participation in the Upward Bound program, with its' summer college-residence component, assisted them academically. This component of Upward Bound is particularly important because low-income students of color typically have less access to college-related information and navigational resources than their more affluent counter-parts. The Upward Bound program responds to this disparity of access by specifically serving low-income, (would be) first-generation college students. The frequency of East High School students participating in Upward Bound underscores that many are forced to negotiate conditions of poverty and lack of immediate access to institutional knowledge while pursuing higher education. However, with the assistance of programs such as Upward Bound, students are able to mitigate these challenges. Furthermore, both Jackson and Michael emphasized that the network they were able to build as participants within the program afforded them supportive communities that in addition to providing educational resources also helped them "socially" as Michael described.

Damon from East High, responding to his peers' comments adds that his participation in an UCLA-based program has contributed to his academic writing abilities:

> For me, it would be VIPS, because what I did on the writing course, at VIPS, it was really challenging and really hard. And then now that I'm going to my junior year, doing the classes don't seem as rigorous compared to that.

VIPS is a social-justice-orientated college access program based at UCLA that is designed to increase the number of underrepresented students admitted to and enrolled at competitive universities. In addition to the college preparation the VIPS program offered Damon, he credited the program for further developing his academic writing skills. After working with the VIPS program Damon found his actual school curriculum to be less rigorous. While the VIPS program is not a product, design, or function of East high school, its' presence and collaboration with school faculty and teachers are meant to compensate for the school's usual resource unavailability.

Student participation in school and community-based partnership programs such as Upward Bound and VIPS were identified as pivotal to the student participants' academic trajectories. Their ability to locate and maximize partnership programs demonstrated what Tara Yosso (2005) describes as navigational and aspirational capital. Despite the limited college preparation East High is able to immediately offer its students, participants were adamant in gaining the necessary tools to actualize their endeavors, locating supplemental resources.

Teacher and Staff Support

Some of the many burdens associated with low-performing schools include low teacher morale, high teacher turnover rates, and overall poor teacher quality (Corallo and McDonald, 2011; Duke, 2014). While student participants did give description of challenges with the quality of instruction they received at times, this was not the entirety of their experience with all of their teachers. Instead, student participants at Both East High School and Anderson High School described having a select number of teachers who were instrumental to their success. Beyond offering students high quality teaching instruction, in many cases these 'good' teachers also provided emotional-social supports that transcended the typical academic demands placed on students. Additionally students recognized other school staff such as coaches, counselors, and administrators, as supportive individuals within their schools that aided their success and well-

being. Together the productive and supportive relationships students were able to foster with some teachers and other school staff members amounted into a significant resource and strategy for navigating challenges present in their experiences.

Austin from East High School, for example pointed to instances of quality instruction as a major form of support. He explained:

> I'll say I was in my last year's geometry teacher. I'd say he's one of the best teachers because when he explains, I don't need to go home and study or whatever. When I pay attention to his class, when he's explaining, I don't need to study. He just makes the class easier for me

Black students have a tradition of being particularly invested in their academic success (Herndon and Hirt, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006), especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and schools, despite stereotypes that suggest otherwise. This was proven true for the Black male students featured in this study and illustrated by their rigorous evaluation of the instructional and support quality they had received. Austin's appreciation for his geometry teacher's commitment and ensuring of student learning is not easily earned. Quality instruction is crucial to any students' comprehension of subject material. However, in the cases of Black students attending low-performing schools, the essentialness of quality teacher is heightened because they are often deprived of qualified and supportive teachers (Ascher and Fruchter, 2001; Peske and Haycock, 2006). In his reflection, Austin described that his geometry teacher's instruction is adequate to his learning of the subject. When class is complete, he stated that his teacher had explained material well enough that he did not have to allocate additional time studying the material. This distinction of quality instruction is particularly important in relation to students' challenges with poor instruction quality. In other classes students described instruction so poor that they had to engage in self-teaching to compensate. To further counterbalance poor instruction students like Austin were intentional to maximize instances of quality teaching when they presented themselves. Additionally,

the relationship students foster with their ‘good’ teachers often develop to include support for more than academic needs.

Kyle from East High School, when detailing the importance and helpfulness of healthy student-teacher relationships shared:

> One teacher in specific, my AP World teacher. She goes out of her own way to email me and make sure everything is going good at home, and in my personal life, it doesn't have to school related. Just knowing that she's always there to help me, its a big motivation.

Kyle offered that among all the teachers he worked with at East High School, his AP World History teacher stands above others in terms of support and care. For the purposes of this study this teacher will be referred to as Ms. Paton. Kyle distinguishes that in addition to academic concerns, Ms. Paton specifically has demonstrated a particular investment in his well-being, taking on the tasks of additional follow-ups and communications to survey home and personal life, offering help or assistance in these regards if needed. Kyle described this holistic concern from Ms. Paton as a significant motivating factor. Later in our interview session when discussing specific supports available within their school, Kyle again expressed an appreciation for the support he has received from his teachers:

> [A]gain, the teachers really pushed you to do the best that you can, as much effort as you can into any task, and they encourage you to sign up for programs and activities that could help you get far, and that should get add on to your college applications, so they really invested in yourself as an individual, and your academic or sports career

Kyle’s classmates echoed his sentiments. Other student participants who worked with Ms. Paton also shared similar evaluations of her support. Even Jackson, who remained adamant that many of his relationships with teachers had been difficult, pointed to Ms. Paton as a meaningful support. Jackson added:

> The AP World teacher, I think she's the most supportive teacher on campus. I think she's the best teacher on campus. She's definitely an advocate for all her students

Jackson used the descriptor *advocate* to describe Ms. Paton and her exceptional commitment to her students. Additionally, Jackson, in his assessment, named her as the "best teacher on campus" speaking to the positive impact she has had not only on him but other students as well. Like Kyle, Jackson included how Ms. Paton's support is not restricted to academic or course subject matters but a more comprehensive style of support that recognizes additional areas of student needs. By no fault of their own, many Black students from poor backgrounds attend schools with greater numbers of novice teachers (Bettini and Park, 2021; Blake, 2017;). Often times these teachers lack the experience or cultural competence to meet the varying needs of Black students, particularly those in low-performing schools (McAllister and Irvine, 2000). Ms. Paton's relationship with students and her impact as a teacher in a majority Black, low-performing school offsets this tendency. More so the manner in which student participants have revered Ms. Paton's impact illustrates how Black students benefit considerably from comprehensive and socio-emotional styles of support from teachers. The utility these relationships of support offered participants was crucial to their navigation of challenges related particularly to poor instructional quality and dismissiveness on part of teachers. In continuing his discussion of supportive school personnel Jackson also named his football coach:

> Same for the football coach, he knows what it means to be Black and everything. He's a Black man himself. He'll advocate for you and he actually care for students. He'll do what it takes for you to succeed. He cares more about football... He cares more about academics than football. He'll try and get you what you need to do to succeed academically on and off the field.

Jackson again used *advocate* to describe how his football coach presented himself as agent of support. Jackson's repeated use of the word advocate highlights how often times Black students rely on positive adult figures to rally on their behaves for access to needed resources and supports (McGee and Spencer, 2015). Jackson was also sure to mention that his football coach is a Black man. When Jackson stated, "he knows what it means to be Black," he emphasized that his coach possesses an understanding of the racialized barriers and experiences that they as young Black men

are likely to encounter. Being aware of these vulnerabilities afforded their coach the competency to respond to some of the intersectional challenges participants encounter within their schooling experience. His coach's ranging style of support is highlighted when Jackson described that his coach prioritizes his academic performance more than their athletic performance, being a proponent for non-athletic needs also.

Jackson's emphasis on the community he has found in his football coach is similar to the description of supportive Black male staff Anderson High students also detailed. For example, Daniel and Rodney from Anderson High School identified their school principal as a supportive administrator. When asked to share the significance of having a supportive adult figure the two responded describing their principal:

> **Daniel:** What he does to help us; if you really need something, he will get on it since he's the principal and help you out with any teacher or any class or any work. Also, with your major and with college classes and other things, with credit.
>
> **Rodney:** It's not more or less about academics; it's more about him wanting to help you as a person. He's the only principal or administrator I've ever asked like, "Oh, can I borrow $5?" He's like, "Here," and I was like, "Oh, I meant that as a joke," but he really does trust all of the students and expect them to be the best student that they can be at our school. I feel like him treating us as equals in a way really does encourage us, compared to if he was just some warden-type principal that just tells you what to do. He's saying it all out of his best interest for you as a person.

Daniel and Rodney, like the students at East High, stressed the importance and impact of holistic support from school staff, emphasizing that their principal is interested in their personal well being and their academics. It is also important to note that Rodney was appreciative that power hierarchies or cultures of control and discipline do not govern his relationship with his principal. Instead of a 'warden-type principal' as he described, Rodney's relationship with his principal is one of respect and authentic care. His appreciation for having a principal who is not overly punitive underscores how Rodney (like many Black male students) is knowledgeable or experienced with school staff that is hyper-disciplinary. Both hyper-disciplining and criminalizing are leading challenges for

Black male students. As such it is notable that the principal at Anderson High School has cultivated a dynamic with his Black male where they feel protected from this. In discussing the importance of these healthy and supportive relationships teachers and staff, Daniel also shared:

> I think it's important for your teachers or your staff to really have that bond with you because some kids really don't have a parent or guardian at home. If you can go to school and have that bond and relationship with the staffs or the teachers and really help them. They can really help you out in going about your life.

Daniel was explicit in recognizing the importance of healthy relationships between students and the teachers and school staff. He specified that at times difficult home lives (something students named as a challenge) or strained relationships with other adults could negatively impact students. Thus, supportive relationships with adults at school become all the more important, sometimes affording students the only refuge and support they receive from adults. Participants' regard for the Black Coach and Principal at their respective schools alludes to a larger, well-documented tendency for Black students to respond positively to Black school staff as well as flourish in schooling environments with Black leadership. Often time individual school personnel function as unofficial, siloed interventions for the challenges facing the Black students at their schools. In the case of participants of this study, this informal support of Black students manifested as socio-emotional supports on their parts.

Black people's inclusion in US systems of education is profoundly demarked by centuries of racial oppression and violence, much of which is persisting, affecting Black students still. The caretaking aspect and spiritual work of teaching cannot be overstated as they often inform perceptions, approaches and practices critical for healthy and safe learning environments for Black students. Black teachers and school staff have the most substantial history of leveraging these components when educating Black students. Consistent with this trend, student participants indeed found select Black school staff to be significant to the support of their academic and wellness outcomes. Additionally, students found select non-Black teachers who also provided crucial and

comprehensive styles of support. Participants at both schools had named weathered morale, instances of mental health issues, and disengagement as issues they have encountered. Considering this, having teachers and school staff demonstrate intentional caretaking and wellness checks, in addition to academic support, proved especially responsive to the issues student participants were traversing.

Peer Support Networks

Another major strategy student participants employed was the utilizing of peer support networks. Students identified that relationship with other students in their schools often functioned as spaces for reprieve, networks of resource exchanges, and sources of motivation, to uplift them during their endeavors. Jackson from East High for example, explained the benefit of having relationships with upperclassmen:

> I'm going to say people that helped me in school, probably, my upperclassmen friends, because, I really just follow their path, how they did it. So they've been in on this classes before and, they would help me

As students who have specifically taken the same classes, upperclassmen students can offer younger students a wealth of useful knowledge and insight, particularly as students engaging identical school environments. In his description, Jackson shared that older students provided academic support, being familiar themselves with the courses he his taking. Additionally Jackson shared how these older students had been successful and set examples for accomplishing goals he also aspired for as a student. As such, Jackson intended to adhere to these examples set by his upperclassmen peers to recreate their success for himself, wanting to ‘follow their path, how they did it’ as he stated. When following up to his earlier comments on the importance of peer relations Jackson added:

> I'm going to say, extremely important. In fact, I don't know how I'll be successful if I didn't have people that actually have my back and are willing to help me. I'd say that a lot of the time, I will ask someone for help, just to make sure that I'm doing, it right so the assignment can be the best it can possibly be. So I'd say extremely important. I don't know how I could do it without them.

Jackson was clear that his relationships with fellow students was of the upmost importance to his academic performance and perhaps and more generally his experience at East High, citing his peers as central to his position as a high performing student. Within these peer networks he has open communication with his classmates where he is able gather their opinion and assessment of his schoolwork for the purposes of refining assignments to the best quality possible.

