

**HIS-STORY: EXPLORING THE SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS ENROLLED IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

by

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Dominique J. Thornhill Morgan, EdD

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This qualitative problem of practice study explored the overrepresentation of African American male students enrolled in alternative education. The educational experiences of three African American male students currently enrolled in alternative education were examined. Participants alternative education recommendation packets were analyzed, and students participated in two in-depth interviews that focused on their race, gender, class, and families, in relation to their education

Four themes emerged from the analysis of their counter narratives: Participants desire to succeed, the benefits of alternative education, the role of the teacher and participants perceptions of their race, gender, and class in relation to their marginalization in school. Paired with previous and future research, the findings from this study can assist educators and policy makers in providing the necessary changes needed to close race and gender opportunity gaps in education, thus improving the teaching and learning conditions for African American male students. Recommendations for further research are included.

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PREFACE

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Rasheed Strader, Doughboy, Martin Brown, Deandre Dozier, De'Von Dozier, Trayvon Parks, Michael Nolen, Jo'Markus, Chris, Lorenzo, and the many other African American male students I've taught, who lost their lives well before their 18th birthday, prom, and graduation.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This problem of practice study concentrated on the experiences of three African American male students enrolled in an alternative public school within a Northeastern city in the United States (U.S.). The purpose of this study is to improve the teaching and learning conditions for African American male students who disproportionately face opportunity gaps. Far too often they are funneled into special education, alternative education and the judicial system. I am currently teaching in alternative education in Esko Public School District. I frequently witness the referral of many African American males into the alternative education site. Some successfully graduate or transition back to their traditional school setting. While other students remain in the alternative setting or return back quickly. In this study I examined the counter narratives of this marginalized group of students, in hopes of better understanding their educational journey.

1.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Many initiatives and acts such as No Child Left Behind have emerged in an attempt to close the racial achievement gap. Although resources and time have been dedicated to this issue, I believe we are “leaving behind” a very important race and gender in our attempts. Numerous scholars have investigated African American males and their under achievement in academics. Yet, due to continued poor academic performance, expulsion, high rates of absenteeism, and

disengagement, many remain at-risk (Beach, 2013). There are significant challenges that must be addressed. African American male students are not achieving at the same rate as their white counterparts. The National Center for Educational Statistics records that most fourth, eighth and twelfth grade African American males were not proficient in reading, math, history or science in the past decade. These statistics directly correlate with the quality of life African American males obtain after K-12 schooling. In 2005 African American males were five times more likely to be incarcerated than White males and outnumbered all other ethnic groups of the prison population. Therefore, effective intervention at the alternative education setting is crucial to interrupting the outcome and perpetuating the school to prison pipeline. The alternative school aims to support the educational and lifelong success of African American students enrolled, rather than prepare them for incarceration.

1.2 SCOPE OF INQUIRY

My problem of practice study was investigated at Mary Lou Starkes Academy, a 6-12 alternative school for Esko Public School students. Students are recommended to attend the academy based on their behavior or other infractions, such as bringing weapons or drugs to school. Depending on their infraction students can spend a semester or entire year in alternative education before transitioning back to their home schools. Students are taught skills and strategies that should allow them to improve both their academics and behavior. African American male students outnumber any other race and gender at Mary Lou Starkes Academy. Small classrooms, a behavior model and levels of redirection are used to support students as they work to transition back to traditional school settings. Students' behavior is rated by staff each week, on a scale from

concern, neutral, positive, pledge, to phoenix. Students have an opportunity to improve their status by displaying acceptable behaviors, such as following school norms, taking ownership for misbehaving, and redirecting other students. For the purpose of this study student success is defined by two categories: raising status from neutral to Phoenix while enrolled at Mary Lou Starkes Academy, or transitioning back to traditional school settings, able to assimilate into the school culture, maintain good grades and behavior, without being referred to alternative education. The number of males enrolled in Mary Lou Starkes Academy that are African American males are 98 % are African American and 100% of females are African American. Thus, the focus on this group of students. Three African American male students who met the requirements for success, striving and struggling participated in a nine-week case study.

Data collection occurred using several methods, beginning with the document reviewal of the Recommendation Packets schools must submit to refer students to alternative education. The background of African American male students, their academic performance and behavior records from their traditional education setting was reviewed to assist in the participant selection process. Selected participants also participated in pre and post interviews. In addition, I recorded field notes observing students in several settings weekly.

This problem of practice study was conducted through a critical race theory lens, examining the effects race has on African American males and their educational experiences. The impact their race, gender and class have on their success was examined through their individual and collective counter narratives. Qualitative data was used to examine and hopefully improve the teaching and learning environment for African American male students throughout their schooling journey.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AND EDUCATION

Despite a significant body of research investigating the underachievement of African American [1] males in academics, and their overrepresentation in the school to prison pipeline, public schools in the United States continue to fail in addressing the challenges facing many African American male students (Howard, 2008). Consequently, the school failure they often experience impacts the quality of life lived during, and well after the K-12 schooling experience. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that most African American males in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades failed to meet grade level proficiency in reading, math, history, and science (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). In addition, African American male students are overrepresented in school suspensions, expulsions, special education classrooms, alternative education sites and remedial classrooms (Gregory, 1996; Noguera, 2003; Office of Civil Rights, 2001; Pabon, 2014; Wald & Losen, 2016). Several factors such as socioemotional issues, familial and social environments contribute to the challenges that African American male students face (Toldson, 2008). However, this review of literature includes scholarship that focuses on school factors, particularly the discipline policies, which account for the overrepresentation of African American males in alternative education. The examination of

discipline policies is vital to ensure they do not further perpetuate the overrepresentation of African American males in alternative education.

2.1.1 Discipline Approaches

A first theme of scholarship has examined the discipline patterns that perpetuate the overrepresentation of African American males in alternative education. Scholarly literature presented over the last three decades identified African American males as the “most frequent targets of unfair discipline practices” (Lewis, 2008; Townsend, 2000). African American males also tend to receive harsher punishments for less severe offenses compared to White males (Skiba, 2001). A vast body of research documents the discipline gap evident in urban K-12 school settings. Suspensions, expulsions and repeated disruptive behaviors often result in a student being referred to an alternative education site. Although African American males make up only 18% of the nation’s student population, “this population remains ostracized for low achievement, behavioral problems, and overall lack of motivation towards educational growth attainment” (Allen, Lewis, & Scott, 2014).

Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) completed a document analysis of the disciplinary records of 11,000 students in 19 middle schools. The analysis concluded “a differential pattern of treatment, originating at the classroom level, wherein African American students are referred to the office for infractions that are more subjective” (p. 317), compared to white students who were referred for more objective infractions. In addition, the study also revealed African American male students received harsher punishments. For example, a superintendent recommended seven African American male students to be expelled for a fist

fight at a football game. In the same district, white students using weapons in a fight did not receive such harsh punishment.

Similarly, Bonner, Butler, Joubert, and Lewis (2010) conducted a study examining the disciplinary patterns and the overrepresentation of African American males in exclusionary discipline. The study was conducted in Cascade Independent School District and compared African American male students to their counterparts. Data was collected from the district's research department, and focused on the 2005-2006 disciplinary roles, infractions, and sanction records of 3,586 African American male students. Researchers categorized data into three sections of analysis 1) gender and race breakdown of student population cited for disciplinary action, 2) top ten behavior infractions, and 3) top ten behavior sanctions. A relative risk ratio formula (dividing the number of African American males cited for disciplinary action by the total number of African American males in the study) was used to determine the degree of overrepresentation. Findings suggested African American males were overrepresented in disciplinary action compared to their white counterparts. Recommendations emerging from the study included (1) culturally relevant classroom management and training for teachers; (2) establishment of an advisory committee; (3) amendments to the zero-tolerance policies; (4) three-strike rule for nonviolent offenses; and (5) referrals to counseling/therapy services for students.

2.1.2 Zero Tolerance Policies

The increased referral of African American males to alternative education programs is also, a result of zero tolerance policies. Zero tolerance policies are predetermined consequences that are often harsh and punitive in nature. Consequences are implemented regardless of the severity of

the infraction, extenuating circumstances, or situation specificity surrounding the infraction (Blake, Darensbourg & Perez, 2010). Although the intended purpose is to provide safe school environments, punishment is not consistent with the severity of the discipline infraction committed (Skiba, 2000). Blake, Darensbourg & Perez state the “rigidity used when enforcing zero tolerance policies may affect African American males at higher rates due to the way they are viewed by school staff, their evidence of higher office referral rates, and the disproportionate allocation of exclusionary discipline they receive from their districts (p. 199).” In other words, zero tolerance policies are not fair, and many times cause many African American male students to be suspended and expelled at far higher rates than their white counterparts.

