GENDER PERCEPTIONS: A NARRATOLOGICAL, SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST, CASE STUDY OF THE LITERACY EXPERIENCES OF URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

by

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GENDER PERCEPTIONS: A NARRATOLOGICAL, SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST, 
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this critical, narratological, social constructivist case study was to 
explore the literacy experiences of African American males and their relationships to 
masculinity in a third grade public school classroom within a Midwestern urban metropolitan 
area. The blending of critical, narratological, and social constructivist paradigms allowed the 
development of a thick, rich description of the literacy experiences of six African American 
males.

As a single case study, participants were selected through the use of purposeful, 
criterion-based sampling. The following central question was posed followed by three sub-
questions: What are third grade urban African American male students’ literacy experiences like regarding their meanings of masculinity in an elementary classroom? (a) What traits of 
engagement, motivation, and metacognition are displayed by African American male 
students during literacy instruction? (b) How do urban African American male students define masculinity? (c) How does the use of critical cultural literacy practices engage these students in literacy instruction?
Stories, interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals were utilized for data collection. Through the use of open coding, themes were identified and used to form a synthesis of findings. Within the context of literacy instruction, the use of a critical culturally responsive pedagogy created classroom experiences for African American males that were engaging and motivational. These young students had perceptions about masculinity that were used to negotiate and make meanings of their literacy experiences. In spite of the lived experiences and racial injustices placed on the six African American participants, they possessed forms of resilience that allowed them to cope with the social and racial injustices placed upon them in the academic setting and larger society.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Education have examined a dissertation titled “Gender Perceptions: A Narratological, Social Constructivist, Case Study of the Literacy Experiences of Urban African American Male Elementary Students,” presented by Crystal M. Bandy, candidate for the Doctorate of Education degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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PREFACE

Personal Reflection

The founding motivation for this study began 25 years ago at the kitchen table of 6206 Fairlane Drive in Kansas City, Missouri, as my mother began my personal education story beside the construction of my older brother’s education story. I was given fairy tale books and a chalkboard to use for writing stories. My brother was given the same books and flash cards. While I found a connection to the books as my desire to be a beautiful princess grew, my brother was unable to find significance in the stories and slowly began to develop a distaste towards reading. My brother was my foundation, my go-to, and my protector. He epitomized what I believed for so long to be characteristics of a man: strong-willed, powerful, ambitious, aggressive, and academically weak (Wood, Lundgren, Ouellette, Busceme & Blackstone, 1994).

I fully acknowledge and understand the fundamental differences in qualities and characteristics that my brother and I possess. However, there are outside contributing factors that led to two children, born within 15 months of each other, and who never strayed too far from each other’s sides, to be so fundamentally different in our love for literacy. I cannot stress the length to which we were lectured that in order to be nothing like our alcoholic father and uneducated mother, we would have to obtain an education that would lead us to a career and not a job. My brother and I were given minimal choices in our career path: He was to be an architect or athlete and I was to be a nurse. At home, our roles began to reflect the perception of self within the aforementioned roles. I diligently cared for my younger siblings, and Anthony Owen built monstrosities with his blocks and legos. I was allowed to
read for hours, while Anthony Owen was pushed to play catch or compete in neighborhood games.

As the pendulum in literacy swung in the late 1990s, my brother’s education experience began to differ greatly from mine. In the early years of literacy instruction, Anthony was able to regurgitate the facts of any story and to answer quite systematically any question placed before him. However, literacy instruction took a swing to a more open-minded approach of freedom in response, reflection, and self-awareness through use of voice and emotion in writing. The calls began to come of Anthony Owen suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), mental issues, and being overly aggressive and incompetent. My parents feared that all of these allegations made by the teachers were indeed true, forcing my brother into facilities focused on ridding him of these illnesses. On enough medication to sedate a small elephant and to cause any young person to create emotional walls, Anthony continued to struggle in Communication Arts as the popular use of expression and connection-to-self practices rose in the everyday use in the classroom.

My parents, determined to produce academic scholars, forced Anthony Owen to read; he was going to be successful despite his inability to focus in school. My brother chose materials such as comic books, action books, and science fiction pieces as his favorite reads. These books were full of action and allowed his enormous amounts of energy to be used through acting out scenes within the books. Sword fighting, death-defying jumps from tree houses, massively long games of playing Wolverine and Storm, battling the evil mutations, all provided my brother with the creative tools to spend energy and to make some connection to what he was reading. As his passion for reading grew, Anthony began to become an alpha male. Through his reading he was introduced to the numerous “rules” of being male. Dr.
Anne-Marie Dionne states, “Sexist representations impact child development, conveying “rules” for how to be masculine and feminine and how one is supposed to act as a boy or girl” (Dionne, 2010, p. 2). The stories, which my brother loved to read, began to exert influence on his behavior. However, few adults recognized the large disconnect in the representation of masculinity in my brother’s books and the expectations of the academic learner in a literacy classroom. The role of the student versus the role of being a man caused a great deal of extrinsic and intrinsic conflict within my brother. As an alpha male, he made the decision to follow the lead of the behaviors that he related to the most.

Dafflon (2003) explains that children’s gender identity is gradually formed through the acquisition of knowledge from multiple forums, including books. Once a child has developed their perceptions of gender, they will begin to dissect the systems or expectations that do not relate to their gender perceptions (Dionne, 2010). For example, if a young learner believes it is not masculine to express emotion, then he will take issue with the teacher who asks him to write a story of a time when he felt sad.

While my brother’s experiences introduced me to the phenomenon of masculinity, as an educator and lover of literacy practices, I wanted to understand the relationship between gender perceptions and learning for African American males in urban elementary schools. The goal of this study was to identify specific gender perceptions that lead to lower performance standards in literacy, in hopes that techniques and strategies could be developed to support the critical literacy of these students. Critical literacy is defined as the ability to understand the injustices and inequities as held by our world, and the creation of knowledge to overcome these barriers (Jardine, 2005; hooks, 1994).
In this text, I used white and black to refer to the social context of schooling as related to issues of race in America. My intent is not to polarize race but to present the realities of race that have often been the centerpiece of racial politics in America. Regardless of the social models set forth by public figures, laws, or education doctrines “African Americans’ educational opportunities are constrained by race more than by class,” thus African Americans are still subjected to invisible forms of inequalities and injustices (Epps, 1995, p.7). To eliminate the invisibility, often surrounding the lives of young African American males, I deliberately insert this term within the text.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my BBCAT (Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology) boys who fell in love with learning and have inspired me to pursue this topic further than I thought was possible. Cruise, Moses, and Martin, you changed my life, opened my eyes, and made me believe. Your desire to live outside of the expected is empowering—continue on, my little men. To your parents, thank you. You gave me hope that there was good in a world that had only shown such ugliness. I am blessed to have seen such a strong example of love and dedication to the success of your young men.