Damon, from East High also described that his peer networks are used to collaborate on schoolwork and assignments:

> And most definitely in my friends. If it's a really hard homework assignment or it's a big project, they'll come over and we'll do it together, and we're going to make sure that we understand stuff that we made together.

Because high performing students are often assumed to be so academically gifted that the struggles they encounter with coursework and subjects are overshadowed by their classroom outcomes. However, even advanced students can have difficulty with schoolwork at times, as Damon shared. In such instances where he was completing a particularly difficult or large assignment, Damon described working with other classmates as a means to both further grasps course content and bolster the quality of his work.

At Anderson High School, student participants also remarked how important their peer supports were. Daniel for example stated that:

> My peers, we all push each other to do better, but sometimes we know what can we do, and what cannot we do. Still also we push each other to do more than what they can and boost their ego instead of bringing them down.

Daniel was clear that in instances where he or other students may be doubtful of their ability to execute a task related to schoolwork, their peers offered affirmations and showed a trust in their ability to complete tasks. This building-up of one another illustrates the substantial comradery participants have with their peers and how this sense of community and support functions in regard to their academic performance, specifically working as a source of motivation, affirmation, and

collaborative work. Rodney, from Anderson High also spoke to how he and his peers are intentional on their affirming of each other:

> If you see the one homie that everybody thought was dumb has a 4.0, then it's like, okay, you give them all this props. If I ever told anybody in the team, like, "Oh, I have 2 Fs, they're going to say, "What's wrong with you?" That's what I mean.

In his discussion, Rodney demonstrated peer-to-peer affirmations of each other's student academic abilities when he congratulated another student for performing well; especially when said student is normally thought to perform poorly. Black male students are usually assumed to perform poorly in school, so Rodney's acknowledgment of his peer's accomplishments are especially poignant, illustrating how as high performing students, they are resisting the stereotype of incapability associated with Black males as well as showcasing the emotional intelligence he offers his peers. Additionally, Rodney detailed that when he had not performed well, his peers would engage in caretaking, asking if there is something particularly burdensome or hindering in effort to support him. Chris, the final participant from East High also shared:

> Our school there's a lot more support than an online school. If we're all together in school doing the same type of work, it's going to be a lot easier than online school. There's a lot of peer support.

Chris drew a comparison between his remote learning experience and his in-person learning experience, specifically that when he attends school in person he can more easily access and benefit from his peer support network. This distinction is important because it underscores the impactful of peer support and the subsequent loss of supports remote learners suffer when they are no longer in proximity to their peers.

Teacher and Staff Responses

In this section I present findings based on data analysis of responses from teachers and staff members from East high and Anderson high. Examination of data and responses from nominated adult school actors directly addresses research question **3b** of this study, which focuses on how

adult participants understand themselves in relation to the experiences of student participants and their experiences. Responses from teachers and staff members, all of whom were nominated for having supported student participants also serves to address why nominated school actors are particularly impactful, complimenting student response data and furthering the collected information addressing RQs **2, 2a, 3** and **3a**.

Table 3: Adult Participants

	School			
	East High School		Anderson High School	
	Participant Pseudonyms	Occupation	Participant Name	Occupation
1	Ms. Paton	Social Science Teacher	Ms. Wright	Counselor
2	Mr. Washington	English Teacher		
3	Mr. Reynolds	Football Coach		

Commitment to Resourcing Students

The adult actors and staff members student participants nominated, were selected because students found them supportive and, in some cases, instrumental to their academic success. When discussing the rationale for the nomination to investigate how nominated school staff understood themselves in relationship to student participants, particularly as high performing students, staff participants quickly identified themselves as resources for students. More specifically, staff participants demonstrated a dedication and commitment to resourcing students as optimally as possible. At Anderson High School, Ms. Wright, an academic counselor, understood herself as a liaison between Anderson students and the many opportunities available to them, ensuring that students are highly informed as possible. For example, in terms of college readiness, Ms. Wright described:

> A lot of them just because they don't know the information, they don't know what to ask. What I do is I set up a meeting with each one of my students in their ninth, 10th, 11th, and 12th Grade year. I actually set up two meetings when they're 10th, 11th and 12th graders, just to make sure that they know this information. It's like a quick little spiel that I go through. It's a 15-minute meeting and I tell them, I'm like, "I'm going to talk at you a lot

> right now." I have a little handout that they can take notes on and just to give them the ins and outs.
>
> Now with the internet we post it on the internet, I have it in my canvas page that they can visit. Even my own kids who just graduated from high school, they didn't know it and I'm a high school counselor... I just go around and give all the information I possibly can. I have my little set meetings that I have with them. I encourage kids to stop by and ask questions. I have a whole system for them to make appointments, but I know kids aren't going to really make appointments. That's why I have those mandatory ones. We try to go into the classroom. We have a seminar every Monday like a homeroom period.

Ms. Wright is aware of the ways students lack or can be kept from information vital to college matriculation with this being particularly true for students of color. Even as a high school counselor herself, she stated that her own children have encountered troubles with accessing needed information. As such, Ms. Wright was adamant in open and effective in creating channels of information for students. Conscious of how young folks are not always inclined to immediately seek out essential college-related information, in addition to an appointment system she created, Ms. Wright also held mandatory counseling meetings beginning as early as a students' ninth-grade year. Finally, Ms. Wright discussed how she facilitates a weekly seminar dedicated to disseminating college readiness information and tools. Ms. Wright recognized students' tendency to miss essential information and the need to continue bolstering college readiness at Anderson High School; to address this she had developed multiple means of promoting resource accessibility.

While college readiness was a prominent area of support Ms. Wright detailed, her efforts to adequately resource students was not limited to this subject or concern. At several points in our discussion of her role in the experiences of high performing Black male students she pointed to the diversity of the resources she liked to offer students, and that she worked to connect them with:

> We're going to talk about what we need to talk about, we're going to try to find a solution and we'll schedule a follow-up meeting. Even in those 15 minutes, they know that I'm centered on them; they know that I'm going to help their situation. If I'm out on the quad, I'm like, "Hey, is everything still okay with whatever it was?" Little things like that, it helps the students. They feel connected. Sometimes they don't have that anywhere else so we connect them through programs. We connect them through different just opportunities. Our

> community is great because we have so many resources available to us. I don't think people realize the wealth of resources that we have at Muir. There's a lot available to the kids.

In addition to the number of resources and programs present at Anderson or partnered with the school, Ms. Wright talked about how she is intentional in making sure students utilize such resources. On a regular basis she said that she conducts follow-ups with students about various matters and in the event a need presents itself, she is sure to connect them with the appropriate program or opportunity. She described how Anderson receives a substantial amount of support from the surrounding and neighboring communities contributing to the "wealth of resources" the school possess that can sometimes go unknown, underscoring the importance of her role as liaison between students and available resources. Ms. Wright went on to add that

> I just feel like there's so many things, but again, we have to get the kids to ask for it. That's why we have to have that connection with the kids, because if they're not going to ask for it, then we can still suggest it to them.

Ms. Wright again emphasized the importance of not just resource availability but students being knowledgeable of and utilizing of resources. Across her interview she drew attention to the pitfall of having a variety of resources but a low tendency for students to either know of a particular program, or to engage it. Being aware of this challenge in her school, Ms. Wright expressed a particular dedication to connecting students with appropriate resources to ensure that students are optimally supported.

At both East High School and Anderson High School, nominated teachers and staff demonstrated a commitment to resourcing and advocating for students. However, across school contexts, this commitment was unsurprisingly influenced by the stark contrast between the support, material, and funding available to staff at Anderson and East High School. At Anderson High School, Ms. Wright was clear in her description of the ample resources, programs, and opportunities for students at the school, with her efforts to resource students mostly consisting of promoting awareness of and utilization of resources. However, at East High School, teachers and staff gave

detailed accounts of how the lack of resources, materials, and funding—while not stifling their commitment to providing students with resources—had affected the ways they have been able to support students. Mr. Washington, a veteran English teacher at East High School gave synopsis of his longtime grievances with the ways East High School had been treated by district personnel:

> [M]y statement to these district people that we've had these meetings with is, in the earlier years that I was with Westchester High School, it always felt as if we were being treated as a stepchild. The district recognized that we were there, they recognized that we were a predominantly African-American school. They realized that we are different in that we don't have a large English language learner's culture at our school, which makes us different, and they really didn't pay a whole lot of attention to us.
>
> As these charter entities have come, and these charter entities are getting resources and are getting attentions that we still are not getting, my argument to them is that we have gone from the stepchild of the district to the neglected child of the district.

Having worked at East High School for more than 25 years, Mr. Washington gave descriptions of how over near three decades East High School has not been treated with proper regard and resourcing. Mr. Washington called East High School the 'stepchild' of the district to describe how it has continually been passed over for support by the local school district. He accredited this to the school not having a large ESL population (instead the school is majority Black with English being the first language of most of its' students), which disqualifies the East High school from funding and resourcing most other LAUSD high schools receive. Additionally, Mr. Washington identified that charter schools (one of which is currently housed on the campus of East High) have superseded East High school in terms of resourcing and attention, again highlighting the way East High and its students have been neglected by the officials tasked to protect and uphold the interests of the school.

Despite the decades long battle with resource allocation to East High School, Mr. Washington remained firm in his assertion of providing whatever resources and support possible to his student:

> It's not right and it's not fair, especially to our students, because the truth is in spite of the fact that we are so, so, so horribly behind in resources, technologically what we have going on at our school is really, I don't want to use the word joke, but it's really, really unfortunate.

> Yet, we still manage to send a whole bunch of kids every year to Big-Time college and university programs. If you sit down for example and look at, I have winter break work ahead of me here I'm doing common app work for kids... I think we're doing tremendously great work and have been for a long time unfortunately being without in a lot of areas.

Mr. Washington explained that although East High School is severely underfunded, he is sure to provide assistance and help to his students in anyway feasible for him. He does not succumb to the structural lack of support impacting his school and instead utilizing his own personal time to compensate for the school's shortcoming. For instance, in the above scenario he described how to mitigate the impact of East High being "horribly behind in resources" he dedicated his winter break to assisting students with the completion of the Common Application for their college admissions. He alluded to how this effort encompasses more faculty and staff than just himself, bringing attention to how a collective effort of select staff, has enabled a trend for East High School students to still matriculate into top competitive universities despite "being without in a lot of areas" as he described.

Teachers and staff at both Anderson High School and East High School understood the importance of providing resources and support to their student populations. Due to apparent differences in school funding between the sites, the manners in which adult participants have been able to resource their students also differ. For Ms. Wright, her immediate goal is promoting the awareness and utilizing of the varying resources, programs and opportunities available to students at Anderson. For staff and teachers at East High, like Mr. Washington, supporting students required making due with what minimal materials, technologies, and opportunities accessible at East High School. Additionally Mr. Washington and colleagues have a history of supplementing student supports with their personal time and capacities, while continuing to advocate for better school funding. Nominated adult participants at both school sites, regardless of resource abundance or scarcity, were fiercely dedicated to providing the most resources they could for their respective students. The manners in which adult participants understood themselves as agents of support and

advocates for student both reinforces student participants' sentiments that the identified actors are in fact dedicated to their well-being, academic performance and played a vital role in the experiences and outcomes of students, particularly by providing resources or facilitating resource accessibility.

Cultures of Care

The supportive ways identified teachers and staff at the school sites functioned as part of larger cultures of care evident at both schools. In addition to resourcing students (as best as possible) with material means, teachers and staff participants collectively described attentiveness to the socio-emotional needs of students, actively constructing sectors of their school environment where students are affirmed, safe, and heard. Particularly when working with Black students and students from marginalized backgrounds, students' sense of safety, welcome, and value within the academic and learning spaces are crucial to their experience and outcomes (Edwards, 2021; Heidelburg et al., 2022). Ms. Paton, a social science teacher at East High, in her responses gave descriptions of how resourcing of students in addition to responsive approaches of engagement, work in tandem to foster a culture of care at East High:

> They (students) know that I care and that I push them to the point where like, "To me, you don't have deficits. We just have to overcome the things that you're dealing with, and you can overcome them. You just need support" That's overarching and it really fits the student, but it's like, "I'm there to support you." My expectations for all my students is out of control high. You come to me, I give you the tools. I need you to use those tools to build that house. If you're not building that house, I'm going to be bothering you about why you're not out building that house. Like, "What's going on? Why is it not being built? What's happening?" I tell my students all the time, "Tell me what's happening." If you don't tell people what's going on, and you don't have to tell them your life story. If you threw up in the morning, and then you come into class and I'm getting mad at you because you're falling asleep, why don't you tell me you threw up?