2.1.3 Alternative Education

Research has documented the significant challenges African American male students face on their educational journey, such as marginalization in alternative education. These challenges cause African American males to be disproportionately represented in every category of academic failure. As a result, “African American males who are deemed inappropriate for mainstream schools are excluded and placed in ‘alternative schools (Dunbar, 1999, p. 242).” The negative academic and discipline experiences identified result in an achievement gap that perpetuates the discipline gap, and vice versa.

For example, Foly & Pang (2006) identified three types of alternative school settings. The first type refers to schools of choice, with a programmatic theme focus such as science, math or art. Type two schools serve students who have been disruptive or expelled and need behavior remediation before returning to their traditional school settings. Type three focused on academic

improvement and credit recovery. For the purpose of this review of scholarship, type two, alternative school settings serving disruptive or expelled students, will be examined.

There is limited research on the various effects of alternative education, which will differ by site, and interventions offered. The purpose of alternative education is to provide students with skills and strategies to transition back into their traditional school settings by dismantling disruptive behavioral patterns that caused their recommendation to alternative education.

Research exists that identified detrimental effects of disciplinary practices, such as alternative education, which excludes students. To ensure the intended purpose of alternative education is achieved, the effectiveness of the intervention must be continuously examined and modified to serve the needs of its population. Milner (2013) calls for an examination of increased student dropout, increased referral to special education, a decrease in student learning, and an increase in student absenteeism. He believes students must be provided an educational space that helps foster acceptable behaviors to assimilate back into traditional school settings, rather than simply being excluded.

2.1.4 School to Prison Pipeline

In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander explores the historical standpoint that has perpetuated the marginalization and criminalization of African American males. Alexander refers to the influx of mass incarceration as a system of racialized social control and believes it prevents African Americans from taking part in mainstream society and economy. She suggests mass incarceration stems from slavery and the Jim Crow laws. Furthermore, Alexander explains how this system extends beyond imprisonment, effecting housing, employment, education, public benefits and voting rights.

Similarly, Noguera (1995) stated “It is no surprise that African American male students resemble those who are most likely to be targeted and incarceration in society today (p. 23)”. With so many negative school experiences, it is documented that many African American male students exit K-12 schools and enter prison. This is referred to as the school to prison pipeline. “The School to Prison Pipeline proposes that exclusionary discipline techniques (e.g. detention, out of school suspension, disciplinary alternative education placements) experienced by African American males alienate them from the learning process by steering them from the classroom and academic attainment toward the criminal justice system” (Blake, Darensbourg & Perez, 2010, p. 197). This steering of African American male students resulted in students becoming resentful of school personnel, increased association with deviant peers, and the criminal justice system (McNeely, Nonemaker & Blaum, 2002; Wald & Kurlaender, 2003). Sociologist Loic Waquant (2000) suggested the correlation between the prison system and inner-city schools is no accident. He believed the relation between the two is a “deadly symbiosis between ghetto and prison” (p. 14).

2.2 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

As a teacher and researcher, I am interested in better understanding the challenges African American male students’ face, with an interest in improving their academic and discipline experiences. I am currently teaching in alternative education at Mary Lou Starkes Academy, in Esko Public School District [2], an urban district located in a Rust Belt City. I have frequently witnessed the referral of many African American males into the alternative education site. African American male students outnumber every racial and gender subgroup at Mary Lou

Starkes Academy. Many African American male students enrolled at Mary Lou Starkes Academy successfully graduate or transition back to their traditional school settings, while other students remain in this academy or return quickly. Students are recommended to attend the academy based on their repeated negative behavior or other infractions, such as bringing a weapon to school. For students who are recommended based on repeated misconduct, teachers and school staff are required to document academic and discipline infractions as part of a discipline packet that is reviewed each month by a panel. The panel is comprised of school principals and an assistant superintendent. Depending on the infraction, a student may be recommended to complete a semester, or entire school year at the alternative education site before transitioning back to traditional education sites.

While at Mary Lou Starkes Academy, students are taught strategies to improve both their academics and behavior. Academic curriculum remains the same as their traditional school setting, although pacing is affected because of behavior disruptions and varying attendance. Small classrooms, a behavior model, and levels of redirection are used to support students as they work to transition back to traditional school settings. Students are taught socioemotional skills that encourage students to redirect their peers' negative behaviors, take ownership for their own behaviors, and participate in guided group instruction and counseling. The peer packet clearly outlines the norms, expected behavior, for various settings such as the cafeteria, classroom and hallway. The peer packet also includes eight basic social skills, seven levels of redirection, six steps to success and student processes to be followed to ensure success in the alternative education setting.

My problem of practice addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do a group of African American males in an alternative school context understand their experiences with academics & discipline?
- 2) How do they describe factors that support and limit their success during their time at an alternative school?

This problem of practice study is significant in improving the educational and life journeys of African American males, such as the ones I teach. Findings from this study can assist educational stakeholders in addressing the disparity. The body of literature used to inform this problem of practice study includes both reports and scholarly articles on the academic and discipline experiences of African American male students in alternative education. In this review, I discuss scholarship that explores the perceptions of African American male students on their schooling experiences particularly in relation to the overrepresentation of African American males in alternative education. Therefore, in this literature review I first explore African American male student perceptions of their traditional education sites to examine themes and trends among students. Then, I review African American male student perceptions of their alternative education sites to compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of the educational settings.

3.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent literature has shown there are many factors that contribute to the aversive treatment African American male students receive in the classroom. Because of these factors African American males are overrepresented in exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions, special education programs, and alternative education sites. This review of supporting scholarship provides significant insight into African American male student perspectives on their educational experiences, while enrolled in traditional and alternative education settings. Analyzing the counter-narratives of students while enrolled in both traditional and alternative education settings can assist educators and researchers in improving practice and policy for this marginalized group of students.

African American Male Student Perceptions of their Traditional Educational Experiences
Pabon (2016) described the schooling experiences of Black male students, who now serve as teachers in urban schools in the United States. The researcher conducted two 60-minute, audio taped interviews with three participants. The study utilized a life history protocol to obtain a subjective understanding of their experiences and how they viewed those experiences. Open ended questions were asked to allow participants to reflect and build upon their responses. The study was grounded in black feminist thought as the researcher aimed to understand and learn from participants. In addition, social suffering theories and a life history method were used to honor, examine, and understand their experiences, from their perspective.

Academic tracking was a consistent theme that emerged in the participants' narratives. Although for various reasons, disposition towards school, low standardized test scores, and misdiagnosis of reading skills, all three shared their experiences with academic tracking and remedial classes. Their experiences with academic tracking caused pain, and negatively affected their perceptions of themselves and their capabilities. Furthermore, their schooling experiences have impacted their pedagogy and how they engage with African American male students. Pabon urges educational researchers and stakeholders to consider the perspective of Black male teachers when crafting policies and encouraging practices to improve the schooling experiences of Black male students.

Bryant, Givens, Mckinney de Royston, Ross, and Nasir (2013) conducted a qualitative study at three high schools in an urban school district. To address the achievement and discipline gap affecting African American male students, the Manhood Development Program (MDP) created the African American Male Achievement (AAMA) Task Force, in 2010. African American male students from three schools were selected to participate in the study. Students at two of the three schools participated in an end of the year interview, but based upon observations, attendance, and researcher presence, Valley High School was chosen for additional observation and interview analysis. Interviews and classroom observations with twenty-three, 9th grade African American male students were conducted. Audio recorded interviews focused on students' experiences, and their perceptions of those experiences. Students were provided time to reflect and share on their peer and teacher relationships, experiences, and understanding of discipline practices within their school, the MDP class, and the racialized and/or gendered experiences at school.

Twenty one of the twenty-three participants believed discipline practices in their school were unfair. Their perception of unfair discipline practices highly related to their belief that teachers and administrators had negative views of African American males. Participants also believed they were sent out of the classroom for minor infractions. When asked why teachers sent African American students out of the classroom at alarming rates, one student responded, “probably racial.” Lastly, students noted negative teacher perceptions of African American male students caused students to be punished harsher and more frequently. In contrast, the discipline policies within the Manhood Development Program were also analyzed. Researchers concluded transformative resistance occurred with the leadership of a “hero teacher.” Students stated that the discipline practices in the MDP showed that teachers cared, rather than viewed them as discipline-worthy subjects. In addition, students described discipline policies in the MDP as fair and relevant. Their counter narratives also included feeling capable and valued, ultimately transforming how African American male students view not being excluded because of misbehavior, and a focus on resolution.