The University of Missouri-Kansas City has been the guiding light and force behind this entire project, and without the exemplar knowledge gained from an outstanding field of professors, I could not have created such a unique understanding of the plight of current education practices. Dr. Caruthers, in one class you erased all of the negative stereotypes that education had placed on me—I was indeed capable, and it took a beautiful mind to see that. Thank you. Dr. Smith, your patience and ability to just sit and allow for thought to take form awed me. In the world of education, where change and movement is, at times, the only consistent piece of our lives, you asked us to step outside of the norm and seek understanding. Thank you for slowing me down and helping me see my full potential. Your few words were mighty in meaning to me.

To my University of Central Missouri team, this work symbolizes the hope and power you gave me to conquer with a sense of urgency each new item placed on my plate. Deb, your endless words of encouragement and charismatic approach to life renewed my spirits daily. Ann, your smile of knowing humbled me and made me realize that there were others who have walked this path before me, and they made it; therefore, so would I. Nicky, thank you.
you for always being just a bit busier than I thought was humanly possible. You too humbled me when I thought that no one could understand my plight. I needed that motivation more than I could ever possibly describe.

To my Strate, Stonestreet, Havasi, and Pennington family, I owe you countless hugs, shoulders to cry on, and more home-cooked meals than I can count. Your endless cheerleading will never be forgotten. Thank you. Amber and Lauren, you have been the best driving force an older sister could have ever asked for. I hope you see that we do not have to trudge down the same road, which we were brought up on—we get the option to create our own. Find your love, pursue it, and own it. I love you, Sisters.

My husband. You prove to me on a daily basis that regardless of the lack of positive male support in the life of a young man, there is still the possibility to choose the right path. Your unending support, love, and faith in my ability to finish this work are something I can never repay. I hope only to have the opportunity one day to show you the same pillar of support in whatever endeavors you may take on. However, for now, let’s enjoy our marriage and family, and find some time to create new hopes and dreams as the Bandy’s.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Literacy is not a luxury; it is a right and a responsibility. If our world is to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century we must harness the energy and creativity of all our citizens.

—Bill Clinton, International Literacy Day, September 8, 1994

Former President Clinton’s (1994) quote provides a powerful synopsis of how important the literacy education of young American children is for their future and the benefit of our nation. All children must be provided with an education that provides them with the tools to be successful, critical thinkers. The right to an education is a natural right, according to the framers of the Constitution. Within these rights to an education, children should acquire the skills to infer meaning, decode information, and amalgamate ideas. Yet, since the beginning of our great nation, there has been considerable discrepancy about the rights of education for all, the extent of availability, and the level of expectations of engagement for diverse groups attending school as students. The unfortunate reality is the same cultures who have survived centuries of silenced voices are still forced to remain silent as our education system fails to give them the tools to effectively communicate their stories (Freire, 2005).

Few of us can argue against the importance of education, so why are we allowing ourselves to ignore the increasing disparities in literacy experiences for young, urban African American males? Clearly, schools are critical sites for young students to develop understanding of who they are, what they are supposed to do with their lives, and how others perceive them. While I acknowledge the fact that our education system cannot stand alone in the quest to provide a comprehensive education which would equip students with the necessary critical thinking skills and “street survival skills,” I believe that the schools can do
more to close the gap between the lived experiences of young urban African American males and their academic experiences in the literacy classroom.

As a middle-class white female scholar, I do not wish to add to the scholarly pieces that categorize young African American males as an endangered species or a population at risk based upon their academic performances and continued struggles in society. Rather, I wish to reflect upon my own upbringing in an urban Midwestern school, where knowledge about survival was deemed just as important by my male African American peers, as was their academic successes. I witnessed and experienced teachers who provided a culturally relevant pedagogy that provoked empathy and self-efficacious behaviors in students who fell well below the poverty line. Through combining our lived experiences with the academic expectations of the district and state, the teachers of this urban school were able to create effective instruction that motivated both the white and African American students to achieve at higher levels than what is currently seen in many urban schools throughout the United States.

I believe that the problem with educating young African American males does not fall onto the shoulders of the African American society; rather, it should fall on the shoulders of policy makers, curriculum developers, and instructional leaders of all races and ethnicities. A study conducted by Polite (1993) affirms my belief that if education is to be truly motivating and efficacious for young African American males, teachers must see and bring out their true potentials through presenting a critical, culturally responsive education. As a white female, I do not wish to incorporate a deficit model of thinking, nor solely view the issue through a critical race lens. In order to fully understand the problem, the subtle issues of race that affect their lives must be understood as well as the academic expectations that can
be transformed to include their lived experiences. I desire to embrace the culture of African American males and add to the slim body of research that provides applicable solutions, founded in well-established theories and both quantitative and qualitative empirical studies.

The Problem

Many urban elementary African American males may struggle with their experiences in the literacy classroom due to perceptions of what it means to be masculine as an African American male. Researchers have shown a decline in male students’ performance on literacy achievement tests and a relationship between decline and their strong beliefs about what it means to be masculine (Davies, 2003; Gray & McLellan, 2006). Many studies examined the gender gap from an adolescent model within a broad context of social economic status (Davies, 2003; Gray & McLellan, 2006; Louie, 2008; Salisbury, 1999), while other research projects focused on issues of masculinity as a whole from the male perspective (Gaer, 2007). However, few studies have examined the literacy experiences of primary-aged African American males.