Ms. Paton spoke to how she intentionally marries the high but manageable expectations she has of her students with belief and confidence in their abilities. More so in the above scenario she provided, Ms. Paton illustrated how important it is for students to understand she cares about their overall well-being, taking this into proper consideration when engaging them. As a teacher in an

under-resourced school serving an almost entirely minority, low-income, student population, Ms. Paton is cognizant of how students can and have arrived to her class, hungry, sick, or fatigued. In situations such as these she urges students to be transparent with her about the difficult circumstances they are undergoing. Ms. Paton stated that she responds with compassion and understanding with the intention of providing students with the proper help and 'tools' when varying needs present themselves in the lives of her students. Although she is firm in her expectations and rigor, Ms. Paton has also communicated a genuine investment in her students' wellness and concern for them holistically, which (as she described and students have confirmed) is why they know that she cares.

Mr. Washington of East High School was also direct in that he prioritizes developing healthy and humanizing relationships with his students. When asked how has he fostered supportive environments and relationships with specifically the high performing Black male students at his school he responded:

> The question that you asked me is more of a human-to-human question than it is to a teacher to a student. Kids nowadays are really private, they just are. I think in order for them to really come out and share with you what's going on in their lives and what's happening is that there has to be this element of trust. I have to be, not just the symbol of trust, I have to be somebody that they can look at, that they can come to and know that they can trust me. There are certain constraints that I have being a public education teacher, that I'm responsible to do, but I think that what's really important is, establishing trust.
>
> I think they come in at first, they're a little bit shocked, here I'm an older White man, and I'm going to teach them, "What can an older White man teach me?" I understand that and I appreciate that. Again, it's not just the curriculum, I don't teach out of a textbook. I can't stand it. It drives me crazy. I do my own stuff, since we've been doing this distance learning. My head is just so full of bad information that I'm getting from the district about all of this stuff, these materials and the stuff that's available. I still want to do it my way. I still want to bring in stuff that I think is relevant to them. I think that when they see that I'm not a threat to them because I'm not, I think that it builds trust.

Immediately into his response Mr. Washington called attention to underlying themes of humanity recognition within our conservation. His attentiveness to seeing students for the people they are rather than just students is especially pertinent to Black students, given how they are often

dehumanized in schools (Christian, 2014). Rather than perpetuating practices that ignore the humanity of young Black students, Mr. Washington said that he is intentional in both seeing his students as Black people and being reflexive of himself. As an older white male in an authoritative position, he's stated that he is aware of the perception young Black men may have of him. To alleviate the wariness histories of violence (DiAngelo, 2018; Jaima, 2021) have taught Black people and youth to have of white male authoritative figures—and be in attempted allyship with his students—Mr. Washington prioritizes trust building, recognizing how race can inform initial apprehensions his Black students have of him. Mr. Washington also discussed how he employs culturally responsive teaching practices (Gay, 2002, 2018), leveraging what autonomy he has over curriculum and tailoring it to be as relevant to students' realities as possible. Mr. Washington discussed how he used culturally responsive teaching to not only create engaging material but also as an opportunity to build trust, communicating to students via curriculum choice that he is invested in them as both people and learners. Mr. Washington in his response, went on to add:

> I think that what I've always been really good at with kids is establishing a rapport. I think that when that rapport is established, the barriers come down and I think, again, the question that you asked me is more human-to-human than it is to a teacher-to-student. I just want them to be able to come into my classroom and know that it's a free place where they can openly express themselves and openly think. I've had kids say to me, "I really love this class because I don't feel self-conscious about expressing myself in here, expressing my thoughts, my feelings, and my views." The truth is that there are certain times; I think that when there is this classroom trust where somebody says something where we all kind of go, "Ooh,"

Again, Mr. Washington emphasized the importance of relationship building with students and developing a sense of trust with them. In his evaluation Mr. Washington said that he discovered that when students trust their teacher and feel safe within their classroom environments participation and engagement are bolstered while sensations of self-consciousness are assuaged. He also stated that he takes pride in fostering classroom spaces where his students feel uninhibited and empowered to engage. He asserted that this kind of dynamic is largely bought through a humanized approached where students are also seen as the people they are in totality. Mr. Washington's approach had a

striking contrast to the ways classroom dynamics are commonly informed by axis of power that typically exists between teachers and students (Rios, 2007; Garcia et al., 2022).

At Anderson High School, Ms. Wright also highlighted the importance of cultures of care in regard to supporting students. She for instance described her willingness to negotiate deadline extensions on behalf of students who are experiencing an unprecedented hardship to illustrate that she is an advocate for them. Ms. Wright shared that:

> It's just kids knowing that we care about them, whether it's the teachers, the administration, the support staff, the counselors. They know that we care about them. They know that when they have a problem they can come to one of us, and if it is a deeper problem, we will refer them to where they need to go, or if it's something that will need more time, we can either schedule a meeting or call someone up

Like the adult participants at East High, Ms. Wright also emphasizes how pivotal it is for students to understand that the teachers and staff of their school care and that the investment in them is not strictly academic, but encompasses their socio-emotional needs. In such climates, adult participants have found that their students benefit substantially when they sense they are welcomed, valued, and supported.

Variation of Race Awareness or Race Critique

Within data concerning the cultures of care present at East and Anderson high, varying degrees of race awareness was revealed within teacher and staff participant data. I bring attention to this; again, because this study prioritizes the ways race and antiblackness inform participant experiences. As such, (in alignment with a CRT and BlackCrit framework) when interpreting the cultures of care data analysis revealed, I consider school staff's awareness of the implications race has on Black students' experiences and outcomes. More so, how responsive or aware school staff is to the racial implications of has substantial implication on how effective, comprehensive, or wanting a school's climate or culture of care is. The nominated adult participants at both school sites exhibited substantial care for student participants. On multiple occasions and in varying ways,

both the teachers and staff of East High and Ms. Wright from Anderson High indicated an investment in the well-being of the students they serve. However, when examining the ways adult participants understood the specific ways race informs the schools (policies, procedures, climates, etc.) and the schooling experiences of student participants, data analysis revealed a clear distinction between adult participants from East High and those of Anderson High. Specifically, adult personnel at East High demonstrated a pointed awareness of race within their student experiences. At the same time, at Anderson, this element and lens were absent from Ms. Wright's comprehensions and reflections on Black student experiences. Differences in their approaches to student engagement and care most pointedly illustrate the variation of race awareness and race critique present in adult participant data.

When examining the experiences of Black male high-performing students at Anderson, I asked Ms. Wright to assess in what ways (if any) that Black students benefit from healthy relationships with teachers and school staff. Her response, like previous ones, moved away from the race-specific element of my question. Instead, she discussed the importance of healthy relationships with all students, adding that she is attentive to the relationships she fosters with students in her work with the Anderson population. Additionally, rather than reflecting on the experiences and interactions with student participants as young Black men, Ms. Wright more readily spoke about how her counseling practices and efforts to support students are shared equally across student groups. This is not to suggest Ms. Wright is wrong in her approach or detract from the care and attention she has shown student participants. Instead, I maintain that in our discussion of Black male students, she did not denote any ideas regarding race within her responses.

The absence of race commentary from Ms. Wrights' responses was near opposite to that of the adult participants from East High, who demonstrated a keen awareness of how student participants' experiences are heavily racialized. For example, Mr. Reynolds, a Black man and the

Football coach at East High, when asked about the challenges student participants face, specifically as young Black men, responded:

> I think interaction with some of the teachers is a challenge. The majority of the teachers on campus, I believe, are not minorities, so to speak. There's always a challenge being able to communicate with their instructors. That is one challenge. Another challenge is, with the officers on campus, there's always a challenge because a lot of students on campus-- or not a lot of students but some students on campus getting some type of trouble and it reflects to all the students on campus. A lot of the police officers on campus tend to treat some of the Black students on campus, especially Black males a little differently. What I mean by that, they don't give them the benefit of the doubt. They assume that they're doing something wrong when in fact, they aren't.

Immediately Mr. Reynolds identified that, more times than not, Black male students at East High have difficult relationships with their teachers. Particularly, many of the teachers at East High are not people of color or members of the same communities as students enrolled. He identified this disconnect between the different communities, teachers, and students as contributing to strained communication and relationships between students and teachers. Additionally, Mr. Reynolds called attention to how Black male students at East High are criminalized and profiled by campus police. A substantial body of literature has contextualized the ways antiblack racism specifically informs hyper-criminalizing of Black students and animates punitive actions inflicted on them (Marcucci, 2020; Nasir et al., 2013). At East High School, Mr. Reynolds stated that he was aware of the negative perception many teachers and campus police often harbor toward Black male students and how this has contributed to a tendency of Black males to have 'trouble' with these school officials. More so, Mr. Reynolds is conscious that this misperception of Black male students is an artifact of antiblack ideology that undergirds the marginalizing of Black students, in this context, the mistreatment of East students by teachers and campus police. While he does acknowledge that students do misbehave at times, in the case of Black students, any infraction by an individual student is considered indicative of the entire group's behavior. Additionally, misbehaviors are also used to validate deficit preconceptions about Black students. Mr. Reynolds demonstrated a clear

understanding that in the case of the Black students, he works with privileges such as assumed innocence are not present. Instead, the young Black men of East High, like many other Black students, are forced to contend with hyper-discipline, criminalizing, and animosity from teachers as conditions of their schooling experience.

Relevance of Antiblackness

Interpersonal Instances of Antiblackness

Antiblackness is a distinct form of racism rooted in the way Black people are uniquely positioned as nonhuman, a social construction derived from the US institution of channel slavery (Abrica et al., 2020; Ray et al., 2017). Because of this specific relegation of Blackness and Black people, a fundamental idea of BlackCrit is that multiracialism or racial diversity of spaces does not translate to Black students being safe from antiblack racism. Rather, these spaces can still be especially harmful due to episodes of antiblack racism being less expected (Dumas, 2016).

Within their responses participants pronounced that they were confronted with prevailing negative perceptions underpinned by antiblack racism. Despite being among the most academically accomplished students in their schools, student participants continually encountered notions of intellectual inferiority from other students and school staff. Although student participants have been labeled as ‘gifted’ and ‘advance’, demonstrations and episodes of their capabilities and prowess were often met with unexpectedness, surprise, and attempts to refute. For Rodney, a student at Anderson High School, the perception of Black male students at his school is complicated because so many of them (like himself) perform well academically, but deficit ideas about them persist. Rodney shared:

> As far as the perception of the Black male population at Blue High School, I feel like the perception is that it's mixed. I can say that it's mixed, but it's mostly just intelligent young Black men like I mentioned in our previous recording with our principal, he really does push us for us to be the best students that we can.

Rodney's use of 'mixed' to describe the larger perception of Black male students at his school highlights how, despite the realities of Black student success and a principal who champions Black students' dedication to excellence, imagined notions to the contrary remain. This negative perception although more figment than actual, is so substantial that it can compete with and detract from realities of Black students performing well academically and cultures of student excellence that they appreciate and engage. An Afro-Pessimist reading-style of Rodney's description emphasizes how rather than the observable well doings of Black students being the prevailing factor informing their perception, the larger community at Anderson is unable to completely forgo negative ideas about Black male students from its collective imagination, illustrating how affixed deficit notions about Black people are deeply affixed within the school

Additionally, participants gave account of interactions and exchanges with peers, teachers, and staff who exemplified particular hostilities and aggressions towards them as Black persons attending the school. Jackson from East High, gave scenario of online antiblack racism from a Hispanic student despite Black students being the majority at his school and even having healthy relationships with some Hispanic peers:

> Most people I know are Black, so I'm not really indifferent. Even when it comes to ... Spanish people in our school, a lot of them hang out with Black people too... although there was this one time, where I had saw on Instagram, this guy that had went to our school. He was just posting some really racist remarks about Black people, and we're the problem with America ... N-word multiple times, he's Hispanic, I don't ... I just though that was interesting, that was the first time I had ever really ... there was a racist in our school.