In another study, Martinez (2014) examined how Black high school students perceived their schooling experiences prior to being placed in alternative education. Six participants were African American males, and one participant was an African American female. Research was conducted through thirteen, semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted 30-40 minutes. They were audio taped and later transcribed. Participant’s school documents were also analyzed identify trends. The overall theme to emerge, is the effect principals’ policies and practices had on African American students feeling heard, respected and understood. Students’ behaviors were a direct reflection of their interactions with their principal and authority figures. If students had positive interactions with administration, they were more likely to behave and excel. Through a

process called selective coding additional themes emerged from the study. Themes were categorized as (a) the participants' perceptions of the importance of being heard, understood, and respected, (b) the participants' perceptions of experiences based on racism and/or stereotyping, and (c) the participants' involvement with the criminal justice system.

In relation to the first theme of a disconnect in being heard, understood, and respected, participants used words such as betrayal, unfair, over-punished, and expressed a longing to feel cared for by teachers and school staff. Most participants spoke of receiving discipline consequences without an opportunity to tell their side of a discipline referral. Several students shared experiences of being ignored or yelled at and stressed the need for teachers and principals to listen to them. In addition, participants spoke of past discipline infractions drastically affecting all future encounters with school authority figures. Findings that warn Black students who do not feel respected or dignified are more likely to escalate to negative verbal and physical levels of aggression.

Furthermore, students were aware of the role socioeconomic status and race played in their discipline experiences. One participant spoke on their experience of being expelled for fighting and the white student who was also fighting receiving in school suspension for three days. Lastly, participants compared their negative interactions with law enforcement to their school authority figures. Martinez hoped findings could help school administration foster better policies and practices to improve the discipline gap. She suggested the use of culturally relevant practices to increase the success of Black students.

Howard's (2008) qualitative study examined how African American males believed race and racism impacted their Pre-K-12 educational experiences. The study drew upon tenets of critical race theory and aimed to end the disenfranchisement of African American males in

schools. Two hundred middle and high school students were surveyed. Ten of the two hundred students, from different social classes, and school settings, offered a more in-depth perspective through counter storytelling. Howard's findings revealed participants were aware of the role race played in their schooling experiences. The first theme to emerge was students' awareness of the negative stereotypes about African American males. A second theme that emerged focused on unfair discipline treatment. Richard, a high school senior and participant in the study stated "I watch it all the time. One of us (Black males) do something and we get suspended or expelled. A White kid does the exact same thing, and he gets a warning or an after-school referral. Sometimes it's so obvious that they treat us different than them." As students were able to identify factors impacting their educational experience, Howard recommended educators do the same. Incorporating race, class and gender into the analysis of the overrepresentation of African American male students is critical in improving their educational experiences.

Canton (2012) conducted a qualitative study over a period of nine months. The goal of the study was to document how Black male students perceive their school experiences. The study was grounded in interpretivism (Denzin, 2001), which allowed participants to construct meanings and describe what those meanings. Ten Black males who dropped out of high school in the 10th or 11th grade volunteered to participate in the study. All previously attended one of three urban high schools serving low income and predominantly Black and Hispanic students. Three of the ten students were transferred to alternative education before dropping out. All participants dropped out of school after an expulsion or suspension. Sixty-minute, one-on-one interviews occurred. In addition, participants were also provided a journal to write down thoughts and feelings related to their schooling experience. Participants also listened to audio recorded transcripts to confirm the accurate representation of their open-ended responses.

Four themes emerged from the interviews; 1) impact of security measures on school environment; 2) need for strong teacher–student relationship; 3) impact of disciplinary space on student learning; and 4) impact of school exclusionary policies on student outcomes. In relation to the impact of security measures on the school environment, participants believed they were often targeted by security guards and security measures were hostile. Several participants compared the school environment to a correctional facility. Furthermore, participants felt isolated, reported an increase in misconduct and a decrease in academic achievement. Participants described the second theme, the need for strong teacher-student relationships, as critical in both academics and behavior. One participant noted that “a teacher can make or break you.” Participants further noted that teachers focused more on their misbehavior than their strengths, affecting the teacher-student relationship, sometimes for years. Participants shared the impact of disciplinary space on their learning. They reported being behind in school work because of exclusionary punishment. Participants also believed they were at a higher risk of being disciplined harshly and incidents often escalated. Furthermore, participants were aware of the role race played in the negative perceptions their teachers had of them. The final theme, the impact of school exclusionary policies on student outcomes, allowed participants to reflect and share how exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension, expulsion, and alternative education has impacted their both their grades and misbehavior. Participants recognized the importance of order in school, but believed punishment was harsh and unfair. Participants questioned the value of policies and believed these exclusionary disciplinary practices further perpetuate the academic and discipline gap affecting Black male students. Regarding the four themes discussed, researchers also analyzed how zero tolerance policies negatively impacted their schooling experiences.

Participants in the studies above shared their positive and negative experiences while enrolled in traditional education settings. Findings include the strengths and weaknesses of school policies, stakeholders and student individual factors. The literature presented above fails to present how negative school experiences impact the success of African American male students inside and outside of the classroom.

African American male student perceptions of their experiences in alternative education, unfair discipline policies, student factors, and misconduct all contribute to African American male students being recommended to attend alternative education sites. Their experiences while enrolled in alternative education significantly impact their educational journey. If more positive interactions are experienced students are likely to successfully transition back to their traditional education settings, rather than dropping out, returning to alternative education sites or the judicial system.

Grant (2013) aimed to identify predictors of success for African American male students, in an alternative school located in Alabama. The study explored the perceptions of fifty-four African American male students, between the ages of 12 and 18, and enrolled in one of three alternative schools in urban areas of Alabama. The researcher predicted if students had a negative perception of the alternative education site, they were more likely to continue misbehaving, and were at a higher risk of dropping out. Students enrolled at the participating alternative schools violated Class III offenses such as drugs, arson, assault, stealing or weapons. Based on their infraction, students typically spent one or two semesters at the alternative site. All participants were ordered by the school board to attend alternative education, and all participants consented to participate in the study.

Participants' perceptions of school culture, including safety, rules, teachers, curriculum and school membership were examined using a two-part survey. Part one of the survey focused on demographics, such as age, grade, and length of time in alternative education. Part two involved participants indicating their agreement or disagreement with certain statements on a five-point scale. Sample survey statements for part two included 1) My grades are better at this school; and 2) My teachers teach me about character education as well as academic subjects. The findings concluded an overall positive perception on the alternative education site, although participants report the lack of learning opportunities because of exclusionary discipline. Participants believed teachers were fair, patient, and caring. They also believed small class sizes helped decrease misconduct and increase academic achievement. In addition, findings suggested teacher-student relationships, and perceptions were vital in the way teachers treated students, and the way students viewed themselves and their capabilities.

Williams (1987) conducted a study at an alternative school for boys in the Philadelphia School System. He aimed to analyze the perceptions of Black male students through surveys and interviews. Students who violated the code prohibiting serious student misconduct are referred to the alternative school. The rules under the code include: 1) disruption of school; 2) damage, destruction, or theft of school property; 3) damage, destruction, or theft of private property; 4) assault on a school employee; 5) physical abuse of a student or other persons not employed by the school; 6) weapons and dangerous instruments; 7) narcotics, alcoholic beverages, and stimulant drugs; 8) repeated school violations; and 9) disruptive and/or offensive use of language.

The 53 participants in grades nine through twelve, were divided into four groups based on the time they attended the alternative education site.

The following research questions led the study; 1) What are students' perceptions about their school experience? 2) What school reported factors are associated with students' perceptions about their school experience? 3) What are students' perceptions about the school program?; and, 4) What school reported factors are associated with differences in students' perceptions about the school program? Following an interview with the principal, a panel of teachers was formed. These teachers participated in an interview that focused on the programs policies, and the correction of students' behavior. In conjunction with researchers the panel also formed a questionnaire booklet that was administered to 53 of the 200 Black male students currently attending the alternative school. Questions and response answer choices were read aloud to students.

Researchers concluded students' overall perceptions of the alternative school were positive, although they believed they were unfairly recommended to attend the school. Students believed the individual attention they were given, and the extracurricular activities available assisted in improving their behavior. Fifty three percent of students felt that the school would help them to grow into responsible human beings, and 30% felt that the school would help them a little in the process. Students felt they were learning more than at their previous schools. Lastly, most students viewed themselves as different people since attending the school.

Elison, Morris, Slaten, Tate and Zalzal (2013) conducted a study on the educational experiences of six Black males at an alternative school, in an urban public-school district. The school consisted of 175 students, 45% were male, and 99% of students were African American. The research study was embedded in person-centered educational practices, a counseling and psychotherapy approach grounded in teacher empathy, unconditional positive regard,

genuineness, non-directivity, and the encouragement of critical thinking (Cornelius-White, 2007).