Gray and McLellan (2006) noticed a disparity between the achievement of boys and girls in literacy; girls scored 46% at or above grade level in literacy, compared to 29% of boys who perform at or above the third grade level. Concluding that further empirical evidence was needed to confirm the relationship between gender, social class, and ethnicity in relation to pupils’ attitudes towards school, Gray and McLellan (2006) determined that gender-based stereotypes greatly influenced the dispositions of young students in the classroom, particularly literacy. Similar findings were reported from the Vermont Department of Education when analyzing state scores on the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) from the school years 2002 to 2007 (Louie, 2008). The
aforementioned achievement reports led the Vermont State Board and Commissioner of Education to request an in-depth analysis of gender gaps in all areas of Communication Arts (Louie, 2008). The study analyzed the size of gender gaps among students at the third-grade level (eight to nine years old) disaggregated by poverty, ethnicity, and disabilities. The research found that there was indeed a relationship within the American school system of performance rates and these external variables. The levels of academic proficiencies as determined by the standardized assessment scores during students’ K-8 experiences continue into the secondary schools, where even greater emphasis is placed upon the performance on the standardized tests; therefore, there is a great need to understand the dispositions of young urban males in literacy classrooms who hold strong beliefs of what it means to be masculine.

In recent years, media attention has labeled the current dilemma young men of the education system are facing as the “boy crisis” (Davies, 2003; Salisbury, 1999). The notion of a lack of engagement among boys in literacy has been noted among scholars for decades. In a qualitative study, using discourse analysis techniques, Davies observed and recorded the discussion of novel study groups in a secondary literacy classroom. Through the coding of conversations, male subjects displayed a loyalty to social norms, which severely limited their learning and work processes, as well as the evoking of emblems or societal beliefs to avoid self-revelation. Similarly, Salisbury (1999) concluded that while the gap in achievement scores may be concerning, it is not necessarily a case of under-achievement per se. Further exploration of the child’s background, social class, and parents’ education levels could lead to better understanding of the levels of performance of young students in the literacy classroom.
Researchers have given several explanations as to why boys are facing underachievement in language arts: gender differences in verbal intelligence and learning styles, interests in language arts, motivation and attitudes toward learning, behaviors, and perceptions of the level of usefulness of language arts in real life situations (Gaer, 2007). Defining a peer group as an individual’s small, intimate group of peers who interact with each other on a regular basis, one cannot deny the heavy influence of each individual on another. Using a quantitative lens, Gaer (2007) found that while boys showed higher mean cognitive abilities than their female counterparts, it was males’ attitudes that influenced their learning the most, negatively influencing their verbal intelligences and interests in literacy instruction. If young males belonged to social or peer groups that held a negative view about the importance of literacy instruction or engagement in school, then the students were more likely to be less involved and reflective during classroom instruction. I believe that the lived experiences that contribute to the development of perceptions of masculinity affect young male students’ abilities to connect to the literacy instruction, currently used in the American classroom. Outlined in Chart 1 are data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that reflect educational outcomes for African American males and females and White males and females. NAEP data annually assesses fourth, eighth and twelve students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

**Chart 1**

*Disaggregated Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American Males</th>
<th>African American Females</th>
<th>White Males</th>
<th>White Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievement Rate</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>above the 75th Percentile</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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5
### The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Scores

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores for fourth graders show a total of 7% of the African American population, 4% male and 3% female above the 75th percentile. This is drastically lower than the 37% of white males and 34% white females who score in the 75th percentile on the fourth grade reading assessment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Studies show that because of the disparity in achievement rates between African American and white students, young African American males begin to feel isolation early in their academic experiences. This is often caused by a perceived failure to match the expectations of school educators and leaders in the areas of literacy, resulting in a gradual process of alienation from literacy and other areas of curriculum which rely on literacy (Gray & McLellan, 2006). The national graduation rate for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suspension Rate of High School Students 2012</strong></td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Estimated High School Drop Out Rate 2011-2012</strong></td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High School Graduation Rate 2011-2012</strong></td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College Attendance 2011-2012</strong></td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2012 African American male students was 60%, compared to 76% of white males graduating in 2012 (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012; Black, 2014). While there was an increase from the 2009-2010 school year 52% graduation rate for African American boys, there is still cause for concern regarding the continued disparities between the percentages of white males and African American males graduating (America’s Promise Alliance, 2014; The Urgency of Now, 2014). Barely graduating or simply dropping out of school, African American males have been further silenced, as educators do little to move students beyond their feelings of isolation (Giroux, 2001). More than half, 54% of the African American male population drops out of high school. This is considerably larger in comparison to the 28% of white males who drop out. When comparing the issue across the lines of gender, African American males are 14% more likely to drop out from high school than their female African American counterparts, and 32% more likely to drop out than white females (Amurdo, 2014; Black, 2014; US Girl Dropout Crisis, 2013).

The disparity of graduation percentages versus the drop out rate is related to the additional year of high school that African American students take in order to graduate. Nearly four times as many African American males took an additional year to graduate compared to their White counterparts (America’s Promise Alliance, 2014; USA Today, 2014). The cause of this additional year of education is often attributed to the level of expulsions/suspensions that African American students are forced to endure.

School districts across our nation have reported that nearly 40% of the African American student body is suspended or expelled for behavior issues; 24% of the African American male student body and 12% of the African American female student body were suspended during the 2011-2012 school year (Henderson, 2014). The suspension rate of
24% percent for African American males is 13% higher than white males and 22% percent higher than white females being suspended in American schools (USA Today, 2014). The discipline actions taken against African American males are often leading factors to their continued presence in the school setting. The implications of the suspension rate that have been found to lead to increased dropout rates for African American males and females are overwhelming. Found to lend to a continued loss of employment in the African American community, the implications of the drop out rate of high school African American males are further understood in examining the college graduation rate for African American males/females compared to White males/females (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012).

Forty-two percent of African American male students who successfully complete high school are admitted into a four-year institution graduate, while the number of white males who graduate from a four-year institution are 20% higher (Black Student College, 2014). Of significant interests to family socialization and the role of masculinity in the African American culture are the data that show further disadvantage for African American boys, as African American females are six percent more likely to graduate from a four-year institution. In addition, as female enrollment in four-year institutions continues to gain ground, white females are 24% more likely to enroll and graduate in a four-year institution than African American males (Women’s College Enrollment Gains Leave Men Behind, 2014).