The struggles of Black and Brown (non-Black Latinx) students are often grouped together in terms of educational struggles and challenges. However the scenario Jackson provided, serves as an example of how Black students (even within diverse spaces where they are the majority) are subjected to the unique harms of antiblack sentiments and behaviors.

Austin, from East High discussed how his teachers have typified him on account of his Blackness:

> Most of the time, they think I don't look smart, I don't sound smart, I don't know that's just what I think. Some teachers, they place me differently, so when I tell them I'm African, they gave me low classes, no honors, no nothing, and I had to go above the average in all the classes for them to switch me to AP's and honors so, I think just based on my looks they, they assumed that I couldn't take honors and everything, stuff like that. Yeah, I think most of the time people judge me on my looks and I'm not smart enough or that and stuff.

In his experience, Austin identified a tendency for his teachers to place him in less challenging and less rigorous courses because he is Black. He is clear that because of how he looks and sounds he is often disqualified from consideration for placement in advanced courses. As such, he talked about how he was forced to leverage his proficiency in average courses as justification to be moved into more advanced coursework. Black students along with other students of color are often placed in less rigorous classes because of assumed inability or tracked (Francis and Darity, 2021). Education researchers have substantially documented the adverse affects of tracking on marginalized student groups and how this is informed by intersecting forces of racism and class inequality. While tracking is not specific to Black students, elements of antiblack racism do animate exclusionary actions against Black students. Austin being initially excluded from advanced courses because he is Black illustrates what scholar Demarcus Jenkins describes as anti-Black spatial imaginary. Dr. Jenkins defines that

> "the anti-Black spatial imaginary marks Black bodies as undesirable and therefore extractable from spaces and places that have been envisioned for their exclusion. I consider schools as sites specialized terror where the exhibitions of terror consist of forcing students to observe other Black bodies being forcibly removed from the classroom and school community; constant rejection of Black language, traditions, music preferences, and other cultural forms of expression" (p. 107).

Anti-Black spatial imaginary describes how Blackness, its presence, and participation of Black students in educational spaces, are often made illegitimate because of how educational spaces are built for the exclusion of Black bodies (Jenkins, 2021). Austin states that in addition to his race, his look (dress, demeanor, attitude), and way of speech –all of which are aspects Dr. Jenkins list as things made illegitimate because of anti-Black spatial imaginary—are also reasons for him being

kept from AP and honors courses. For Austin, race, more so antiblack sentiments of his ability and the denial of his right to participate in educational spaces, is an ongoing challenge.

Damon, from East High also spoke to how the manner his Blackness is perceived has impacted his interactions with teachers at East High. He shared, “I wonder how I would be treated, if I would be treated differently if I was another race... I'm given some advantages over my peer because I'm lighter skin tone than them. It’s just something I wondered, but I wouldn't really know”. Unlike Austin who had experienced school being made more difficult because of how he is profiled based off his race, Damon shared that because of his lighter complexion he is often afforded privileges over other Black students. While not the same discrimination Austin described, colorism or the preferential treatment of people of lighter complexions, that Damon identified, is deeply rooted in antiblackness. Colorist ideology, where across a phenotypic spectrum, whiteness and white features are considered valuable, desirable, and attractive (Rosario et al., 2021). Subsequently this consideration of whiteness as superior is contingent of the positioning of Blackness as undesirable and valueless (Dumas, 2016; Rosario et al., 2021). Lighter skin is often interpreted as an increased proximity to whiteness and the ideas associated with whiteness such as civility, intelligence, and dutifulness. In schools, like many spaces, colorism manifests as biased discrimination towards darker-skin people and favorable treatment of lighter skin-toned students (Gasman and Abiola, 2016; Rosario et al., 2021), notable in the narratives of Austin and Damon. Both kinds of instances are undergirded by the particular disdain of Blackness and the disassociation of Blackness from humanity, which instigate and legitimize violent, biased, treatment of Black students.

Antiblackness and the Entrenched Deficit Notions of Schools and Students

Students who attend low-performing, poor, urban schools routinely find themselves at the lower ends of academic performance outcomes (Bloom and Owens, 2011). On a consistent basis,

large, urban school districts serving majority, high-need student populations, are faced with challenges of poverty, compounded, and systemic disadvantages impacting the communities such schools serve. Despite these challenges being common in low-performing public schools serving poor and minority students, student participants of this study have demonstrated themselves to be a part of select group of Black male students who managed to transcend educational barriers to the accomplishment of high academic performance (in terms of GPA and college-readiness). However despite academic success, student participants collectively identified a persisting stigma associated with their schools and subsequently themselves as students attending East High School and Anderson High School. When asking students at East about how they are perceived Jackson stated that, "People from other schools, they think that were stupid, ghetto... They think lower of us because of being more Black", his peer Michael then added "I just want to say that I completely agree with [Jackson]". In their statements both Jackson and Michael assert that because East High is a predominantly Black school with this being widely known, other students have the perception of the students at the school as being "stupid" and "ghetto" as Jackson listed. The particular way 'ghetto' is ascribed to the predominantly Black educational space that is East High, demonstrates how ideas of ghetto-ness (poverty, lack of civility, and undesirability) are affixed to Black communities (Anderson, 2012). More so these perceptions are present in the educational experiences of Black students who regularly encounter deficit notions regarding their student abilities and character rooted in antiblack sentimentality. Elijah Anderson (2012) writes "black ghetto is typically distinguished by the local boundaries that physically separate it from the rest of the city" (p.14) describing how the segregation and degradation of Black spaces as a product of historical injustice, are often accompanied with dismal infrastructural conditions. Both student and adult participants had described East High as an anomaly because of how the poorly maintained campus juxtaposes with the affluent white neighborhood it's located in. Participants articulated that

East High School, its' perception and mistreatment (by school officials) are perpetuated by the disregard and undesirability of Blackness literally and symbolically exemplified by the poor physical condition of the school.

Jackson, from East High also asserted that East High School is typified as ghetto because other people (outside students, other youth, and community members) believe Black students frequently fight at the school:

> I'd say one last thing there. For some reason, there's this misconception about our school. When I talked to some of my friends that don't go there, they like to say that our school is ghetto. I'd be like, "Why do you think that?" They're like, "Oh, your school has fights or whatever." I'm like, "Well, every school is going to have that. You can't avoid that your school has fights." Then they run out of things to say. Then you start to realize that the only reason why people think it's a bad school is because it's mostly Black. I think everybody at our school knows that everybody thinks our school is ghetto because the school is a Black school. Most people go there as Black. I don't know why there's that misconception. I think it is racism.

Jackson is direct that the idea about East High students being hyper-violent or there being a frequency of fights between students, Black students especially is incorrect, calling this notion a misconception. When he has encountered this sentiment, Jackson pointed out that most schools have some occurrence of student fights, including the schools of students who harbor the stereotypes about East High. Jackson detailed that in his dialogue with other students regarding East High's perception as ghetto because of the supposed frequency of fights, he realized the narrative of violence is rooted in antiblack racism. However, Jackson is also specific that it is Black students specifically are the imagined perpetrators of violence, alluding to not racism, but more specifically antiblackness. Jackson's emphasis that other people have this misconception of his school because it is primarily Black students, illustrates how antiblack notions of hyper-violence inform the dominant narrative of Black students and the schools they attend. In her 2020 *Concrete Rose Project,* education researcher and Black feminist theorist, Jamelia Harris, employed Dr. Elijah Andersons' concept of the iconic ghetto (2012) to examine the controlling narratives that informed

a ‘ghetto school stigma’ present within the school site of her study. Dr. Harris found that the dominant narrative of Desert Rose High School being a ghetto high school, related significantly to exaggerated and racialized notions of student violence, specifically that the school was ghetto because of the prevalence of fights among Black students (Harris, 2020). Like the work of Dr. Harris, this study also found that racialized notions of prevalent violence among Black students was a central idea associated with East High School, contributing to a deficit perception student participants had to actively maneuver, reject, or combat.

Kyle, the only 10th grade participant and youngest from East High School, was compelled to contribute to Jackson’s statement, sharing:

> I'd like to add on to Jackson’s statement. I do have friends from private schools that do have the bias of me acting ghetto now because I do go to a predominantly Black populated school. Just hearing that come out of their mouth is just like, "Why are you generalizing with a certain racial group that doesn't even act a certain way that you perceive it as?" Just having people look down upon you just because of the school that you go to, I think, is the stupidest thing. I don't know any other way to put it, but I just like to say that it is such a stupid factor or a stupid perception that people hold.

Based on his experience and relationship with students from other schools, Kyle found that because he is a student at East High School others are more inclined to anticipate his behaviors or interpret his behaviors as ghetto. Since leaving private education and enrolling at East High, Kyle described that other students assumed he would take on the imagined characteristics of the racialized caricature of East High Black students that outside individuals presume. When faced with the ridiculousness of these sentiments, Kyle challenged the perpetuators, citing racism and prejudice toward Black students as having informed the negative perception of Black students attending East High. From the tone of his response, I discerned that such interactions frustrate and exhaust Kyle as he appeared unable to make sense of the absurdity of the racism he encountered, naming it the ‘stupidest thing.’ Kyle’s frustration is understandable, as racism and antiblackness are not based in logic or reason, rather they are constructs based in the white supremacy project designed to

maintain racial caste systems (Moore, 2017; Pierce, 2017). Within his student experience, perpetuation of Black marginality had manifested in as Kyle being stereotyped as ghetto primarily because his serves a majority Black student population.

In our discussion, Damon explained that because of the large Black student population and perception of East High, parents from non-Black racial groups intentionally avoid enrolling their children into East High:

> A lot of the kids in the neighborhood over our school, that are not Black, let's say White or whatever they are, their parents to send them to other schools that are predominantly White, even though our school is local to them, and we score higher on tests and everything. We're academically better than these other schools, but the White people might get sent to...El Segundo. They like to send their kids to El Segundo just because El Segundo is predominantly White hood, where academic would be better than El Segundo even though they live in the neighborhood of our school. That's just that.

Despite East High School being the school in closest proximity to the white residents of El Tercero, parents and students alike actively avoid the school due to perceived and realized resource inequity, perceived violence, and undesirability fueled by the predominantly Black student population. Damon critiqued the avoidance of East High School and quasi-white flight of white residents as faulty and misinformed. Although there are challenges present in the school with funding and quality of facilities, Damon still recognizes the wealth, value, and ability East high school students have, even claiming that he and his peers are comparable, if not superior in terms of academic ability to the students of more revered, neighboring schools.

Students at Anderson High also gave account to how antiblack ideologies informing a persisting and seemingly entrenched narrative of violence and deficiency regarding their school. During our second focus group session, exploring how students contextualized forces racism in relationship to their schooling experience, Daniel for example, stated:

> The only problem we face is the background of our school and what people think our school is, but actually our school is really responsible and respectful. We aren't as we were years ago, as they've seen us. Our principal make improves of us and makes us who we are but better.

When asked to elaborate on the specific perception of Anderson High School Daniel added, “its just ghetto, dirty, a whole bunch of Black kids. They're not smart. Actually, the school is more clean, we're not even ghetto, and most of the kids are smart there”. Daniel, like the students of East High School, described the connotation of ghetto associated with Anderson High School. Daniel to an extent was especially confused by his school’s negative reputation because his experience was to the contrary. Daniel in fact had found the students of Anderson High, its’ facilities, teachers, and staff, all to be of high quality and caliber, challenging the dominant narrative associated with his school.

In his response, evaluating of Anderson High School is viewed, Rodney included that school has had a negative perception spanning decades:

> **Rodney:** I feel as far as Anderson High School, it's viewed as that one school over there. I feel like how I mentioned with our principal is that he strives to get that image out. A lot of our students go to UCLA. I feel like he really strives for us to be the best that we can, and for us not to be viewed as ignorant or something like that. I feel like that really just plays a big part in the grand scheme of things.
>
> **Travis:** Okay, good. It's good to hear that you have such a supportive administration. Just a follow-up, why do you think Blue High School has or had these negative ideas surrounding it?
>
> **Rodney:** My father went to Anderson High School back in the older days, and based off of what he said to me, it's way different than it was now, but I would say a lot of the Black population, the things surrounding our school-- our school has a rivalry with...Stoneville High School... Over there, we're viewed as just the ignorant, ghetto, hood school compared to their campus, which has always been mostly the White population in the City of Pasadena, or Asian, or Indian or things like that. I feel like as a whole in America, Black people are not held to the same end because everybody says, "Oh, Asians are so smart, Black people are dumb." When you have most of the students come from the hood and things like that, it's associated with them just being dumb or them just being ghetto. I feel like that's why, even now when things are different, we're just viewed as that school, when it's really far from the truth.