Data was collected through interviews of six African American males, ages 17-19, who have documented histories of misconduct. Participants shared their experiences during nine open ended questions. Researchers aimed to identify perceptions of the school's composition and atmosphere, perception on how their school addresses the needs of Black youth, perceptions of how to engage students who are typically disengaged from traditional schools, and unique challenges faced by the school site. Three themes emerged contributing to the success of African American male students while enrolled in the alternative education site, 1) staff and student relationships; 2) self-awareness; and, 3) pedagogy. As a result, participants noted overall positive experiences.

Similarly, Saunders and Saunders (2002) conducted a study that supports the importance of student and staff relationships. African American males who were enrolled at a small Midwestern alternative school participated in the study. Students completed two surveys, and rated their perceptions of students, counselors, teachers, and administrators. The first survey focused on their experiences in their traditional schools, and the second focused on their alternative school experiences. It was noted that students rated the educators at the traditional school negatively, believing staff did not care about them. On the other hand, students rated alternative school staff positively. Participants noted that alternative schools staff showed they cared about students, helped students solve problems and offered academic guidance. Because of examining students' reasons for the different schooling experience, researchers suggest interventions and strategies to support students before they are referred to alternative education.

Isom's (2007) study concluded that although African American boys considered themselves capable and intelligent, they often projected the negative racial and gender viewpoints of others on to themselves. The researcher explored how 5th, 6th, and 7th grade African American boys made meaning of themselves in relation to gender and racial constructs. Interview questions focused on maleness, masculinity, "blackness", and racialized gender identity. Their responses revealed how those constructs impacted their schooling experiences. Findings showed that participants often acted how they believed they were perceived by others. Although the boys believed they were good students, they projected negative racialized and gender constructs such as lazy, dumb, and bad onto themselves.

Many viewed African American boys in a negative light, both inside and outside the classroom. One theme that significantly emerged was the importance of their self-efficacy influencing their experiences with educators and education. Through their interviews the boys revealed internal struggles between their perceptions of themselves as African American boys in relation to their own behaviors. Establishing identity is essential in positive academic experiences as students continue their educational journey.

Conclusion

The literature explored in this review of scholarship provided insight into the schooling experiences of African American male students while enrolled in traditional and alternative school settings. African American male student participants shared factors that limited and supported their success in both academics and discipline. In each of these studies discussed, African American male students spoke on their negative experiences with teachers, administration and their schooling experience while enrolled in traditional education settings. Their stories and feelings of isolation have impacted their academic achievement and continued

misconduct. Interventions and initiatives are present, however African American male students continue to be marginalized and excluded, rather than listened to and supported. The next body of research presented documented how alternative education settings have served the mass population of African American male students. Participants shared more positive experiences while enrolled in alternative education.

Through their experiences four major themes worthy of further research emerged 1) unfair discipline patterns; 2) students' individual factors; 3) teacher perceptions; and 4) African American male student perspectives on themselves and education. These themes are documented factors in the success, or lack thereof, of this marginalized group. In addition, these investigations should explore gaps in literature, such as the effectiveness of alternative education for African American male students. The counter-narrative experiences should enlighten educational researchers and stakeholders as they improve policies and practices to improve the educational journey of African American male students.

Despite landmark decisions to improve the state of education, based upon race, such as *Brown vs. Board of Education*, and gender legislation, such as the Gender Equity in Education Act, African American male students continue to receive aversive treatment in classrooms (Gregory, 1997). This review of supporting scholarship has sought to answer questions related to improving the discipline experiences of African American male students. My problem of practice addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do a group of African American males in an alternative school context understand their experiences with academics and discipline?
- 2) How do they describe factors that support and limit their success during their time at an alternative school?

It is evident that their overrepresentation in alternative education is the direct result of their negative socio-economic, cultural and educational experiences. Although numerous scholars have investigated the opportunity gaps presented in this review of scholarship, unfortunately more action by educational leaders and policy makers is needed.

Researchers have identified the complexity and existing challenges in addressing the overrepresentation of African American males in alternative education. Like scholars in this literature review, I conducted a qualitative study. However, my approach has illuminated the voices of those affected to provide new insights to improve practice, pedagogy, and ultimately provide opportunity for African American males. I examined the counter narratives of this marginalized group of students, in hopes of better understanding their educational journey. My own experiences and observations of African American male students in alternative education has led me to question how we as educational leaders can combat the overrepresentation of African American males in alternative education and provide them positive learning environments and experiences.

[1] The terms Black and African American are used interchangeably throughout this Literature Review.

[2] Esko Public School District and Mary Lou Starkes Academy are pseudonyms used to protect the confidentiality of participants.

4.0 METHODS

4.1 DESIGN AND/OR METHOD AND EVIDENCE:

Table 1 Applied Inquiry Plan

Inquiry Question	Evidence to be Collected	Method Utilized	Analyses
<p>How do a group of African American males in an alternative school context understand their experiences with academics & discipline?</p> <p>1) How have discipline policies impacted their educational experiences?</p> <p>2) How have teachers supported or limited their success in academics and discipline?</p> <p>3) How has race, gender, and class impacted students educational experiences?</p>	<p>Student background information (family, income, social status, etc.)</p> <p>Students' current academic and behavior status.</p> <p>Indicators of success.</p> <p>Barriers impacting their educational experience.</p> <p>Perceptions of self, teachers, schooling experience at alternative and traditional education sites.</p> <p>Students' ratings on the behavior scale.</p>	<p>Collecting Artifacts (Participant Selection): Document analysis will begin with reviewing the recommendation packets of African American male students at the alternative education site. Purposive sampling will occur to select six African American male students to participant in the study. I am looking for six total participants: 2 students who are doing well, 2 students who are struggling and 2 students who have transitioned back to their traditional education sites and have returned to alternative education.</p> <p>Interviews (Primary Data Source): After document analysis I will conduct two open ended, semi structured, audio recorded interviews with six participants. Interview questions will be based on research questions and data collected from document analysis. I will use an interview protocol adapted from Joseph A. Maxwell.</p>	<p>Document Analysis-Participant Selection Criteria</p> <p>Two interviews per student. The second interview will be a follow up to the first. I will ask more specific questions that emerge from the first interview. If students would like to reveal more information they will have my contact information and be able to share at any time.</p> <p>Qualitative coding of the interview protocols.</p>
<p>How do they describe factors that support and limit their success during their time at an alternative school?</p> <p>1. What themes emerge as similar or different than their traditional educational experiences?</p>	<p>Factors that have assisted students in their success in relation to academics and discipline.</p> <p>Common and unique challenges and supports.</p>	<p>Interviews: After document analysis I will conduct two open ended, semi structured, audio recorded interviews with six participants. Interview questions will be based on research questions and data collected from document analysis. I will use an interview protocol adapted from Joseph A. Maxwell.</p>	<p>Qualitative coding of the interview protocols and transcripts.</p> <p>Comparing and contrasting the educational experiences at traditional and alternative education sites.</p>

4.2

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

This Problem of Practice study was guided by two inquiry questions and several sub-questions. The first inquiry question is how do a group of African American males in an alternative school context understand their experiences with academics & discipline?

Sub-questions under this inquiry question include 1. Why were students recommended to attend the alternative education site? Is there a history of misconduct or is their referral the result of the zero-tolerance policy? 2. What trends or themes have been identified in participants' academic and family backgrounds? The second inquiry question that will guide this Problem of Practice study is how do they describe factors that support and limit their success during their time at an alternative school? Sub-questions include: 1. what themes emerge as similar are different than their traditional educational experiences? Students are expected to learn skills and strategies to assist them in transitioning back into a traditional education setting. They are expected to follow norms, accept redirections and advance on a behavior rating scale. Through document analysis and interviews counter narratives of this unique, disenfranchised, race and gender were explored.

4.3 INQUIRY APPROACH

The purpose of this inquiry was to understand a context of practice more fully. The researcher aimed to understand the experiences of African American male students in grades 9-12, enrolled in an alternative education site. This inquiry approach was grounded in improvement science. The counter-narratives of participants will provide insight to create and implement necessary interventions. Findings from this study will be presented to the alternative education panel, comprised of traditional and alternative education administration members. By analyzing the experiences and factors that support or limit their success, academically and behaviorally, educational leaders can improve the teaching and learning conditions for African American male students. Ultimately, school culture will be improved decreasing the overrepresentation of African American males in alternative education.

5.0 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, Findings and Analysis, I will discuss the results of my research by reviewing the themes that emerged from the data analysis of documents and interviews with three African American male students enrolled in alternative education:

1. Participants desire to succeed
2. Benefits of alternative education
3. The role of the teacher
4. Participants perceptions of their race and marginalization in school.