When comparing the aforementioned national data to the data from the selected setting for the purpose of this particular study, there is evidence of similar struggles and inequalities inflicted upon the African American males in this urban Midwestern school district. While the graduation rate of African American males is nearly 93%, compared to the
national average of 52%, nearly 22% of the African American male student body took an additional year to graduate with a four-year high school diploma (Ohio Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014). Additionally, in this particular district the suspension rate of African American males was nearly four times higher than that of the national average (Kirwan, 2014).

Persistent underachievement and creation of a disenfranchised social belief among African American males should resonate with educators as a cry for help, yet for decades this cry for academic justice has been unheard, ignored, or belittled. Acknowledging the detrimental effect dropouts have on the success of our nation, the following questions beg an answer: If we know that young African American males are feeling isolated in their academic experiences, specifically in the literacy classroom, at a young age, what is being done to prevent this problem? The critical question for all educators to consider is how do we present a critical, culturally relevant pedagogy to engage the young African American male urban population that will allow their continued success in our global economy? Educators have an ethical responsibility to ensure their students’ successes through implementation of relevant pedagogical practices; yet, few are meeting these ethical responsibilities.

I argue that education is one of the greatest influences on the quality of life that individuals are able to attain. Current research suggests all of the quality of life indicators for African American males are troubling (Jackson & Moore, 2006; Noguera, 2003). Incarceration, conviction, and arrest rates continue to top the chart of life indicators for African American men, with the most alarming quality of life indicator showing that African American men are the only category of humans in the United States who are experiencing a decline in life expectancy. “It is not surprising that there is a connection between the
educational performance of African American males and the hardships they endure within the larger society” (Noguera, 2003, p.432). In the education space, African American boys show signs of distress and significant trouble in school, as they are often the group who is expelled or placed into special education classes at a higher rate than other groups (Ford, 1996; Holzman, 2006; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Tatum, 2000, 2005). African American young men consistently fall behind other students in achievement and performance and lead their peers in school infractions and other negative outcomes (Davis, 2003).

Some researchers have found that African American boys perceive success in school as a sign that one has resigned to acting in a white manner (Fordam & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004). Research shows in order to improve the academic performance of African American boys, education must address the attitudes and culture they bring to school with them (Ogbu, 1995). Currently, there is limited research that has explored how the environmental and cultural forces of the African American society influence how African American boys perceive school, and how those perceptions influence their behaviors and performance within schools (Davies, 2003; Ogbu, 1995). While the African American male population tends to stand out in society in a negative fashion it is imperative that research focuses on the positive changes in education that could ultimately benefit the quality of life indicators for African American men (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Noguera, 2003; Tatum, 2005). The plight of young African American males in schools demands far more attention, both in theory and practice. The purpose of this research is rooted in the notion of the possibilities that exist for educating all children, including African American males.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this critical narratological, social constructivist case study was to explore the literacy experiences of African American males and their relationship to masculinity in an urban elementary third grade public school classroom within a Midwestern urban metropolitan area. For the purpose of the research, gender was defined as the socially determined ideas and practices of what it means to be masculine. As the primary focus of the study (Patton, 2002), the unit of analysis was the literacy experiences of third grade urban African American males. The study identified techniques and strategies that will create a positive learning experiences for urban African American males in the literacy classroom by acknowledging their socially constructed perceptions of masculinity.

According to Creswell (2013), a qualitative case study is a process of studying experiences in the state in which they naturally occur as a way of understanding the phenomena of what people bring to experiences. One component of a qualitative study is the researchers’ abilities to position themselves within the study itself. Through this approach, researchers are able to create a holistic account through in-depth inquiry into the phenomena (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2007). In addition, Rossman and Rallis (1998) describe eight characteristics of qualitative research and researchers that closely relate to the purpose of this study. These eight characteristics are:

[qualitative research] (1) is naturalistic, (2) draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of participants, (3) is emergent and evolving, and (4) is interpretive. Qualitative researchers (5) view social worlds as holistic or seamless, (6) engage in systematic reflection on their own roles in the research, (7) are sensitive to their personal biographies and how these shape the study, and (8) rely on complex reasoning that moves dialectically between deduction and induction. (p. 9)

My experience as the teacher of African American male students whose masculinity influenced their experiences with literacy at school allowed an emic perspective of this inquiry. Emic perspective is referred to as the “insider’s” perspective on the study;
researchers display an attachment and sense of self as they interact with the phenomena of the study, allowing them to construct meanings of the participants’ worlds (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Through the understanding of my personal biography and how it shapes the study, I actively reflected upon the findings from interviews, observations, and documents to understand the phenomena.

Through personal interviews, a deeper history of the formation of gender perceptions was explored to fully understand the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the phenomena, forming a case study design for this qualitative study (Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 1994). This study was designed to capture the stories of participants in order to understand the breadth and depth of their literacy experiences. Embracing the critical theory approach through critical race theory and narratology paradigms, the individual stories of these third grade African American males guided the formation of future implications of the study. The use of critical theory allowed for deeper meanings to be derived from the findings of the study as critical race theory embraces the idea that racism is an underlying problem found in our society and affects our daily lives (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; McLaren, 2003). As a subset of critical theory, the use of critical race theory was employed to delve deeper into the impact of racism, inequalities and injustices that confronted African American third elementary boys in the literacy classroom. Narratology research supports the collection of stories to form the basis of a social movement, lending to a public forum for the stories of marginalized people to be heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Social constructivists view the world around them as the means to further understand their experiences in life, work, and many other areas. I believe that elementary urban African American males construct their meanings of masculinity through interaction with others;
hence, they socially construct their perceptions of masculinity. Social constructivists attempt to answer how people within a particular setting have constructed their realities, and the consequences of their constructed realities on their behaviors (Patton, 2002). The social construction of masculinity forms from several mediums available in our culture. According to Doyle (1995), whose research focuses on masculinity, males are often depicted in society as aggressive, in control of all emotions, and in no way feminine. Further understanding of the social construction of masculinity lends to the understanding that young boys are often constructing their personal definition of masculinity across observations of race, class, and their ethnicity (Morrell, 2000; Pillay, 2006). Developing an understanding of the relationships between the critical, social construction of the perceptions of masculinity and the stories these students tell about their experiences with literacy assisted in the design of this case study.

**Research Questions**

The central research question with three sub-questions were formulated for this inquiry. Central Question: What are third grade urban African American male students’ literacy experiences like regarding their meanings of masculinity in an elementary classroom?