The commentary from Rodney’s father (alum of Anderson High School) encapsulates that over recent decades, Anderson High had made substantial strides in improving the conditions of the school and outcomes of students. However, these gains have been dismissed and overshadowed by

the Roseland community's insistence that Anderson is a—as Rodney named it—ignorant, ghetto, hood school. The manner in which Anderson's negative reputation has spanned generations of students illustrates a reluctance or inability for non-Black community members to relinquish deficit notions of the school. Even more concerning is that Black students make up one of the smallest demographics at Anderson and yet Black students are at the center of the negative perception associated with the school. This underscores not just the stigma attached to Anderson but how antiblackness specifically informs the mistreatment and misrepresentation of Black students as well as those perceived to be in proximity of them; other students attending the 'ghetto' school—ghetto being generally associated with Black communities (Anderson, 2012). Those who attend the school with demarked Black students are by consequence stigmatized as well. This in part can account for why non-Black parents are intentional in not sending their students to Anderson. More than seeking out better school choice options, in this case school choice, or avoidance, represents an attempt to distance themselves from Black people, Blackness and the degradation associated with us. The avoidance of Anderson and hyper-defamation of Black students encompassed subtle and explicit messages of antiblackness, where desirability of spaces are actively constructed by the public (Lipsitz, 2011), including the constructed undesirability of spaces associated with Black students. Such behaviors are compliant and reinforcing of antiblack strata of hierarchy, power, and humanity that reinforce to urgency to distance oneself from Blackness in attempt to increase proximity to the all-imperative to whiteness (Lipsitz 1998).

Also important to note, is that Rodney does not just identify white people as perpetuators of antiblack rhetoric and behaviors. He recognizes that individuals and groups from other communities of color in the city of Roseland enable or contribute to the typifying of Black Anderson students as intellectually inferior. Rodney's critique is not limited to his school, as he identified the national tendency for Black people to be treated as lesser. His critique upholds a central idea of Black

critical theory and Black pessimistic thought; that antiblackness positions Blackness as worthless and undesirable. Additionally these designations are the basis for which ideas of worth, value, and appraisal are created upheld. Within systems of schooling, this has informed how for example, despite occurrences of Black students doing well at Anderson High, their character and abilities are continually disregarded for the sake of the larger community's ability to hold steadfast to ideas of Black inferiority.

Student Responses to Antiblackness

Data analysis also found that participants of this study on several occasions engaged differing types of responses to the antiblackness within their schools and interpersonal exchanges as students. However Black student resilience is not a recent phenomenon, in fact there are substantial bodies of research that have documented and examined Black student resolve and resistance to oppressive structures, policies, and practices within US systems of education (Fergus et al., 2020; Griffin and Allen, 2006). Student participants of this study demonstrated resilience and agency as responses and tools of combat to the antiblackness they encountered. Particularly when asked about the ways they have responded to racialized perceptions of them as students, several East High participants indicated that they intentionally perform well to challenge notions of intellectual inferiority. Austin shared:

> I think the best way to show them is just to prove them wrong because if they think you're not good enough to have honors in classes and AP class and then you get regular classes and you get B's and D's, they'll say, oh, we were right about what said, so the best way is to hit all tops, that'll be the work, and just score all A's, prove them wrong.

Across our interview series, Austin was especially vocal about his ongoing battle with being low tracked by his teachers. He is hyper-aware that, if after advocating for his enrollment into advanced placement courses, he performs poorly, it will be used to valid his initial exclusion from these types of courses. To avoid this Austin is especially dedicated to his academic performance to intentionally disprove governing perceptions of Black student inability. Michael, also from East High, agreed

with Austin, explaining that when attending a different school we faced similar negative perceptions and responded with high academic performance to disprove such notions. Michael in his response also added “basically, you just brush it off and just let it go. Because there's not that much you can do about it”. In addition to the hyper-vigilance the Austin described, Michael also employs passiveness and an ignoring of deficit notions about his academic abilities. Although regarding college students, Ebony McGee (2018) found that Black students, when responding to stereotypes with an “unrelenting motivation to succeed” (p. 1) endure substantial socio-emotional tolls. Michael, recognizing the persistent nature of deficit notions about Black students incorporates an intentional passiveness to mitigate the emotional expenditure of battling stereotypes. Kyle from East High School, also echoed Austin’s sentiments, sharing that:

> [L]ike [Austin] said, I can do everything in my power that I can do to prove that person wrong, to show that we are on the same level, or that I am on a higher level than them. Personally, I don't let anybody see, perceive me as lesser, because that's just not who I am, because I know who I am, I'm my own individual, I'm not going to let anybody else make fun.

Kyle is assertive in his refusal to let others perceive him as less capable because of dominant misconceptions of Black students. To him, purposeful demonstrations of his academic record—at times superior to those who typify him as less capable—is an active form of resistance to negative perceptions of Black male students. Kyle has confidence in both his abilities and identity as a student, which he is committed to defending. Similarly Rodney from Anderson High School also spoke to how he actively debates negative stereotypes about his school and Black male students in conversation:

> We're The Mustangs. The thing about being The Mustang is that we have a lot of pride about ourselves and about our school. Even far from extracurriculars outside of school, like even at the mall if somebody says, "Oh, you go to Blue High School," blah, blah, blah, I have pride in that. I don't have an issue correcting them, not in an aggressive way, but there shouldn't be this narrative about our school. I make sure when anybody ever has something to say like that, I correct them on it.

Rodney describes how the deficit ideas regarding his school and the Black students that attend it are not expressed or repeated solely within the school but also in non-academic, casual spaces. He shares that when he faced with such notions he 'corrects' people, rejecting the dominant narrative about his school, its' students, and asserting the wealth and ability Anderson High and its' student population has. Additionally it should also be noted that when responding, Rodney makes sure not to do so in an 'aggressive way' as he described. Rodney' intention to react in a way that is not perceived as aggressive signals that although he is the respondent to hostilities, he is also cognizant of the assumptions that young Black men are violent, angry, and dangerous and must tailor his reaction to account this. Rodney is simultaneously refuting and navigating multiple stereotypes about young Black men.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

I open this chapter by revisiting major areas and components of the dissertation study, specifically study sites, participants, research questions, theoretical and methodological approaches. In my overview of these components, I also provide discussion of how my study and its finding expand extant literature on Black male students, the challenges they face, and the achievements they manage. Additionally, I provide succinct commentary on the ways that my study contributes to the framing of antiblackness in education as a theoretical framework (Dumas, 2016)—specifically by situating narratives of Black student achievement occurring in low-performing schools, in relation to antiblackness and Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit). I close this opening section with a philosophical contemplation on the relationship between entrenched racial inequity, Black male students participants, and the examination of their experiences within low-performing schools that this dissertation offers. Following the opening section and study overview, I carry out two objectives concurrently; (1) placing this study's findings in conversation with existing and current literature relevant to explored topics, and (2) evaluating findings in relation to my research questions. Following this, I discuss the implications of my work and provide recommendations for educational research, school practices, and teacher practices.

Part I: Overview of Study

This dissertation examined the challenges high-performing Black male students—defined with a criteria of 3.0 GPA and projected A-G completion—face attending low-performing high schools (state designated Title 1 and SIG-qualified) in addition to the techniques, resources, and actors that supported their academic outcomes. This study included student and adult participants from two low-performing high schools located in Los Angeles County. East High School, the first participating school site, is one of the last predominantly Black public high schools located in Los Angeles. Despite being located in the upper middle-class neighborhood of EL Tercero, East High

School, like many low-performing, minority student serving public schools, is grossly underfunded and demarked with unmaintained facilities. Anderson High School, the second participating school site, while still state-designated as underperforming is also located in an affluent neighborhood, Roseland. However, unlike East High School, Anderson High School's buildings, infrastructure, and facilities are well maintained and tended to—suggestive of appropriate funding, management, and facility care. The commonalities within the community and school contexts of East High and Anderson High provided the opportunity to examine the shared challenges of high-performing Black male students in low-performing schools. Additionally, the striking differences between the conditions of each school afforded me the opportunity to contend with the diversity between Black male students (their experiences) and between low-performing high schools. In particular, student narratives, insights, and appraisals, in tandem with the reflections and evaluations of school employees, provided an in-depth exploration of young Black male students' navigation at the intersection of—at times identical, at times varying—schooling conditions, race, socioeconomic class, and performance status/outcome.

My qualitative research design employed Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit) to construct the framework that guided this project. CRT within education studies has a substantial history of being utilized to centralize experiential knowledge of marginalized people and groups, as well explicate counternarrative/counter-storytelling methodological approaches. BlackCrit, augments these existing strengths of CRT while asserting a direct attentiveness to the manifestations, entrenchments, and ongoing of antiblackness. The organization of BlackCrit across terms of framing ideas (Dumas, 2016) rather than tenets (as other *crit* framework are) represents the intentionality of current BlackCrit discourse, theorists, and scholars to provide further developmental *space* for the framework before anchoring BlackCrit to a particular rigidity. In short, BlackCrit (especially as an applied framework) is relatively young and

the collective community of theorists, scholars, practitioners, recognize the extent of developing and solidifying the framework is currently undergoing. This is not to undermine the value and utility of BlackCrit or suggest the framework is lacking in anyway. In fact, the pointed attention to antiblackness BlackCrit offers is an element I argue, most frameworks attempting to interrogate inequity stand to benefit from. Rather, to uphold the framework's integrity and focus, a continued collective deliberation is identified and warranted. My employment of BlackCrit serves to further the larger, emerging BlackCrit project, applying the framework to procedures of data collection and analysis to produce empirical data, forwarding the body of research that substantiates BlackCrit theory and discourse. More so this work contributes to the emerging body of theoretical scholarship examining antiblackness within education and the schooling experiences of Black male students. Finding from this study specifically contributes to the scholarship of antiblackness within education by linking antiblackness to the racialized perception of minority serving low-performing schools, explicate antiblackness within racialized challenges of Black male students, and contemplate student response to school-related encounters with antiblack racism.

In this study I explored separate but related areas of concern across three research questions. Each question was designed to explore the encountered challenges, navigations, and significant actors, contributing to student participant schooling conditions, experiences, and sense-making.

4. What (if any) are the challenges associated with being a high performing Black male student within low performing high schools?
5. What do these students do to promote their academic performance?
    a. What are some assets these students use to support themselves?
    b. According to participants, what are the resources available to them at their schools that help promote their academic performance?
6. Who are the school actors relevant to the experiences of participants?
    a. In what ways have these actors impacted the experiences of student participants?
    b. How do these actors understand themselves in relation to the experiences of high performing Black male students attending their school?

Operationalizing a CRT and BlackCrit approach to analysis, participant responses were examined within the context of the pervasiveness of structural racism and the permeance of antiblackness

(Moten, 2018). While there is extant research that offers explanation to Black men's concerning educational outcomes, seldom are these explanations (and the examinations that inform them) properly contextualized in relation to antiblackness. My employment of CRT was instrumental in identifying the racialized elements that inform encounters and conditions experienced by student participants. However, I recognize that CRT is limited in terms of its interrogation of the uniqueness of Black students; hence my application of BlackCrit. Schooling as a domain and arena is a facet of society encompassed and captured by the construct and practices of racism and antiblackness (Grant et al., 2020). My application of BlackCrit, particularly to data analysis, elucidate how the racialized challenges unique to Black students' conditions and experiences stems from how Black life conceptually is situated within ideologies of racial exclusion (Grant et al., 2020).