This problem of practice study was conducted through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens, examining the effects race has on African American males and their educational experiences. Lindsay Perez Huber believes CRT is an invaluable tool for critical scholars who seek to expose and disrupt oppressive conditions within education institutions in the U.S. The impact race, gender and class have on success will be examined through the counter-narratives of student participants. By examining their experiences through a Critical Race Theory lens systematic and customary ways racism impacts the educational journeys of these marginalized students can be exposed. By exposing the relation between race and educational inequities, educational leaders can begin to address the social contexts that allow the inequities to continue.

I conducted purposeful sampling to select three African American male students, enrolled at Mary Lou Starkes Academy, Esko Public Schools alternative education site for students in

grades 6-12. Students participated in in-depth interviews and I reviewed each student’s alternative education recommendation packet. Participants were selected based on meeting one of three criteria groups, succeeding, striving, or struggling. Students are rated by teachers and team leaders each week. The force field ranges from concern, neutral, positive, pledge, phoenix, to executive. Ratings are strictly based on a student’s behavior, academics are rarely considered. For the purpose of this study succeeding will be defined as a student having a pledge, phoenix or executive rating. Striving will be defined as a student having a positive or neutral rating. Struggling will be defined as a student having a concern or attendance concern rating.

Table 2 provides an overview of the participants’ general information including their ages, grades, behavior status, race and special education qualifications. This table is followed by a more detailed excerpt on each participant, their backgrounds, and educational journeys thus far. Each participant analyzed has a unique educational experience, but similarities do exist. Many which have resulted in their enrollment in alternative education.

Table 2: Participants

Name	Age	Race	Special Ed	Traditional Ed GPA	Alternative Ed GPA	Rating
A1	16	Black	No	1.5	4.0	Pledge- Succeeding
B2	16	Black	No	0.833	2.7	Positive- Striving
C3	16	Black	No	1.5290	3.1430	Attendance Concern- Struggling

My succeeding student A1 was placed on a long-term suspension from his traditional education site, on 11-21-17 for violating the Code of Student Conduct, amended June 21, 2017. His specific violation is # 405, Assault on a Student or Other Person. This violation can result in a 10-day suspension plus up to a one-year exclusion. This is determined by Student Services or a formal hearing. A1 along with four other male students assaulted and robbed a fellow student in the boys' bathroom.

A statement included in A1's alternative education recommendation packet includes an account by his guidance counselor, which states that A1 is a second year 9th grader. He has served three long term suspensions and his grades are classified as extremely low. His teachers state that he is very bright and capable of achieving high honor roll if he only applied himself. It also notes that A1 regularly skips his afternoon classes, with class absences ranging from 8-25 per semester. Teacher comments include behavior disrupts learning of self and others, chronically absent from class, does not complete assignments and little cooperation/poor behavior. His recommendation packet states that credit recovery will be necessary for A1 to be in his correct grade level.

During the second quarter at Mary Lou Starkes Academy A1 received an interim grade report with a 4.0 grade point average. His comments from teachers include demonstrates hard work and effort, demonstrates responsibility, positive attitude, and quality of work excellent. His attendance is stellar, and his current rating is a pledge. He is currently completing his peer packet and well on his way to passing the test to become our school mascot and the highest rating as a Phoenix.

As it relates to this study B2 is currently classified as a struggling student. He is a sophomore student who is attending Mary Lou Starkes Academy for his second time. B2 was

previously enrolled in alternative education during the 2016-2017 school year after the completion of a disruptive youth referral packet. His reasoning for referral stated that he had a disregard for school authority, including persistent violation of school policy and rules. After several parent conferences it was decided that B2 should complete daily sign in sheets to verify grades, behavior and attendance in all classes. In addition to preferential seating and several redirections from the social worker B2's disruptive behavior continued. Teachers noted feeling unsafe when he was present, due to his erratic and disruptive behavior. It was recommended that B2 be screened for mental health or other support services, which B2 refused. The social worker believed B2 would benefit from a change in environment to provide structure and opportunities for academic and behavior success. During this time B2 managed to obtain a 2.5 grade point average for the quarter. Upon completing his time at Mary Lou Starkes Academy B2 stated that he learned "self-control" while enrolled. He stated, "when I go back to my home school my self-controlling skills are going to be an excellent effect on me and my fellow peers and teachers." He also stated that he is "looking forward to moving up to 10th, 11th, 12th grade and graduating. His three goals for returning to his home school were to graduate, achieve better grades, and become something promising. B2 achieved a 3.1430 grade point average during his time enrolled in alternative education.

After transitioning back to his home school for the start of the 2017-2018 school year B2 violated #405 Assault on a Student or Other Person on November 21, 2017. This violation results in a ten-day school suspension plus up to a one-year exclusion from his traditional education site. B2 along with five other male students were involved in an altercation where a student was beat up and robbed in the boy's bathroom. According to the school's guidance counselor B2 seemed to show very little interest in achieving academically in school. His mom had several parent

conferences throughout the school year to address B2's behavior, grades, and attendance, to no avail.

B2 began his time in alternative education as reflective and motivated. He was eager to improve his grades as well as his behavior rating. As a formal student he was educated on the school's norms and expectations. After a month of quality academics and behaviors several of B2' friends transitioned back to their home schools. At this time B2 began to miss several school days each week, which has impacted his academics greatly. His rating soon became an attendance concern as he missed more than three school days in row. It was later determined that he was admitted to the city's detention center for several days. B2 returned to alternative education wearing a house arrest anklet, due to outside illegal activities.

For the purpose of this study, C3 will serve as my striving student. C3 violated the Code of Student Conduct #306 for a weapon suspension. The principal recommended a 10-day school suspension, plus a one-year exclusion pending a formal hearing. According to his home school administrator, C3 was involved in two fights on 8-31-17. His suspension packet was shortly turned into an alternative education recommendation packet, following additional evidence, which states that the fights were gang related. Video recovered showed that C3 entered the bathroom to fight with a belt on, following the fight C3 exited the boy's bathroom with the belt in his hand. Later it was determined that he used the belt as a weapon during the fight to injure another student.

While enrolled in his traditional education site C3's overall grade point average was a 0.833 and he was also a repeat ninth grader. C3 was referred to the Student Assistance Team and the Shores Program but declined both services. His mother called several times concerned about his academics and attendance. C3 has an extensive misconduct file, with multiple suspensions

for school disruption and fighting stemming from elementary school. Included in his alternative recommendation packet was information stating C3's previous cases of misconduct.

This year is not C3's first year in alternative education. He was referred previously in the eighth grade. According to C3's middle school teachers, C3 disrupts the learning environment daily by yelling out, arguing with peers, and refusing to work. In addition, he was involved in three fights during his eighth-grade year and took part in joking acts such as pulling another student's pants down during math class. Several interventions were tried including tracking sheets, the shadow program, and incentive programs. C3 failed to improve his behavior long term, although he had good weeks sometimes. Teachers noted that C3's attendance was very good. He was viewed as a likable and capable student, when one on one. He showed more effort and academic engagement in the beginning of the year. Although his mother decline testing for special education services, she did agree to C3 receiving services from Mercy Behavioral Mental Health partnership.

C3's goals on his transition plan included to get physically stronger, focus on grades, and stay away from negativity. He should meet with a school liaison weekly to monitor his success back at his home school. The liaison noted that C3 had been attending class and did not have any behavior referrals.

All my participants were eager to analyze and discuss their educational journeys. I believe this study allowed students to recognize strengths and weaknesses in not only the educational system, but also within themselves. They all spoke of their desire to be successful and noted what barriers they faced while enrolled in their traditional education site. All three participants showed a significant increase in engagement and academic achievement while enrolled in alternative education. In addition to their academic success all three managed to

decrease their misbehavior with the help of devoted teachers and a behavior model at their alternative education site. However, their perceptions of race, gender, and social class, in relation to their educational experiences are similar, yet different. They all appeared confident and determined, despite their current circumstances.

5.1 THEME 1: PARTICIPANTS DESIRE TO SUCCEED

The first theme that emerged throughout the research study in both document analysis and interviews was the participant's desire to succeed. Participants were aware of the role they played in being recommended to alternative education, as well as the purpose in enrollment. Without a desire to succeed and a belief that success is attainable, it is likely that one will fail, with little to no effort exerted. When asked about how their educational journeys have been so far, A1 summarized all my participants' responses. While recognizing factors such as families, teachers, curriculum, negative activities, and interactions outside of school, they all emphasized their desire to succeed inside the classroom, and in future career endeavors. A1 said:

My educational journey has had a few bumps in it, but I still manage to pull myself together. I'm the type of kid that was always into my work and tried hard to do my best no matter how hard it is. Attending school is really important to me because it affects my grades and I'm used to seeing A's on my report card.