• What traits of engagement, motivation, and metacognition are displayed by African American male students during literacy instruction?

• How do urban African American male students define masculinity?

• How does the use of critical cultural literacy practices engage these students in literacy instruction?
Exploring these questions within the context of the literacy experiences of urban elementary African American males required the integration of personal beliefs with knowledge gleaned from scholarly works in the areas of race in America, the development of masculinity, the historical structures and practices of literacy instruction, the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, and the integration of critical literacy pedagogy in classrooms. The theoretical framework of the study provided further clarity of the goal and purpose of the research.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework, often referred to as the conceptual framework, is defined by Maxwell (2013) as the written portion of the dissertation that details the main components of the study in a narrative manner so that the reader may understand the relationships between concepts and/or variables found within the study. Maxwell identifies four main sources for the modules used to construct theoretical framework: experiential knowledge, existing theory and research, pilot and exploratory research, and thought experiments. Drawing on experiential knowledge, it was important for me to disclose my system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that informed the study (Maxwell, 2013, p. 39). For these reasons, the theoretical framework addressed the assumptions I brought to the study, as well as a critical analysis of the problem, based upon a related framework of knowledge.

The acknowledgement of assumptions while conducting a study is crucial to conducting an ethical and reliable study. I had several assumptions in relation to this qualitative study. The first assumption I held was that current literacy practices ignore the lived experiences of urban African American males which contribute to their development and understanding of what it means to be masculine. I believed there was a close
relationship between the cultural development of a young boy and his definition of what it means to be masculine. The problems young African American boys face are chronic and extreme, thus deserving of continued focus and application of positive reform policies. Morojele (2011) examined the pressure placed upon young boys to conform to the expectations of masculinity per their culture, class, and peer group and found that there was indeed a strong pressure to meet the expectations of one’s culture, which often trumped the expectations of sub-cultures, such as school. As early as kindergarten young African American boys are often treated differently by their teachers because their behaviors are deemed aggressive, intimidating, and defiant. A disconnect between the two worlds in which the young African American boy lives is created through cultural and social influences outside and inside of the school. The text and teaching practices which are currently used in the classroom focus on the feminine characteristics of emotion and connection to self in expressive responses. I believe that this form of thinking creates a disconnect between the urban African American males and their experiences in the literacy classroom; in a sense, there is a creation of duality in personalities in the urban African American males (Freire, 2005).

As a social constructivist, I actively seek a better understanding of the world which I am involved as an educator in an elementary setting and as a college instructor of future educators in the elementary setting. I believe that the development of perceived traits of masculinity is formed through interaction with others and through the cultural norms within one’s space (Creswell, 2013; Newkirk, 2002). I further believe that there is a conflict between the social constructions of masculinity versus the academic construction of masculinity. In both areas, boys are expected to conform to strict expectations of
masculinity. However, the social expectations of masculinity often produce results of classism, racism, fear of appearing homosexual, and shame for falling into any one or more categories (Gosse, 2011; Morojele, 2011; Newkirk, 2002). For young African American males, the social norms of society establish these beliefs and are called into direct question in the literacy classroom.

The theoretical framework for this study is built from multiple findings that support a strong examination of the literacy experiences of urban elementary African American males. These areas of focus are race in America, the development of masculinity in an urban setting, the historical structures and practices of literacy instruction in the elementary classroom, the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, and the incorporation of critical literacy pedagogy as a more crucial stance of literacy instruction.

**Race in America**

Acknowledging that race is crucial to the development and understanding of the lived experiences and social development of the urban African American males was essential to this study. Growing up as an African American male in the United States is difficult in nature as the injustices and inequalities that have been placed upon African Americans since the days of slavery continue to plaque the African American community. Within this framework, the effects of racial socialization, racial identity, and education identity were used as a foundation to my understanding of what the lived experiences of African Americans males are like in the United States of America.

African American families were found to provide a strong foundation in what it means to be an African American in a society dominated by white standards and expectations (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991). While the role of traditional parenting is found within all
African American families, regardless of the make-up of the family, many African American parents are faced with the need to educate their child in the ways that will help them cope with the racism, social inequalities, or outright discrimination for being African American (McAdoo, 2002; Peters, 2002). Often in order to be successful or to avoid racial inequality, African Americans find themselves with a foot in two worlds, the dominant white society and the cultural beliefs and traditions of the African American community (DuBois, 1903). This idea of a double consciousness creates a tightly woven net of understanding in how to live as an African American, more specifically as an African American male, in a society that does not accept certain traits or beliefs found within the African American culture. In forming a double consciousness, African American males are able to remain true to themselves and their masculinity as a strong, independent African American male, yet live and function in the dominant culture (Peters, 2002).

The dominant culture of our nation is taught at an early age and often the foundation of our educational upbringing. The teaching of white expectations, history, and successes can be found in textbooks and literacy genres. In teaching African American students and/or children, African American parents prepare their children to form strong racial identities as well as a strong educational identity (Boykin, 1986; Peters, 2002). A heavy emphasis on academic success can be found rooted within the cultural and beliefs of the African American community. Research shows that regardless of the academic level of achievement of an African American parent, there is still a high level of desire for African American children to achieve academic success, more specifically to go to college and earn a four-year degree (Boykin, 1986). The emphasis on the importance of education is often not seen nor acknowledged in the mainstream society and society’s expectations for members of the
African American community, thus deepening the development of a double consciousness in African American children.

**The Development of Masculinity in an Urban Setting**

Masculinity was defined to suit the purpose of this study and the rationale behind constructing the research from paradigms of critical race theory, narratology, and social constructivism. Pillay (2006) provides a sophisticated approach to defining masculinity. The terms “masculinity” and “male” hold both social and linguistic meanings; the two words are related, but provide different meanings socially and linguistically. Essentially, there are core characteristics, which men relate to in their development of an understanding of masculinity. However, these understandings are gleaned from preconceived or learned notions of one’s “space.” Alexander (2006) proposed “space” to encompass those not only surrounding you, but also the social contexts with which those persons surrounding you associate. Brittan (1989) reasons:

> Roles are added to biology to give us gender—and, once this happens, men and women acquire their…gender identities. In a nutshell, the socialization thesis asserts that human beings acquire gender as a result of the social definition and construction of male or female bodies. (p. 21)

Thus, masculinity is the practice of what is socially acceptable, and not what being male biologically pre-determines. Therefore, young boys are left to construct their definitions of what it means to be masculine based upon their personal experiences, socialization within their family systems, and the greater influences of their cultural surroundings (Morrell, 2001; Pillay, 2006).
Cole (1999) concluded developmental change is a relationship between a child’s biological makeup, the social space, which the child occupies, and the resulting behaviors, which occur. In addition, during the concrete operational stage of development, as developed and defined by Piaget, young urban African American males will begin to have a heightened awareness of self and what it means to be socially accepted; which, in turn, could potentially influence their exertions of masculinity. Piaget (1976) developed four factors that influence the development of mental thought processes:

1. Biological factors, which account for the sequential stages of growth
2. Equilibrium factors, which develop through interactions with the environment
3. General socialization or social interactions
4. Social factors which include education and cultural interactions.