To execute a targeted examination of Black students' encounters with structural and racialized challenges, contemplating this in context with their status as academically high-performing students, I utilized a sequential qualitative design featuring students and student-nominated adults. Within a fifteen-month period I conducted a three-part series of qualitative focus group interviews with student participants from each of the respective school sites—followed by individual interviews with nominated adult participants. When reemphasizing the terms of participation, I reminded student that our collective space was intentionally designed for their recollection, evaluation, and sharing. I expressed that my role as facilitator should not stifle their engagement or autonomy of discussion. Instead, my facilitation of our focus groups was intended to employ Michael P. Nichols approach to listening, wherein I as facilitator "suspending memory, desire, and judgment" (Nichols, 1995, pg. 77) to curate a safe environment inviting of participation. Together, during student focus group interviews, we explored how they as high-performing Black male students attending low-performing high schools, encountered school challenges undergirded by systemic inequity and antiblackness. Within our exploration of their experiences, we also

examined the individual and collective forms of support, navigation, and acts of refusal participants employed in response to schooling challenges. Throughout all focus group interviews, when multiple participants expressed a particular idea, experience, or interpretation, I as interviewer would offer a restating, paraphrase, or summation of what was expressed. Restatements and synopsis of participant responses functioned as a mechanism of member checking to ensure the validity, accuracy, and reliability of findings.

At the close of our final focus group session, each group of student participants were asked to identify adult actors within their schools they assess as significant to their experience and to share their rationale for the nomination. Individual interviews were then conducted with said adults who agreed to participate in the study. Within this study I centered student voice, recognizing student participants as capable of evaluating and appraising their own experiences credibly. Adult participants were not included for the purpose of verifying or validating the narratives of student participants nor do I use adult participant data to determine whether what students shared is true or not. Instead adult participants were included for the purpose of comprehensively examining the role of specific school actors within participant experiences from the perspectives of school actors and the students they serve. Students nominated all adult participants because they were identified as supportive and assisting of their academic performance and well-being. The protocol used to interview adult participants targeted responses that further explain emphasized student experiences and examine how they as teachers, counselor, and coaches understand themselves in relation to participant outcomes. Their responses provide complimentary insight into the cultures, challenges, and supports cited within student participant data. Collectively data from both student participants and adult participants inform a robust examination of the schooling conditions and responses reported. By centering the voices of Black male students—to give name to their experiences—this study positions student participants as valuable to the knowledge-building and theorizing of how

marginalizing forces intersect within the schooling of young Black men. Additionally the locality of student participants as high-performing but attending low-performing schools critiques the tendency of Black male student achievement literature to overlook student achievement occurring within the context of underperforming schools.

Philosopher Charles Mills described what he called *the racial contract* as the implicit agreement, enforced through varying means that relegate those categorized as non-white to a status of sub-person, inferior morally and in terms of legal status (Mosley, 1999). As a sub-person, those relegated to this status are thus validly exploited to the service of white supremacy (Mills, 2014). Mills describes that within the racial contract the inequity and oppression facing Black communities is a natural outcome (Mills, 2014). In relationship to systems of schooling, contemporary scholars build upon Mills' work and argue that the Black suffering perpetrated and observable within schools is a required aspect to maintain national order (Marie and Watson, 2020)—that antiblackness is a necessity for the function of schooling systems. I leverage the works of Mills and Marie and Watson to further contextualize how schools as sites of social reproduction (Collins, 2009) and subsequently antiblackness where Black students are predisposed to persisting oppressive conditions; structural, systemic, and interpersonal. Yet, despite these conditions present within their schooling experience, findings of this study illustrate that student participants engaged, attained, and cultivated academic achievement. While not to devalue alternative, other, or under-recognized forms of achievement; in their academic success (by traditional and standard measures) student participants exist in defiance of governing conceptions and resist typical designations of Black men within schooling institutions—existing within schools but outside the designation of underperforming, remedial, and uneducable. I do not uplift the narratives of high-performing Black male students as examples of hard work surmounting inequitable schooling conditions or structural racism or to imply that other Black men must simply work harder. I instead assert that the young

Black men of this study succeed in spite of obstacles that must be redressed to increase the greater success of Black male students.

Findings from this study align with the existing body of empirical scholarship of Black Critical Theory within education, which stipulate that Black students' occupancy within inequitable systems of education are undergirded by antiblack racism (Caldera, 2020; Dumas and ross, 2016). At the same time, findings also identified strategies and navigation of challenges as well as acts of refusal that student participants employed when met with structural schooling inequity and antiblack misandry. In accordance with Black optimistic thought (a foundational element to BlackCrit) while simultaneously enduring the condition of antiblack racism, Black people have (and continue to) construct and engage matters of self that resist the denial of Black humanity. Black studies scholar and critical race theorist Fred Moten invokes the Black slave singing while running from captivity as example of how Black life, expression, and resistance can occur despite of constructs of antiblackness. Despite fleeing slavery, despite the ever-present possibility of re-capture (Given, 2021), which renders *true* escape impossible, music still exists, and as Linscott (2017) describes (paraphrasing Moten), singing is a possibility whilst running for your life. I use Moten's theory of Black optimism (Linscott, 2017; Moten, 2013) to situate the pursuits of student participants and their academic success as instances of defying structural powers positioned against them; these are their songs amidst stifling conditions.

Part II: Relationship to Extant Research & Study Aims

Discussion of Challenges

This dissertation project was particularly concerned with identifying the challenges related to the demands of high-performing students and meeting them while attending a low-performing school. This is the first of my research questions. Like extant literature on Black male students, this study documented Black male student's encounters with school-related issues. I conducted this

analysis while exercising an astute awareness of the racial, classist, and structural violence that inform the collective conditions of Black students and underperforming schools. Within student responses a particular distinction between the quality of resources and facilities at East High and Anderson High arose, specifically that East High was particularly poorly funded and under-resourced whereas Anderson High had sufficient funding. The dominant narrative of low-performing schools suggests they are categorized by funding issues and poor quality facilities. In the case of East High this holds true. Student participants and adult participants at East High school immediately gave description to the host of difficulties they experience due to poor funding and lack of resources. Students specifically attested to ill-maintained buildings, neglected sport fields, books worn to the point of illegibility, and a dearth of opportunities that support extra-curricular interests, college readiness, and career development. These evaluations of their school were further supplemented by adult participants who, as teacher and professional staff within East High, shared their own frustrations with the lack of financial and material support they receive from their administration and district. Although specific to the participants at East High school, I anticipated issues related to resource and opportunity availability to present at some point in data. The relationship between the underfunding of public schools and their underperformance has been well documented (Haycock, 2011; Ostrander, 2015). Even still, while a pronounced challenge for the students at East High, resource availability and funding allocation, was not identified as a challenge present at Anderson High.

While still identifying that many low-performing schools often struggle with securing adequate funding to optimally support students and staff (Ladson-Billings, 2007) Karen Baroody (2011) suggests, the needs of low-performing schools and the students they serve can vary greatly. Baroody (2011) highlights the need to resist easy preconceptions and assumption of low-performing schools as this can skew our assessment of needs and further misinform interventions and solutions.

To further her claim, Baroody (2011) gives example that even when receiving SIGs (School Improvement Grants) schools can still struggle to meet student needs, as is the case of East High. To the contrary, there are thousands schools that do not qualify for SIGs because cursory examinations and narrow qualification criteria give an impression that some schools do not need district intervention when in fact they do. Although Anderson High does in fact qualify for SIGs, its' appearance and the attitudes of students and staff recorded in this study does not suggest that this is a school failing to meet state standards—specifically because the school does not struggle with funding issues. However, as Baroody's work cautions, despite a maintained outward appearance and decent funding allocation, a school can still struggle to meet state standards. At Anderson High students did not give any account of challenges related to how they as students or their school is resourced. To the opposite, when speaking about the programs and opportunities available at their school, most Anderson students named multiple resources and supports. Ms. Wright (counselor to student participants and only adult participant from Anderson High) echoed sentiments of how well resourced Anderson and its' students are, citing a number of partnership programs and investment on part of administration to ensure resource availability to students. Interestingly enough, at the time of these interviews, the graduation rate and English Language Arts performance of Anderson High were well below state-standard, denoted with a yellow designation on the California Dashboard; mathematic performance was recorded to be in the lowest performance tier (red) (CA Dashboard, 2019). To reconcile the discrepancy between Anderson being well funded, well resourced, and yet still low-performing (by CDE criteria), I locate Anderson High as part of the select number of low-performing schools that simply do not share the distressed physical conditions and funding hardships common with low-performing schools. This is not to suggest funding and resourcing issues are not pertinent to the issues plaguing public education and low-performing schools. Rather, in accordance with Baroody's work, the case of Anderson High

exemplifies the diversity and variation that can exist between low performing schools and subsequently the necessity to account for this diversity.

Despite the differences in school funding and resourcing between East High and Anderson High, data analysis did reveal commonalities in student experiences and identical challenges present at both schools. Specifically student participants collectively identified a host of shared school challenges related to Covid-19 and remote learning. Of the six student participants from East High, five were in the eleventh grade and one was in the tenth grade at the time of their focus group interview series. The East High students were interviewed between the months of August and September of 2020. All student participants from Anderson High were tenth graders during the time of their focus group interviews in the month of May 2021. California shutdowns and the closing of schools began in some areas as early as January of 2020. California schools began to reopen in the spring of 2021, implementing hybrid models of instruction before returning to completely in-person, full-time instruction. I revisit these descriptions and sequence of events to provide context of how and when the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the schooling experience of student participants. With their first two years of high school occurring before the Covid-19 pandemic and returning to full in-person instruction by the second half of their senior year, East High students spent the majority of their high school career as in-person learners. This was the opposite for student participants at Anderson High, who at the time of their interviews had less than a full academic year of in-person learning before transitioning to remote learning formats. The differences how long students were remote learners may in part account for why data collected from Anderson students was not less concerned with in-school conditions and experiences, as the time spent on their high school's actual campus was substantially shorter than that of East high participants. Nonetheless Covid-19 related issues were prominent in student participants' overall discussion of challenges they encountered.

In their experience as remote learners students specified difficulties with managing and maneuvering online formats of learning. Minimal literacy and experience with new technologies coupled with incessant Wi-Fi problems created a particular frustration for students and stifled the quality of instruction they received. The gap between the intentions of remote learning and its execution illustrated how schools consistently fail Black students. The failure to support remote learners properly should come at no surprise as schools serving majority low-income, populations have traditionally struggled to meet student needs well before the Covid-19 pandemic. In recent and emerging bodies of research, several studies explain that the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted already existing racial and class inequality that permeate schools (Abedi et al, 2021), reflected in how Black students are disproportionally bearing the havoc of Covid-19. Student participants were descriptive in how during remote learning they struggled to find the motivation to complete tasks, engage material, and manage their time—all of which I situate as consequences of remote learning's shortcomings. Additionally, the alternate learning environments students were forced to adapt (particularly their at-home learning environment) also presented as a challenge. Particularly, when working at home or away from their school campus, many students struggled to secure quiet, conducive, and well-facilitated work environments.

In addition to challenges related to COVID-19, both East High and Anderson High students were faced with a racialized and class-based perception of their schools and as students attending them. It should be noted that despite both schools being low-performing, neither is located in economically depressed neighborhoods (as most research documents and common perceptions would suggest) but affluent, predominantly white and Asian communities. Within their respective neighborhoods students highlight how East High and Anderson High are affixed to the perception of a "ghetto school." Despite the realities of East and Anderson High, there are seemingly inescapable racial and classist preconceptions about the schools. For example at East High students

described that people outside of their schools' community consider the school ghetto because of fabricated and unfounded belief that East high students are overly violent. Student participants at East challenge this conception by (1) explaining how exaggerated this notion is and (2) citing that student fights occur in most schools. At Anderson High, although the school has made substantial gains in improving student outcomes, its' reputation of being a bad school has persisted for decades, attributed specifically to the Black students attending. Constant subjection to these deficit perceptions of their schools and themselves, forced students to respond in a variety of manners that reportedly caused ranging degrees of frustration, anxiety, indifference.

The accounts and evaluations student participants provided were incredibly informative when seeking to identify the pertinent challenges they encounter within their schools. Data analysis finds that despite being high-performing, student participants are not impervious to challenges common for many students, especially challenges with engagement during a global pandemic amidst novel remote learning formats. Additionally, students were also met with antiblack, deficit notions of their schools that continually informed the perceptions and attitudes directed towards them. Findings also highlight the role of structural conditions of schooling inequity in the experiences of student participants and the racially charged ideas associated with them as Black men attending low-performing schools.