Similarly, when asked about his educational journey, C3 responded:

I was doing good in the beginning, started to turn bad in middle school. Grades started to get bad, and now they are better since I've been here. My grades were terrible at my home school.

B2 stated that his educational journey has been good, although he has had some bumps in the road during recent years.

Despite participants expressing feelings of racism and being treated differently than their white counterparts, I was surprised all three took ownership when asked why they believe they were enrolled in alternative education. A1 stated:

I believe I'm in an alternative education because of my grades from my home school. I was skipping classes and getting distracted by my fellow peers. My number one issue was fighting, because I'm very bipolar and sensitive.

B2 simply said: "my behavior." Similarly, C3 took ownership for his actions as well stating "I was in the hallway, being disruptive and not going to class. Skipping half of the school day."

I then asked students how they dealt with peer pressure, and if pressures to be involved in activities such as drinking, drug use or sex negatively impacted Black males' progress in school? A1 stated that these factors did impact the progress of Black males in school but did not allow them to impact his individual progress. Finding a new set of friends was how he decided to deal with peer pressure. B2 believed drinking, drug use and sex was significantly impacting Black males in schools, he said "it is very hard to focus on school work when you are doing all of that. It makes school seem less exciting and all you worry about is what you can do when you get out of school." He also said that it is hard to peer pressure him and that it would take some time for him to give in because he knows what he wants and doesn't want to do. C3 agreed with the other participants in that these factors impede Black male students progress. He said students might

not come to school or be focused when they are there. He also stated that he doesn't give into peer pressure, he does things depending on his need to do it, not based on others.

5.2 THEME 2: BENEFITS OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

The second theme to emerge were the benefits of alternative education on this marginalized group of students. All participants cited both academic and behavioral benefits of the alternative education site, despite negative reactions when initially enrolled. I believe the minimal behavior and discipline problems at the alternative education site allowed student engagement and achievement to increase. Students are required to wear uniforms, walk in lines, and follow norms, which are defined as expected behaviors, while on school grounds. Each student and parent are issued a peer packet, which outlines the norms for particular areas in the school, as well as student processes when an issue arises, and an outline on how a student can improve their behavior rating. As a students' behavior rating improves they can attend field trips, take part in student government, dress down, and receive various other positive reinforcements. The school culture and classroom environment are crucial ensuring classrooms are not only rigorous, but students feel accepted and comfortable to engage in learning.

C3 described the differences between his home school and the alternative education site, he stated:

Classrooms here are like a group of us getting work done. My home school is like a bunch of people just sitting there talking not doing nothing. I'm not skipping, it is less crowded here. The teachers are different. The dress code is different. It's cool to me. I like this school, its going to help me grow.

A1 agreed noting:

Some major differences I can say about Mary Lou and my home school_is that being in Mary Lou Starkes Academy_they are on you about the littlest things because it's the little things that count. At Mary Lou Starkes Academy you have no choice but to follow the rules and norms because if you don't you won't make it nowhere due to the way you act. In my home school students do what they want and act how they act because the teachers don't care about anything you do.

B2 appreciated the structure at the alternative education site stating, "I can sit down and do my work here."

The curriculum does not change between participants' traditional education site and the alternative education site. Although the classroom environment and teachers differ, no student at the alternative education site qualifies for special education services and all students are expected to complete the same curriculum to assist in a smooth transition back into their home schools. When asked about the workload and their individual capabilities, each participant noted that they were not only capable, but that teachers at the alternative education site were available for assistance as well. A1 stated, "the work here ain't hard or easy, I just get it done." C3 agreed "there isn't too much work given at once, when we need help, they literally help us." B2 similarly said, "classwork is the same, but teachers are more relatable."

The rules and policies at the alternative education site greatly differ from those at students' previous traditional education site. These include, but are not limited to uniforms, walking in lines to each class, memorizing a peer packet, following norms and processes, and many more. These rules are put into place to provide structure and embed certain acceptable behaviors into students when they transition back to allow students to be successful and not

return to the educational site. When asked what do you think about the rules you are expected to follow, are they fair and do you understand them, all agreed that the rules were strict, yet beneficial. A1 said he doesn't like wearing a uniform and that there were too many rules here, but the rules help, because everyone listens. B2 stated that the rules were fair, but he would take away some rules such as tucking in your shirt, walking in lines and not having your phone in class. C3 agreed that the rules were fair and that he understood why they were in place. Strict and understandable rules here at the alternative site are critical in decreasing misbehavior. Without a decrease in misbehavior academic engagement and achievement is impossible.

5.3 THEME 3: THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The third theme to emerge was the role of the teacher. All three participants mentioned the role their teachers played throughout the interview. When asked about the differences between their traditional education site and their current alternative education site, all participants mentioned the role of the teacher and how teachers either helped or hindered their success. A1 stated:

The thing I like best about Mary Lou Starkes Academy is that every teacher wants to see me make it somewhere in life and be successful. They push me to do my best and let me know when they see a difference in me. The teachers here are very relatable and caring because they pull you to the side when they see something that's normal or right. All the teachers here want to see everyone be successful. My attitude toward this school is positive because I respect the teachers and students and they have the same respect for me.

B2 answered saying: *Teachers really take their time to help you. Teachers teach here and not at my home school. If you need help, they act like they got an attitude. The principals are looking for something wrong.*

I asked students to tell me about their favorite and least favorite teacher and why that teacher has earned that title. B2 said “that his favorite teachers are nice, kind and trustworthy.” C2 described his favorite teacher as “someone who can really teach, a teacher who will sit down and talk with you about the subject and just you in general, what your going through, what you need help with.” Participants described their least favorite teachers as those having attitudes, giving too much work, and those teachers not willing to assist students when they need help.

Trust is vital in a student and teachers relationship. Without trust a student is less likely to engage and participate. When asked do students trust their teachers at their alternative education site, A1 responded “yes, I trust my teachers at Mary Lou Starkes Academy because they are different and really favor me and make me feel like school is really a place for me.” C3 said “it depends. I trust some because they are nice and help me and other students, and they are a good person in general.” I don't trust mean teachers, who have attitudes or just don't like kids lol. The lack of a personal connection with teachers at their traditional education site could explain some of the behaviors participants showed that resulted in their enrollment in alternative education.

Participants believed the media may influence teachers’ perceptions of Black males. B2 stated that, “teachers may have watched the news or movies and judge you, based off that or how you dress, talk and act.” They respected the teachers who were able to look beyond these judgmental statements and demonstrations to see them for who they were, despite media portrayal. Furthermore, B2 stated that the media portrayed Black males as terrible, horrible and criminals. All portrayals that would not be beneficial for a teacher to student relationship.

Similarly, A1 stated Black males were viewed in a negative light. A1 added that the activities displayed in the media can also influence Black males to partake in such negativity.

5.4 THEME 4: PARTICIPANTS PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR RACE, GENDER, CLASS, IN RELATION TO THEIR MARGINALIZATION IN SCHOOL

The final theme examined is participants perceptions of their race, gender, income and marginalization in school. Participants appear race conscious but are not certain on how their race impacts their educational experiences. They believed that they were viewed in a negative light by teachers, the media, and white people in general. Their conceptualizations of their racial identities in relation to their education were sometimes conflicting. I believe this connection will be made clearer as they continue their high school careers and enter in to post-secondary education or their chosen career.

To gain a better understanding of how students viewed their race in relation to their education, I first asked students how often they thought about their race. A1 stated, “I never think about my race because in my eyes color is just a color. We’re all human beings. So I just get along with any and every one, race doesn't matter.” B2 stated that he thinks about his race here and there. C3 had the most race conscious answer stating, “I think about it a lot. Things that happen to us Black males and stuff, how can it stop, why is it happen.”

To follow up I asked, do you believe your race plays a role in your educational experience. Two of my participants believed their race did play a significant role in the educational experiences. B2 stated “yes, if I was white I don't think I would even be here (alt. ed). They would have probably gave me a warning.” In contrast, A1 did not agree and stated, “I

honestly don't believe my race plays a role in my educational experiences because the teacher is supposed to teach the class instead of several students because we all need education in life." C3 also believed his race did not play a role in his educational experiences.

When asked how he would describe the African American male students in his class B2 stated, "labeled by the white man as killers, drug dealers, robbers." A1 took a more positive approach describing his counterparts as "very respectful, hardworking and striving."