Hale (1982) added to understanding of the basic foundations of growth in disclosing the limitations of Piaget’s cognitive functions:

The kind of psychology we develop in our social environments remains conjectural as long as comparative, extensive and systematic research is not available; a great effort is still to be made in this direction….Only such studies allow us to separate the effects of biological and mental factors from those of social and cultural influences on the formation and socialization of individuals. (p. 24)

If identities are performative and relational, then it could be reasoned that there is a need to understand a cultural definition of masculinity instead of the academic definition of masculinity that is prevalent in mainstream literature (Alexander, 2006; Freire, 2005). Freire (2005) explains that often the oppressed suffer from duality, or the need to present two different realities when faced with the dominant culture or those with power. In our current classrooms, the middle class, white-male textbook companies, who regularly represent the past, present, and path to the future through their perspectives, represent the dominant
culture. Freire (2005) claims that, it is only through freedom of knowledge that oppressed individuals can gain power and learn to authentically exist in society. Based on Piaget’s assessment and theories as noted by Hale (1982) and Cole (1999), I believe that the young urban male is cognitively unable to use abstract understanding to think about the two separate constructions of masculinity within each area of construction. As I gained an understanding of the cultural definition of masculinity for young urban African American males, my beliefs were transformed to skepticism about the need to use the academic space of expected masculinity norms for understanding literacy experiences of these students. I found that when given the opportunity to read texts that reflected the life stories of successful African American men and women as well as fictional stories that took place in the current context of their lives, the young African American male students in my class were engaged and able to display comprehension of explicit and implicit meanings of stories. I found the need to explore the historical structures and practices that are endemic to literacy instruction in most elementary classrooms.

**The Historical Structures and Practices of Effective Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom**

Many scholars agree that increasing literacy skills in our urban youth is crucial to their abilities to overcome social injustices and deficit thinking (Freire & Macedo, 2013; Moss, 2005). Davies (2003), using a phenomenological design, interviewed two young students—1 male and 1 female—to better understand the essence of the experiences of those young learners in the literacy classroom. The young female learner told a story of her first day at a new school, neatly creating the setting and plot of the story as she described her
experiences. As she continued to tell the story, she displayed an understanding of climax and resolution in the conclusion of her thoughts. In contrast, the young male’s stories alluded to the fear of appearing homosexual if the story did not include references to sex and sexuality.

In the literacy classroom, the tradition of oral presentation, or storytelling, is often used as a means of informal assessment; however, this can cause great anxiety among young male learners, as revealed in the above example (Creswell, 2013; Davies, 2003). The current elementary classroom has employed a curriculum that is tailored to the needs of young female learners (Davies, 2003; Salisbury, 1999). The use of a narratological lens in my study allowed me to further understand the literacy practices and the relationships between pedagogical practices and young African American males’ experiences with the literacy classroom.

While the format of the classroom instruction was one central component of interest throughout the study, the area of literacy, for the purpose of this study, was viewed as genre choices (content area of reading), written responses to readings, and other forms of communication. Studying the activities often associated with literacy allowed me to understand the relationship between current literacy pedagogical practices and young African American males’ experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Current language arts research has deduced that student-writing styles are closely related to their reading interests. The breakdown of books checked out by young female learners displayed a wide range of interests with the fiction genre: science fiction, historical fiction, realistic fiction, and others. The boys’ choices of reading materials stemmed from a
non-fiction, or realistic purpose: manuals, biographies, and information-based texts (Salisbury, 1999). The relationships between the reading choices of students and their writing styles continue, as the student often adopts their writing styles from their reading texts of preference. However, current literacy practices call for using metacognition and inferring skills, as they are preferred by a majority of elementary teachers (Pressley, Rankin & Yokoi, 1996). I believed this was contradictory to the dynamics of literacy necessary to create positive experiences for young African American male learners. If a young boy tends to read only expository texts, then he will flourish in writing informative, analytical pieces. If the preferred genre and writing style of elementary teachers across the nation is contradictory in nature to the reading area of strength for a young male learner, the young boy will struggle to find a connection to the text.

To further understand the relationships between African American males and their literacy experiences, one must uncover the stories that are not told in the classroom because of outside influences. Often African American voices are silenced in the literacy classroom. Literacy experiences that take place in the classroom could include the opportunity for the African American male students to engage with text, use written words to express themselves, or to listen to the written or verbal word as a way of communicating with others. A critical, culturally relevant literacy classroom would allow for their voices to express concerns, opinions, questions, and critiques regardless of the accepted “truths” of society (Freire, 2005; Jardine, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Further analysis of the use of a critical, culturally relevant literacy as a supporting tenet of the study can be found in the
following sections, as well as in Chapter 2. To understand the need for a more critical stance of culturally relevant pedagogy, I first provide a discussion of culturally relevant pedagogy.