Discussion of Navigation, Strategies, and Relevant Adult Actors

Another primary objective of this project was to examine how student participants responded to the challenges they faced within their schools, which was reflected in the study's second guiding question. While students of various performance statuses possess valuable knowledge, as high-performing students, participants had (to a large extent) successfully circumvented the challenging conditions within their schooling experiences. In this section I outline the strategies shared between participants groups. Additionally, to understand how student

participants navigate the conditions and distinct aspects of their experience, I also investigated relevant adult actors in their schools (which addressed the third and final guiding question). Although participants were invited to identify adult actors who have impacted their schooling experience positively, negatively, or otherwise, all student participants identified actors who had supported them significantly. Because identified school actors (according to students) functioned as part of the resources and navigation strategies students employed, I have paired my discussion of strategies and navigations of challenges with discussion of teacher responses. Responses from teachers offer further elaboration of how students manage the varying difficulties present in their experience and illustrate the significant benefit of responsive, supportive, and healthy teacher-student relationships for Black male students in under-performing schools.

Data from the student participants detailed three major navigation strategies in low-performing schools; partnership programs, teacher/staff support, and peer support networks. Because of the significant differences in resource availability and school funding, partnership programs were of an especial importance to students at East High. In their accounts, teachers and staff at East high were particularly adamant that students participate in what partnership programs did exist at their school as a means to supplement the lack of formal resources available at East high. While Anderson students also took advantage of partnership programs, they did so with substantially more ease than East High school students. At Anderson there was a reported plethora of programs and community partnerships intended to support students (some of which were even stationed on the campus of Anderson). By comparison, Anderson students had greater access to a more diverse collection of partnership programs. Nonetheless students at each high school utilized partnership programs to directly address difficulties related to structural school inequality as well as further support their academic performance, higher education goals, and career aspirations.

All student participants of this study identified positive and supportive relationships with their teachers and other school staff as a resource pertinent to their academic performance and more generally, their well-being. Although students noted that this was not the case in the majority of their relationships with teachers, the fewer but substantial relationships were a significant component of the support and resourcing they received within their schools. A substantial body of literature has illustrated the significance of teacher-student relationships to both the learning and development of students (Lee, 2012; Murray and Zvoch, 2011; Nasir, 2011). Relationships between teachers and students can range in the extremes, with some being either pivotal sources of support or detrimental to student outcomes. Black students in particular are among those most likely to have negative relationships with teachers. As such it was particularly powerful for the Black students of this study to give description of positive teacher-student relationships within the context of low-performing schools. Student participants specifically described the varying ways select teachers offered additional and tailored instruction as well as emotional supports, commonly inquiring about their well-being in more than an academic sense. When asked about how they as school actors understood themselves relation to the experiences of student participants, the adult participants in this study demonstrated a clear commitment to supporting and resourcing students as adequately as possible. Teacher and staff participants spoke to numerous approaches to both instruction and student support they employed. Similar to what students shared, adult participants described themselves as advocates for their students and the varying needs that present themselves in the lives of their students. Adult participants detailed allocating time within the school day to address the emotional needs of students in addition to pushing district officials for further or continued material support.

In addition to the supportive relationships with their teachers, supportive peer networks and relationships were also a significant technique student participants optimized. The relationships

student participants cultivated with other students in their schools served to promote their academic performance by offering participants opportunities to work collaboratively, practice accountability, and support each other in times of mental or emotional stress. To the latter point, instances of isolation, procrastination, and emotional distress were especially prevalent during remote learning. Many student participants spoke to the difficulty of being isolated from their peers for extended periods. For many of the young Black men in this study, being removed from their schools meant no longer having immediate access to crucial peer support networks. While students said that they found ways to manage separation from peers, primarily video chatting and other forms of communication, the loss of in-person interactions was still felt. For others, remote learning meant no longer having the school day buffer between themselves and difficult home life circumstances. The isolation of remote learning meant students could no longer physically access shared peer support spaces that provided reprieve from difficult home or personal circumstances. For example, a number of the participants at East High highlighted that as members of the football team they engaged in caretaking of one another. However, with sport activities suspended due to Covid-19, players could not perform or receive caretaking as optimally as they had when attending school in-person. The ways student participants were significantly impacted by isolation from their peers and responded with alternative ways to connect and interact is evidence of how reliant on peer support networks students are.

Gendered Dimension of Black Male Student Experiences

This dissertation study, in addition to focusing on the racialized experiences of student participants, also examined the gendered aspect of their experiences. Within data, student participants highlighted a collection of overt and subtle manners that their gendered identities influenced the ways in which they engaged peers, staff, and their schooling environment. Immediately notable among these responses were ideas and interactions regarding how they as Black males are negatively typified, particularly with ideas of violence and aggression. Classist and

racist ideology already suggest that Black students are overly aggressive. As students attending a ghettoized school, student participants are already susceptible to being regarded as violent and aggressive because of how the notion of ghetto pathologizes Black people as violent (Marzo, 2020). This is again (in part) represented in how the notion of *ghetto* is affixed to their schools and attending students due to an alleged hyperpresence of student fights. While the caricature of the violent Black student is not unique to Black men (as young Black girls are also typified as overly aggressive), participant reflections, highlight that as young Black men, they are nonetheless individually and collectively presumed to be violent, aggressive, and quick to anger. For example, as previously mentioned, Rodney (a student participant from Anderson High School) described how when responding to ideas of intellectual inferiority (projected by other non-Black students), he exercised a degree of intentional restraint and calm when reacting because he is cognizant of governing ideas of hyper-aggression associated with Black men. Despite he himself being the victim and of racially charged microaggression and Black misandry, Rodney described having to moderate the offense he experienced so as to avoid being labeled aggressive by others. Ideas of hyper-aggression are especially apparent when concerning Black men. During the time of this study, national discourse and unrest centered on the vigilante and state-sanctioned murders of multiple unarmed Black men, with most cases debating ideas Black male hyper-aggression, assumed criminality, and adultification. Rodney, like his peers demonstrated an awareness of these perceptions, speaking to encounters with other students being impacted specifically by the notion of Black males as hyper-aggressive.

Within the study adult participants also identified ways that Black male students are particularly typified. In his report of the campus climate present at East High School, Mr. Reynolds (football coach at East High School) was explicit in identifying that Black male students in particular are targeted and criminalized by campus police and teachers. Mr. Reynolds is direct in

describing that Black male students at East High are often assumed to be misbehaving or engaging in delinquent behavior when they in fact are not. Rather the assumed delinquency projected onto Black male students by teachers and campus police, in return, places strain on the relationships and communication between Black male students and these school figures, exacerbates unhealthy dynamics between the groups. As Black male students navigating the structural inequity present within schools, the experiences of student participant were impacted by intersecting forces of race and gender. While race as an influencing element is pronounced across student participants' experiences, it was their positionality as young Black men specifically that contributed to their being considered (for example) considered aggressive and delinquent. As young men, prevailing gendered ideologies associate student participants with physical strength and normalized degrees of aggression. As young Black men, these gendered notions are complicated in manner that increase their proximity to harmful stereotyping such as hyper-aggressive and criminality. Additionally, academic success is sometimes viewed as feminine trait by others males (Rowe, 2018) as well as obedience, which in part accounts for why adult figures (teachers and campus police) associate student participants (and other males) with delinquent school behaviors rather than abiding behaviors.

In addition to the way their gender identities as young men informed how they were typified, student participants also detailed how their shared gendered (and racial) identity informed the networks, connections, and comradery they established with other Black males, particularly those exhibiting competencies regarding them as young men. Students at both school sites, when describing healthy relationships with adult figures on campus identified other Black men specifically because they could relate and empathize with them as young men as well as a Black person. At East High, students again highlighted their football coach because he demonstrated a gendered competency as well as racial understanding and awareness when engaging with them. As

previously mentioned, Mr. Reynolds is aware of how student participants as young men are thought of as (for example) aggressive. Student participants are aware of this type of consideration and acknowledgement Mr. Reynolds puts forth and in return, student participants described being more inclined to engage in transparent, trusting, and safe dialogues/exchanges with Mr. Reynolds. Similarly, Jackson from Anderson high, also identified his football coach as understanding and supportive, much of which he credits to his coach being a Black man sharing a common ground and understanding with other young Black men. Students at Anderson High also identified their school principal, another Black man, citing that their interactions with him are facilitated by a mutual consideration for the conditions and experiences impacting young Black men. It has been documented the Black male student athletes have an affinity for their Black male coaches— similar to how Black students in general can often find a degree of kinship with Black teachers—holding true within this study as well. I interpret the recognition of Black male coaches—as prominent and competent support figures at both school site—as indicative of gender competency as well as racial awareness. Consistent with recent research (Horton, 2012; Richardson, 2012) student participants of this study highlighted the connection between themselves as young men and the older adult figures they find within their sports coaches as being facilitated in large part by both parties being male. Research has examined the benefit participation in sports has for young Black men in particular because of the opportunities of positive mentorship and relationship building with other Black males (coaches and fellow teammates) it affords young Black men, a sentiment echoed by the young men featured in this study.

While student participants described some readily recognizable ways maleness and masculinity manifested within their experiences, these occurrences where often discussed in relation to their racial identity, socio-economic class, and school context. The tendency for student participants to narrate their experiences in this manner speaks to the importance of an intersectional

frame of analysis that recognizes and accommodates for how many identities (race, gender, class, school context, etc.) cannot be disentangled or siloed within Black male student experiences. Still, findings of this study do in fact support that as young Black men, student participants are vulnerable to certain hindrances and demonstrate affinity for particular kinds of support and relationships (of which are aligned with extant literature). However, when examining the experiences of Black male students, I would also challenge researchers and scholarship to be considerate of how masculinity and maleness can manifest in a multitude of ways. For example, within this study students at East High School, spoke to having a healthy relationship with their (female) Social Science teacher—an especially poignant occurrence given that non-Black female teachers can find it especially difficult to build empathetic relationship with Black male students in particular (Warren, 2013). In the case of these East High School participants' their relationship with Ms. Paton diverts from common dynamics between non-Black female teachers and Black male students, but nonetheless has a gendered element to be interrogated. Typically, masculinity is thought to prevent males from being accepting of support or help. However, I interpret the case Ms. Paton and the young men of this study, to be indicative that their masculine identities potentially include a reception to care rather, than a rejection of tenderness (a characteristic usually associated with masculinity). While further research is needed to explicate this particular idea, it nonetheless supports that future research should be considerate of varying forms of masculinity that may challenge perception of how maleness is expressed and presents within experiences and relationships concerning Black male students.

Part III: Recommendations—Policy, Practices, and Research

In this section I present recommendations for research and practice intended to address conditions and experiences that negatively impact Black students in within low-performing schools

as well as outline approaches to better support Black male students in such schools as informed by study findings.

Implications for Future Research

As research and inquiry continue to interrogate disparate academic outcomes and conditions impacting Black students (and other students of color) it is important to continue employing attentiveness to the unique barriers facing Black students. This study highlights the need for further knowledge about approaches and interventions that are effective in supporting Black male students. Although high-performing students were the focus of this project, I recognize that Black male students across the performance spectrum are deserving of consideration. As scholars continue contemplating the state of Black male students I recommend future research that considers the experiences, navigations, and attempts of Black male student in low-performing schools who are 'under-performing' or within a moderate or middle range of academic outcomes. My inquiry of antiblackness in schools was not exhaustive and further research is still needed on how antiblackness functions within schools. Specifically how antiblackness can manifest as part of the relationships between student peers and the relationship a school has with the community it is located in. Additionally student and adult participants at specific points illustrated the substantial benefit Black students stand to gain from healthy, responsive, and trauma-informed relationships with teachers. I interpret data to suggests that teacher-student relationship have the potential to function as an effective intervention and disruptor of antiblackness, however further study is needed. I am also vigilant of how teacher-student relationships can function as a vehicle of antiblackness and urge scholars and researchers to be evaluative of this reality as well within forthcoming research.

Additionally this study took place in the particular context of Covid-19. While student and adult participant provided insightful information into the experiences of Black male students, most students are no longer remote learners and in-person schooling has resumed. As such, future research should continue interrogating the schooling conditions of Black male students and the persisting antiblackness that undermines their collective outcomes. Further more (an noted earlier) the full extent of the impact Covid-19 has on vulnerable learners is still being revealed. Several of the participants in this study are still in high school, returning to in-person learning having weathered the national pandemic and its' effect on 1-2 years of their education. Further research is warranted on how schools are supporting Black students transitioning back to in-person learning and how schools are or aren't accounting for the period of compound disadvantage Black remote students endured while learning away from their schools.