Participants spent a particularly large amount of time discussing the way they were perceived by teachers and the media. While discussing perceptions, they touched on the challenges and obstacles these perceptions contribute to. When asked "Do you believe African American males face particular challenges not faced by other students?" B2 answered "yes. The cops-they target Black boys cause of the history of Black and white people." C3 stated, "every race is going through something, but gang activity and violence most white males aren't in. Black males are either dead, in the streets or in jail. Most white boys might be in school or working."

When I asked participants' what they thought about the large number of African American males enrolled in alternative education, A1 stated that the large number was a shame, and surprising because the large population managed to get along. B2 stated "because they don't want to see us succeed. They want us to fail, rather than have a diploma and smiling." In contrast, C3 first blamed the behaviors of his peers on the disproportionality explaining "cause the Black people may have attitude problems or something going on at home and they just bring it to school. C3 then noted that the teachers "don't really pay the white boys no attention, they are always just on our heels. I feel like they are scared of us. I've been suspended for stuff I didn't even do."

I then asked participants why do you think Black males are the most likely to be suspended? A1 said, “we be drawling (misbehaving) in school, doing too much. Sometimes the principals suspended you on some weird stuff.” The notion of being suspended “on some weird stuff” is related to students observing favoritism. The idea of favoritism impacting African American male students was shared by all three participants. As educators we must address each issue and student on a case by case basis. We must refrain from allowing bias and preconceived notions to impact the way we address an already marginalized group of students.

To address the overrepresentation of student suspensions, I asked participants what are some ways we can address problem behavior without suspending? A1 stated, “talk with students about what their actions, extended after school time with punishment, homework, and mentoring.”

B2 similarly said:

Call parents, see how they would handle the situation. Most Black males don't try. Behavior is out of control, they don't care because they parents don't care. Parents don't care because they don't have what they need to make their child successful. It might be a cycle. If their parents did good, they might do good.

Studies show that Black males do better in school when they are rested and have a diet that consist of healthy foods. All students agreed with this statement and cited staying up late, playing the game, drug usage, and parents’ financial problems as obstacles to eating and sleeping well.

When asked about the role of gender on their educational experiences, participants stated that gender played a little role or shouldn’t have much impact. B2 stated that, “more or so race than gender” impacted his educational experiences.

Two of my participants did not believe their current income status impacted their education experience, but B2 believe it did stating his educational experience would have been “way different” and that he would have “probably learned different stuff and been more prepared.” Educators must even the educational playing field to ensure all students are afforded the same academic and extra-curricular opportunities to foster access and imagination.

To conclude the questions on race, class, and gender, I asked participants did they think being a Black male from the inner city all at once influenced their educational experiences? All participants agreed that these three factors played a significant role in their growth as a person and student. In response to this question, A1 responded saying:

Me being black and coming from the inner city should influence my educational experiences because it should make everyone want more. Our goal should be to be something in life, more than what we've be shown or see around us.

Similarly, B2 stated “where I’m from, I grew up where there is nothing. The environment I’m in now may not help me get to where I need to go.”

5.5 STUDENT SUGGESTIONS

All my participants showed a desire to be successful in school and in life. They were also aware that their education would directly impact their level of success. When asked what are some ways that schools can prepare Black males for college and different careers they are interested in A1 stated by providing more “study time colleges visits and speak with college students or job shadowing” someone in their perspective career field. Similarly, C3 stated schools can “prepare them by adding more or different classes that will help students out in the

future.” In addition, he believed schools should “take them to colleges and let them talk to Black male college students.”

My final question asked participants to give advice to parents about how to raise a successful Black male. A1 simply said “keep your sons in the crib.” B2 sadly agreed saying “keep your sons out the hood, keep them off the block. Keep them in school. Maybe even more or keep them in the house. Sign them up for basketball or football.” C3 said:

I would tell them to make sure they are with their sons and know what they are doing when they aren't with them. Make sure they aren't around someone who is drinking and smoking, instead have someone who made it in life around to be a role model.

Their responses to this question speaks highly of the dangers they believe awaits them in the world and in the neighborhoods, they should call home.

Participants also suggested Mentors, positive reinforcements, and more freedom to better the educational journey of African American male students. Their responses not only addressed the misconduct with punishment but offered solutions and interventions that would involve additional stakeholders and move students toward more positive behaviors.

6.0 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of my research was to explore how a group of African American male students in an alternative school context, understood their experiences with academics and discipline. In addition, participants shared factors that supported and limited their success while enrolled in alternative education. I arrived at this topic after noticing the disproportionality of African American male students suspended, expelled, and referred to alternative education. Once teaching in an alternative school setting, I realized the benefits of our school culture, and the role teachers play in helping or hindering the academic success of African American male students. Document analysis of participants' alternative education recommendation packets were viewed during the selection and analysis process.

Furthermore, in-depth interviews offered insight into how participants viewed themselves and how teachers viewed them in relation to their race, gender, and income status. Through their counter narratives I concluded that these African American male students, although enrolled in alternative education, are more than our assumptions. They want to succeed and look forward to overcoming the obstacles and beating the odds. While researching and completing my literature review, I found that there are a vast amount of studies conducted focusing on the reasons educators believe African American male students are not achieving and present more behavioral issues than their white counterparts. Therefore, my study grew out of a need to shine light on this

marginalized group of students and offer insight on their academic and discipline experiences from their perspective.

I used purposive sampling to select three African American male students, in grades 9-12, and enrolled in alternative education. Participants fit into one of three categories, succeeding, striving, and struggling, according to their current academic and discipline status. Once participants were selected, document analysis and interviews occurred to answer two research questions:

- 1) How do a group of African American males in an alternative school context understand their experiences with academics and discipline?
- 2) How do they describe factors that support and limit their success during their time at an alternative school?

Although their narratives do not represent the experiences of all African American male students, they provide unique insight into how some may view their experiences with academics and discipline. Four themes emerged from the study, including participants' desire to succeed, the benefits of alternative education, the role of the teacher, and participants' perceptions of their race, gender, and class, in relation to their marginalization in school. As a result, I offer implications for future research, in addition to participants' suggestions to specifically improve pedagogy and practice for this unique group of students.

6.1 PARTICIPANTS DESIRE TO SUCCEED

The first theme that emerged was participants' desire to succeed. Despite a past of academic struggles and misbehavior, student participants understood it was their responsibility to take ownership for their learning and success inside and outside of the classroom. Participants never placed blame on family structures, educators' practices or policy. Although they did acknowledge these factors could either help or hinder their success. Having a desire to succeed and the belief that you can is the first step in success. I admire my participants to strive amid such negativity.

6.2 BENEFITS OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Attending an alternative education site is not a choice for my student participants. All were recommended by their traditional education site for misconduct or zero tolerance policy infractions. These infractions include, but are not limited to assault, weapons, drugs, or continued school disruption. Despite not choosing to attend the alternative education site, all participants recognized the benefits of increased student engagement and achievement and a decrease in misbehavior. The skills and strategies obtained allowed students to feel confident as they transitioned back into their traditional education sites where their infractions occurred.

6.3 THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

It has been said that teachers are the single most important profession. Teachers can make an impact on many levels. A study conducted by economists at Harvard and Columbia Universities found that having a good teacher makes a student more likely to go to college and earn on average \$25,000 more throughout their life time. They suggested if a good teacher is leaving the school, parents should fundraise and offer that teacher an additional \$100,000 a year. The study also suggested the same \$100,000 a year should be offered to persuade a bad teacher to retire. It is clear through this research study and many others that a good teacher catapults students toward success, while a bad teacher keeps students bound. The role of the teacher significantly impacts the other four themes examined in this study. Participants were clear in noting that teachers are vital in the success, or lack thereof, of their students.

6.4 PARTICIPANTS PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS IN RELATIONSHIP TO THEIR MARGINALIZATION IN EDUCATION

Student participants were aware of their race, gender, and class. They understood that these characteristics impacted the way their teachers perceived them but did not allow the negative perceptions to impact the way they viewed themselves or their African American male counterparts. Participants believed their race impacted their marginalization in education, more than their gender and class. It is vital that educators do not allow their bias and preconceived notions to impact practice and policy. We must view African American male students as students, capable and intelligent, regardless of their race, gender, and class. In addition, we must

provide educators with culturally relevant training to ensure their pedagogy and curriculum reflect the students they teach.

6.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In hindsight, I believe there may have been several limitations that impacted this problem of practice study. One limitation that could have impacted the study was failing to intermingle the four themes identified in this study. Studying the complexity of how these themes intersect may have given me a better understanding of students and their backgrounds. Interviews were conducted at the alternative education site. This leads me to question if students would have felt more comfortable sharing at a site where their administrators or teachers were not in the vicinity.