**Owning Culture: A Reason for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Ladson-Billings (1995a) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as a “pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual empowerment” (p. 160). Furthermore, three tenets were defined as the foundation of culturally relevant pedagogy: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Further investigation of empirical studies began to show evidence of the importance of using culturally relevant information within elementary classroom. Dyson (2003) conducted a phenomenological study in a second grade classroom. The use of a metaphoric “drinking god” (a literary technique employed to help the student recall information) allowed the researchers to capture the influence of children’s nonacademic, textual experiences during their literacy class time. Through the creation of a culturally relevant pedagogy, one of which embraced the lived experiences of the African American youth in the classroom, teachers were able to focus on the social context of the literacy instruction and the relationship of the education experiences and the social norms found within that space. The students in the classroom were presented with literacy that was rich with detailed experiences of the African American culture, diversity within the culture, and the stories of those who are successful in their lives. The more understanding students held for the value of knowing official and unofficial social norms, the more likely students were to become actively engaged in their learning. I believe teachers, publishers, and education resource producers are aware of the societal norms as represented by the dominant white middle class perspective but the need to maintain a dominant view is fueled by
hegemony, broadly defined as the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group. Stinson (2011) notes that, “any theoretical explanation or meta-narrative that attempts to explain the schooling experiences of Black students (or historically marginalized students in general)…must first begin by deconstructing the hegemonic ideology of Whiteness that infects US public schools” (p. 63). In order to create a culturally relevant pedagogy, the lived experiences of students of color must be included in the foundation of the curriculum taught.

Culturally relevant pedagogy should lead to increased planning and creation of contextual understanding of the students present in the classroom. Irvine (2012) says to fully appreciate cultural influences, teachers must completely understand the information taught in the classroom, and should understand that information in relationship to their students. I believe that many teachers do not actively pursue teaching culturally relevant information because of the stereotypes that are associated with culturally relevant teaching practices. Teachers often feel that the infusion of culture into the curriculum is done by acknowledging African American history during a particular month of the year; however, a culturally relevant pedagogy should place culture as the initial structure of the curriculum implemented in the classroom. Irvine (2012) found that teachers do not teach culturally relevant information because they feel that they cannot relate since most did not grow up with the same experiences as their students.

For these reasons, I observed the experiences of African American male students during the original literacy teaching practices and during the implementation of a critical, culturally relevant pedagogy. The following section briefly discusses the foundation of critical literacy as a sister tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy.
Critical Literacy: Thinking Outside of the Box

Literacy is often associated with two core areas: reading and writing. However, to fully understand the impact of literacy on a young male learner, the definition of literacy was expanded to include the skills necessary to read, write, and critically analyze information. Gunter and Taylor (2006) reason that in order to fully grow as a literate learner one must read, write, speak, listen, and think. To fully understand the relationship of critical literacy in the social context of the classroom, I expanded the definition of critical literacy to include the context in which learning occurs both socially and academically and how this information contributes to a subject’s life (Freire, 2005).

I believe there is a unique relationship between critical literacy and the literacy experiences of urban African American male elementary students. As noted earlier in the text, critical literacy is defined as the ability to understand the injustices and inequities as held by our world, and the creation of knowledge to overcome these barriers (Jardine, 2005; hooks, 1994). My assumption is supported in previous research that found the engagement of students depends upon their relationship to the curriculum and to their lived experiences. Through a critical literacy lens, the young learner will be able to better understand the material, which is presented to them as well as why and how it is applicable to their lives (Freire, 2005; Hass-Dyson, 2001; hooks, 1994). Critical race theory supports my assumption of the need for a critical literacy that engages students through a connection between self and the curriculum. Critical race theorists believe that social injustices and inequalities are still found throughout society, including in education texts and curriculum (McLaren, 2003). I believe that curriculum should allow students to question the status quo and to draw connections to the text either through their lived experiences or in questioning
the mainstream presentation of life. As a result of this approach, young African American males will find deeper meaning in the curriculum, thus becoming motivated to engage in their literacy experiences.

Motivating and engaging young African American males necessitate drawing a clear relationship between the curriculum and the lives of students. Paugh, Carey, King-Jackson and Russell (2007) used a critical literacy lens to analyze the evolution of the literacy classroom from historical practices to current literacy pedagogies. The use of critical literacy in the third grade urban classroom proved to be beneficial, as the practice not only changed the learning space, but also expanded the foundational knowledge of literacy among the young learners (Paugh et al., 2007). The change in classroom instructional practices was not solely realized by the classroom students, but was one that had to be accepted and practiced by the homeroom teacher in order to be seamlessly implemented. To effectively create a classroom of critical literacy practices, there must be a high level of teacher buy-in that will allow for students to question the accepted truths in order to make their own truths (Giroux, 2006).

I have laid the foundation for understanding the literacy experiences of African American males in the urban elementary classroom through a discussion of a theoretical framework of race in America, the development of masculinity in an urban setting, historical structures and practices of literacy instruction in the elementary classroom, the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, and the incorporation of critical literacy pedagogy with culturally relevant pedagogy as a more crucial stance of literacy instruction. The following section provides a brief overview of the methodology for the study.

Overview of the Methodology
The purpose of qualitative research is to better understand the webs of causes, effects, learned processes, and the dynamics within a social setting as they represent the qualities within a certain space (Dougherty, 2002). The purpose of this study is not to identify a complex phenomenon, but to identify a central theme that explains the relationship of urban African American males’ perceptions of masculinity and their experiences in the literacy classroom. As an instrument in this critical narratological, social constructivist case study, I positioned myself within the study as a conscious decision maker. Understanding how my own biases may hinder hearing the experiences of the participants was crucial to maintaining the integrity of the human participants (Creswell, 2013; Gilgun, 2005). hooks (1994) urges researchers to make their presences known in their writings, shaping the piece of writing in a manner unique to the voice which is chosen by the researcher in order to hear the participants’ stories. Known as reflexivity, researchers determine their positions within the research, and then discuss how positionality shapes the interpretation of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

In this study, I inserted my voice as I shared the case study of the meanings of masculinity for third grade urban African American males in the literacy classroom. Hence, the purpose of this study does not revolve around my voice; rather, the authentic voices of the participants were honored throughout the study. My voice surfaces in the study as the reflective practitioner and researcher as well as the interpreter of the participants’ lived experiences as African American males. I was diligent in my effort to guard against allowing my biases to interfere with the inductive process of interpreting the lived experiences and stories of the study participants. Through the theoretical traditions of critical theory,
narratology, and social constructivism, I designed a case study that would allow me to use these traditions to make meaning of the phenomena present within the case study.

The use of critical theory allowed for deeper meanings of the lived experiences of third grade African American elementary males to be understood. Critical theory, as initially developed by theorists John Dewey and Myles Horton, was used to better inform education practices through the acknowledgement of the deeply rooted notions of race in our society (McLaren, 2003). From the idea of critical theory, a subset of theory was developed, called critical race theory. For the purpose of this study critical race theory was embraced throughout the analysis of data. Critical race theory allowed for the research findings to be interwoven together through the use of social constructivism and critical race theory, as both are rooted in the belief that society plays a significant role in the development of human beings.