Attentiveness to Antiblackness

The increased uptake of Black critical theories (BlackCrit, Afropessimism, Black Feminist Thought) within fields of study reflects a need to be vigilant and considerate of the role of antiblackness, particularly patterns of inequity, violence, and suffering. Truly equitable systems of education cannot be achieved while Black students are continually mistreated within schools. In the current political climate, Critical Race Theories and other frameworks of analysis that center the role of race within American histories and institutions, are under attack. As leaders, policy-makers, educators, and researchers strive for equitable systems of education, targeted evaluation of the antiblackness that informs Black students' poor experiences and outcomes in schools is needed. Interrogation of antiblackness is requisite to the development of interventions that ameliorate the hindrances of Black students' well being academic and otherwise.

At both participating school sites, student participants detailed how their schools are typified as ghetto, less rigorous, and violent. Interpersonally, students reported how this was especially

frustrating to them and reemphasized the racialized perceptions that continually inform how other students and people outside their community view them from a deficit perspective. At the community/neighborhood-level, both East and Anderson High are schools largely avoided by white and Asian community members, evidenced in the discrepancy between their respective neighborhood demographics and the racial make-up of each school's student population. Participants explained that their schools have a persisting reputation for being dangerous and poor quality, adding that these descriptors are mostly associated with the Black students that attend East and Anderson High. Additionally student participants also described how they experienced a racialized style of tracking, instances of colorism, and indifference from school faculty and staff regarding racially hostile encounters at their school.

In terms of their academic and socio-emotional well-being, antiblackness is a pertinent factor in the experiences of Black students, the full impact and extents of which still need to be better understood. Based on this study's findings I offer the following as immediate actions and practices that can support Black students as they navigate the racially hostile institution of US schooling systems. Awareness of antiblackness is perhaps the most immediate step in addressing how it impacts students in schools. School leaders and teachers must interrogate their own racial biases they harbor about Black students. Largely suggested by this study and related research, school officials and educators must be cognizant that antiblackness is directly related to how Black students' academic abilities are often disregarded and unsupported. Additionally, school officials must interrogate how notions of hyper-violence and criminality inform the ways Black students are typified by school staff, peers, and people from outside their immediate communities. Lack of responsive resources and limited space or opportunity for students to voice how that are harmed by antiblack racism within their schools communicates a disinterest for these concerns on part of school staff. For many of the students, participation in this study was one of very few or only

opportunity to discuss their understanding of how being Black has impacted their student experience. As such, educators at minimum must create space for pause and validation as Black students carryout their academic demands whilst in the 'total climate' of antiblack racism (Sharpe, 2016). On Sunday May15th, 2022, an 18-year-old white supremacist targeted a predominantly Black community in Buffalo New York, killing ten unarmed Black civilians. He was taken alive into custody. The next day was a school day. This recent instance of antiblack violence is one of many where Black communities and people are relentlessly under attack, murdered, and reminded how unvalued the lives of Black people are. Consideration of how Black students, for example, attend schools against the backdrop of antiblack violence, aligns with recent pushes to develop comprehensive approaches to school safety (Edwards, 2020;Voight et al., 2015)—particularly models that demonstrate concern for threats to students' sense of emotional safety and tend the socio-emotional needs of students as they present within schools. To adequately support Black students schools and staff must exhibit a capacity to empathize with how they are impacted by seemingly endless violence against Black bodies. To the same effect school staff must also recognize the validity of when students critique how antiblack racism informs their schooling experience and possibly mistreatment within schools.

Teachers of Black Students and Antiblackness

In my evaluation I find that it behooves educators of Black students to be aware of how institutions of learning are shaped by antiblack racism and the ways in which this informs the experiences of Black students. Within this study there were varying degrees of race-awareness reflected in data collected from teachers and staff. I begin with Ms. Wright, a counselor, and the only adult participant from Anderson High School. In her responses to particular issues relevant to Black students, Ms. Wright held steadfast that the students in this study and others at Anderson High are not particularly impacted by race within their school experience. While student

participants at Anderson did explain that they have not experienced a particularly racially hostile school climate, this is not the same as being unaffected by race. In fact, Anderson students collectively described encountering deficit and racialized perceptions of their schools. Rodney, a participant from Anderson, even gave an account of how his intelligence and academic ability has been has been questioned on numerous occasions during his time at Anderson because of how he looks. It is my understanding that Ms. Wright is well intentioned and very supportive of her students. However, as an educator and school official working with Black students, an inability to discern how your students are impacted by race or how this is relevant to them as attending Anderson High, is a kind of indifference too closely related to race-evasive and colorblind approaches of support and care. In my three conversations with the young men at Anderson I was able to elucidate instances of racialized tracking, teachers harboring biases against Black students, and a decades-spanning perception of the school as being ghetto, surely these things impact the Black students at Anderson, and a school counselor should have some awareness of this reality for students.

Interestingly, Mr. Washington, a white man and veteran English teacher at East High school, quickly established himself as the adult participant most experienced in responsively supporting Black students. In our interview, Mr. Washington demonstrated a keen attention to how race informs the experiences of his students, citing how in many ways East High school has been abandoned by the school district with there being a disregard for the resourcing of this predominantly Black school. He explained that because the school does not have a large English as a Second Language or ESL population, district officials neglect the school:

> They realized that we are different in that we don't have a large English language learner's culture at our school, which makes us different, and they really didn't pay a whole lot of attention to us.

Despite not having a majority ESL population, students at East High are still deserving of adequate funding. The majority of its students are Black and navigating intersecting marginality, however the

needs Black students in this case are overlooked and unaddressed. According to Mr. Washington, the funding and resourcing the school would receive if it had a large ESL population is not reallocated to meet the needs of the Black students attending East High. Instead, the funding is kept from the school, exacerbating the harsh conditions Black students there are forced to endure. This disregard of the school serving a majority Black population because there is not a substantial ESL population is an example of how antiblackness undergirds the neglect and mistreatment of Black student populations, reflected in policy and funding. Mr. Washington's discernment of this as well as his willingness to voice this injustice serves as an example of how teachers and school staff can be vigilant of the structural barriers impacting their Black students.

Cultures of Care for Black Male Students

As young Black men the maleness and Blackness of student participants invokes ideas of super-humanism (which can be framed as a form of dehumanization as it distances them from their actual humanness). Ideas that Black men are impervious, all-withstanding, strong and unbothered by circumstance—often disqualifies young Black men for consideration of uplift, tenderness, and caretaking. Demonstrated academic proficiency suggests that Black students are not in need of help or support, because they manage to attain, a perception that fails to account for the challenges present in maintaining ones' position at the higher end of the performance spectrum. Exaggerated ideas of durability and hyper-exceptionalism threaten to suggests that high performing Black male students do not to benefit from, or are undeserving of, responsive supports. Black male students in low-performing schools, like many Black students, are constantly exposed to a myriad of conditions and challenges that can take a toll on their well-being (academically and otherwise). Like most students, young Black men respond positively to supportive and authentically caring school environments and relationships. Positive relationships with peers, teachers, and other staff was a major factor in how students navigated challenges, and constructed joy and warmth within their

schools, in spite of the hardships present in their student experiences. At both school sites, students named adults (some Black, some not) who engaged in holistic supporting of them, expressing concern for the emotional, sometimes financial, and often academic well-being. I recognize both the impact and importance of fostering supportive environments of care for Black male students. To improve school conditions and climates for Black male students, researchers, policy makers and educators must recognize the necessity and utility of responsive cultures of care that benefit Black students. Some potential ways of bolstering responsive cultures of care for Black male students include the following:

- Support of Black-centered extra-curricular space and programs (not to the overburden of Black teachers and staff)
- Allocation of time and room for dialogue caused by ongoing violence and injustice inflicted on Black bodies, facilitated by competent and adequately equipped community members
- Continued valuing of Black student voices as critical and evaluative of injustices sustained within schooling spaces
- Incorporation of student feedback into the development of adequate school responses

Relinquishing Preconceptions of Low-Performing Schools

Although the singular unit of analysis of this study were student participants, this study's inquiry in to the conditions and experiences of students attending low-performing schools affords a degree of insight and evaluation into how issues present in such schools can be better redressed. Data analysis from both student and adult participants in this study, lends itself to critique how low-performing schools are often discussed in a monolithic manner. As I have already discussed in detail, despite significant commonalities (most pertinent being the schools' status as Title 1 and SIG –qualified), there were distinct, notable differences between East High and Anderson High particularly regarding school funding allocation, resource availability, and physical appearance. I do not interpret the differences between East High and Anderson High as reason to reconsider the ways underfunding and district neglect impact low-performing schools, as this is a structural reality. I

instead advise that this reality be held as a common context of low-performing schools and not treat as a stereotype. As evidence by East High and Anderson High not all low-performing schools are the same. Just as young Black male students should not be treated as a monolithic group, an inability to recognize the diversity and variation that exists between low-performing schools hinders our ability to support them adequately. No two schools are exactly alike and this is true for low-performing schools. In the case of this study, while both East and Anderson share a number of challenges, the holistic set of student needs at East High students are not identical to the holistic set of student needs at Anderson High. 'One size fits all' approaches to supporting schools and staff risk ignoring important differences in what a particular school may need. Low-performing schools are often at the forefront of school reform discourse, legislation, and attempts. As such I caution against efforts and tactics that are overly rigid with no capacity for how diversity between low-performing schools translates to diverse needs and thus warrant varying interventions that can respond to the specific context of schools if needed.

Additionally, I interpreted my findings to suggest that researchers and educational leaders must challenge the governing perception of low-performing schools that position them as the purported villain in educational discourse. Low-performing schools are not the enemies of educators and stakeholders, but the consequence and outcome of structural inequality. The relationship between low-performing schools and systemic violence against poorer communities of color, should elicit consideration and support, not stigma. Low-performing schools are often thought of as lacking value and needing to be done away with by some. This overly deficit perception of low-performing schools lacks consideration for the wealth and assets present within them. This dissertation study highlights that despite being low-performing, student achievement and excellence is occurring within low-performing schools. These schools also host an array of knowledge, contacts, and skills (Yosso, 2005) that support positive outcomes of students attending them. At both East and

Anderson High, students were able to identify school actors proficient in supporting them. Additionally at each school there was some resources available whether it was partnership programs or on-campus resources. Both East and Anderson High School have to some extent managed to graduate select numbers of students and have them matriculate into higher education in spite of the myriad of barriers facing students and the schools themselves. Rather than ignoring the wealth and capability present in low-performing schools I urge officials and policy-makers to hypothesize how the existing strengths of schools can be augmented and used to inform interventions appropriate for particular low-performing schools.

Conclusion

For young Black men, navigating US school systems means direct and indirect encounters with challenging conditions, experiences, and sentiments pertaining to their racial, class, gender, and academic identities. Structural inequality, economic disenfranchisement, and antiblack misandry are some of the foremost factors influencing the barriers facing Black male students in K-12 schools. In attempting to further explain Black male students' outcomes, some scholars have asserted that educational research has become hyper-focused on the poor outcome of Black male students. In response, an increasing body of literature examining Black men's' positive academic outcomes has developed in recent decades. My centering of high-performing Black male students attending low-performing school provides an essential example of how research and practice can be attentive to the difficult conditions facing Black male students with proper regard to significant occurrences of positive student outcomes. Although I employ asset-based and counter-narrative approaches of examination, my work is not intended to reduce the urgency of improving the state of Black men in education. Rather, I posit that to adequately understand the state of Black men in education, their predisposition to poorer outcome and the instances of achievement, cannot be positioned against each other. Rather, together, the hardships and triumphs present in the collective

experiences and outcomes of Black male students offer a thorough understanding needed to properly support them.

Even as high-performing students, young Black men, especially those attending low-performing schools have unique needs that must be tended to. As academically successful, young Black men from low-performing, *ghettoized* schools, there are contradictory assumptions and ideas that surround their collection of identities. Findings from this study dually reemphasizes the need to resource high-performing students within low-performing schools while offering important insight into how these students can best be supported. It is incumbent of researchers and school officials to see past the gloss these students' performance can cast over the entirety of their experience and continue to identify and support the techniques and practices that bolster the academic outcomes of students like those featured in this study.

I conclude this dissertation with a reminder of the importance and value of situating voices of Black students. Their critiques and evaluations of school systems are integral to our ability to *see* inequity, theorize, and create truly equitable systems of education. In building knowledge and understanding *with* my student participants I am hopeful for the continued betterment of men's educational futures.

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