I am now also interested in the counter-narratives of African American female students, who although they do not outnumber African American males in alternative education and the judicial system, they do however outnumber their white female counterparts. Lastly, I also wonder if my relationship with student participants may have hindered or swayed their responses to interview questions. Would an outside interviewer who has no knowledge of or relationship to the students have received different responses to interview questions?

6.6 DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This problem of practice study was conducted using document analysis and interview research methods. Future research should include a larger sample population and participants from

various schools, cities and states. To understand individual students' backgrounds which would explain certain behaviors and responses to questions, future research should go beyond exploring the counter narratives of students. As policymakers and educators continue to find ways to improve the teaching and learning conditions a focus on family, social, and school structures should influence policies and initiatives. We should aim to dismantle those structures that widen race and gender gaps. Providing interventions and supports to foster students desire and belief in their own success should come because of further research. Further studies should also employ quantitative methods of research.

6.7 DISSEMINATION

The researcher plans to share this study with administration at the alternative school site where research was conducted. A professional development presentation, as well as supplemental articles will be presented to administration and teachers at the alternative education site. In addition, the researcher will reach out to the district officials as well to share dissertation findings. Articles based on the dissertation topic will be submitted to journals as the opportunity arises.

6.8 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this problem of practice study explored the educational journeys of African American male students enrolled in alternative education. This topic was examined due to their overrepresentation in alternative education, the judicial system, suspensions and expulsions. It is my goal that through this research educators and policy makers can better both the teaching and learning conditions for this marginalized group of students. We understand African American male students can succeed inside and outside of the classroom, if we foster relationships.

The research explored in this study, paired with previous and future research can aid in the necessary changes needed to ensure all students are provided an opportunity to learn and succeed. Changes are needed in both policy and practice. All stakeholders are needed to collaborate in addressing all issues.

APPENDIX

A.1 PARENTAL PERMISSION FOR PARTICIPATION OF A CHILD IN A RESEARCH STUDY

At Clayton Academy (PPS)

His-Story: Exploring the Schooling Experiences of African American Male Students Enrolled in
Alternative Education

Description of the research and your child's participation

Your child is invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dominique Thornhill, an eighth-year teacher in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The purpose of this research is to understand how African American male students enrolled in alternative education understand their experiences with discipline. The goal is to improve the educational journey of African American male students.

Your child's participation will involve an introductory meeting, and two 60-minute interviews with Mrs. Thornhill. I will also review their alternative education recommendation packets, to better understand each student discipline history.

The amount of time required for your child's participation will be 3 hours. Interviews will be conducted at Clayton Academy, before, after school or during their lunch. Three students will approximately participate in the study.

Risks and discomforts

There is a potential breach of confidentiality. Students' names will be changed to a pseudonym for confidentiality. Students will also be able to skip a question if they feel embarrassed or uncomfortable answering.

Potential benefits

There is no direct benefit to participation. There are no costs or benefits of participation.

Protection of confidentiality

We will do everything we can to protect your child's privacy. Your child's identity will not be revealed in any publication resulting from this study. Information gathered will be stored in a locked computer and/or locked safe. Authorized representatives of the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office may review your identifiable research information for the purpose of monitoring the appropriate conduct of this research study. In unusual cases, the investigators may be required to release identifiable information related to your participation in this study in response to an order from a court of law. If the investigators learn that you are someone with whom you are involved is in serious danger or potential harm, they will need to inform, as required by Pennsylvania law, the appropriate agencies." No names will be shared with educators/policy makers or others at the school.

Voluntary participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You may refuse to allow your child to participate or withdraw your child from the study at any time. Your child will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to allow your child to participate or to withdraw your child from this study. A student may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.

Contact information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, or if any problems arise, please contact Dominique Thornhill at 412-529-6000.

Consent

Child's Name: _____

I have read this parental permission form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my permission for my child to participate in this study. I understand that, as a minor (age less than 18 years), the above-named child is not permitted to participate in this research study without my consent. Therefore, by signing this form, I give my consent for his/her participation in this research study.

_____	_____
Parent's or Guardian's Name (Print)	Relationship to Participant (Child)
_____	_____
Parent or Guardian Signature	Date

Child Assent

This research has been explained to me, and I agree to participate.

_____	_____
Signature of Child-Subject	Date

Verification of Explanation

I certify that I have carefully explained the purpose and nature of this research to (name of child) in age appropriate language. He/she has had an opportunity to discuss it with me in detail. I have answered all his/her questions and he/she provided affirmative agreement (i.e., assent) to participate in this research.

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

Date

**A.2 HIS-STORY: EXPLORING THE SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS ENROLLED IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION
INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Introduction

Tell me about your educational journey

Why do you believe you are currently enrolled in alternative education?

Traditional Education vs. Alternative Education

What is the thing you like best about Clayton Academy? Why is this?

When you think back to your experiences at your home school, what are some major differences?

Classroom environment? Is the work harder/easier? Are teachers more/less relatable/caring?

How would you describe yourself and your attitudes toward school/education since you've been attending Clayton?

Race/Gender/Class

How often do you think about your race?

Do you believe your race plays any role in your educational experiences?

Do you believe your gender plays any role in your educational experiences?

Do you believe your current income status plays a role in your educational experiences?

Do you think being Black, male and from the inner city all at once influenced your educational experiences?

How?

Do you think you had ample opportunities and options?

Perceptions

How would you describe the Black male students in your class?

What are your thoughts on the large number of Black male students enrolled here at Clayton Academy?

Do you believe they face particular challenges not faced by other students?

Can you tell me about a significant experience you've had with a teacher? What happen?

Do you trust your teachers? Why? Why not?

A.3 UNIVERSITY OF PITT IRB CONSENT

University of Pittsburgh *Institutional Review Board*

3500 Fifth Avenue
Ground Level
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 383-1480
(412) 383-1508 (fax)
<http://www.irb.pitt.edu>

Memorandum

To: Dominique Thornhill
From: IRB Office
Date: 4/9/2018
IRB#: [MOD17110613-01](#) / PRO17110613
Subject: His-Story: Exploring the Schooling Experiences of African American Male Students Enrolled in Alternative Education

The University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the requested modifications by expedited review procedure authorized under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110.

Modification Approval Date: 4/9/2018
Expiration Date: 1/30/2019

For studies being conducted in UPMC facilities, no clinical activities that are impacted by the modifications can be undertaken by investigators until they have received approval from the UPMC Fiscal Review Office.

Please note that it is the investigator's responsibility to report to the IRB any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others [see 45 CFR 46.103(b)(5) and 21 CFR 56.108(b)]. Refer to the IRB Policy and Procedure Manual regarding the reporting requirements for unanticipated problems which include, but are not limited to, adverse events. If you have any questions about this process, please contact the Adverse Events Coordinator at 412-383-1480.

The protocol and consent forms, along with a brief progress report must be resubmitted at least one month prior to the renewal date noted above as required by FWA00006790 (University of Pittsburgh), FWA00006735 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center), FWA0000600 (Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh), FWA00003567 (Magee-Womens Health Corporation), FWA00003338 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Cancer Institute).

A.4 PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS CONSENT

February 27, 2018

Dominique Thornhill

130 Industry St
Pittsburgh, PA 15210

Dear Ms. Thornhill,

The Pittsburgh Public School's Data and Research Review Board has reviewed your request to conduct research around racial identity. Your study, *His-Story: Exploring the Schooling Experiences of African-American Male Students Enrolled in Alternative Education*, has been approved as of February 6, 2018.

Per your proposal, you will recruit and interview 3 students who meet your study criteria of struggling, striving, and succeeding within their current alternative high school setting. The purpose of this study is to investigate the characteristics of African- American male students who persevere and successfully graduate or transition back to their traditional high school setting. This research will be conducted during the 2017-18 school year.

As a condition of your approval, the following provisions are in place:

- Participating students must be made aware that their participation is voluntary and can be rescinded at any time.
- Parental consent must be provided for each participating student.
- Participation in the study cannot interfere with student instructional time.
- Access to schools is always under the control of the building administrator and access can be rescinded at any time.
- Confidentiality of all data must be ensured. In addition, this data cannot be shared nor used for any other purpose other than what is stated in the research proposal and must be destroyed per the terms in the proposal.
- District leadership has the right to review in advance any information that may be shared publically in any documents or presentations. The District, the school and the students should not be identified in any public information.

Any major modifications to the research design, instruments, or approved timeline must be forwarded to the Data and Research Review Board for separate approval. You are also required to keep any identifying information related to all human subjects confidential and safeguarded as outlined in your IRB submission.

Thank you for your interest in working with the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Sincerely,

Deborah Fiss

Deborah Friss

cc: Data and Research Review Board

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