Narratology as a method involved collecting stories that people tell about their experiences through in-depth interviews with the researcher re-storying the data, or through participants telling their own stories. Narratives and storytelling are methods used by critical race theorists to express the experiences of people of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Parker & Lynn (2002) found that “the thick descriptions and interviews, characteristic of case study research, not only serve illuminative purposes but also can be used to document institutional as well as overt racism” (p. 11). With narratives as experiences, I found it fitting to use social constructivism as way of understanding the social context of experiences.

Social constructivism informed the study, as this theoretical underpinning was helpful for understanding the extent to which the social context of the larger society contributes to
the formation of perceptions of masculinity. Immanuel Kant stated that in order to understand human interactions, we must assign meaning to them as the action is filtered through human consciousness (Jackson & Hansen, 2008). Understanding the socially constructed experiences of African American males in relationship to the implementation of critical, culturally relevant pedagogy may shed light on the influence society has on both areas of interest. Social constructivism provided a lens through which to understand the relationship between the lived experiences of elementary African American males and their experiences in the literacy classroom.

For the purpose of this research, a case study was defined as an “intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units. A unit connotes a spatially bounded phenomenon” (Gerring, 2007, p. 342). The six third grade elementary African American participants of this study served as a single case study, as their experiences were bound together within the school, classroom, and literacy lessons that they shared. A single case study was ideal for the purpose of this study and supported the examination of “unique cases [or case] to confirm or challenge a theory” (Yin, 1994) or phenomenon. In this study, the phenomena are the experiences of African American males in the elementary literacy classroom. The relationship of developing meaning through a social constructivist lens and the case study was formed through making descriptive inferences, drawn through personal documents, interviews, and observations (Gerring, 2007). As the researcher, I acknowledged my own lived experiences and was able to interact with the participants of the study, gaining insight into their daily routines and lived experiences.

In order to identify the participants, I used purposeful criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2007) to select a group of participants who were of the desired elementary
grade level in the urban core of a city school district. The criteria considered for initial sampling of the research included: (a) cultural and/or racial identity as an African American, (b) identification within a social setting of an urban school, (c) eight to nine years of age, and (d) enrolled in a third grade classroom. Creswell suggests that in order to create an information rich study, the researcher may use multiple mediums for data collection; thus I used interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis for this study. In general, the participants were urban elementary African American males who lived within a selected urban city and categorized as third grade students. Due to possible academic retention in previous years, participation in the study was limited to students who were within the designated grade level and fell into the age range of eight to nine years old. In anticipation that there were not be enough initial participants, snowballing would have been used to seek members to participate in the study based upon the recommendation from parents whose students were already selected to participate in the study. The classroom teacher provided me with the first six consent forms returned to the school, which met the anticipated number of participants for the study.

Upon the selection of student participants followed by the return of signed student and parent/guardian consent forms, the teacher of the selected student participants was approached to determine willingness to participate in the study. Additionally, in the event that a teacher was unwilling to participate in the study, then the student participant would become ineligible for participation as well. The process of selecting student participants was purposefully determined so that students who met the additional criteria of not being enrolled in the teacher’s classroom were declined participation in the study.
Sources of data included personal documents, interviews, and observations. The use of personal documents through journal entries that allowed participants to share their personal stories and literacy assignments served as data for analyzing masculinity and literacy experiences of participants. Students were asked to share stories about their literacy experiences through both the oral and written word. The collection of these personal documents was determined as the study progressed; hence, I was able to determine if oral or written data were a more appropriate manner for the student to share their experiences. The stories followed a natural progression of conversations between the researcher and the participants. In order to maintain authenticity of the experiences and thoughts of the students, prompts were not administered. In addition, the interviews were used as a support for the observations; as there is evidence in research that when a female interviews male participants, the male participants begin to feel the need to assert their masculinity (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Due to the age (eight to nine years old) of the participants, it was important to honor their natural rights as human beings; therefore; interviews were conducted only as casual conversations to maintain the authenticity of students’ voices.

I conducted interviews of the participants using six of Rubin and Rubin’s (2011) seven steps of interviewing, which allowed flexibility of the interviewing model based upon the needs of the participant. The six steps are as follows: (a) create natural involvement; (b) encourage conversation competence; (c) show understanding; (d) get facts and basic descriptions; (e) tone down the emotional level of the interview; and (f) close the interview while maintaining contact. Specifically, the process of interviews for this study took place as an informal chat that allowed participants to discuss their experiences in the literacy classroom and their ideas of masculinity. Through the interviews I sought to gain
understanding of the experiences of the individual participants, as a member of their social space within the classroom, and how those experiences were socially constructed. Analysis of interviews led to the identification of themes within the single case study.

Observations are useful to the researcher when they “take place in the natural field setting” (Merriam, 1998, p. 94). Classroom observations were used to understand the meanings of masculinity and the participants’ experiences in the literacy classroom. The purpose of the classroom observation was to allow the student participants to be unobtrusively observed in their natural surroundings. I maintained a journal of both written and visual recordings from the field during the course of the research. These items were shared with the guardians of the participants and classroom teachers to ensure authentic interpretation of the data.

These multiple forms of data supported crystallization as a postmodernist approach for validity, offering a process of achieving a deep and broad interpretation of data (Noblit, 2011) through what Ellingson (2009) categorizes as befitting for social constructivist and critical perspectives of research. Crystallization entails multiple ways of analyzing data, using a variety of methods for generating a coherent text that recognizes the vulnerability and positionality of the researcher (p. 4). Through the reflexivity allowed by the use of crystallization, I was able to construct themes that captured and identified the voices of the participants in their lived experiences of six males in an urban third grade elementary classroom.

I used the process of open coding to identify central phenomena throughout the data (Merriam, 1998). I conducted a line-by-line analysis of the information and assigned labels to key phrases and concepts within the different documents, interviews, and observations.
These descriptive codes then allowed for the data to be deconstructed to further develop connections between multiple data sets (Miles & Huberman, 1994) through interpretation. At this point, I began to see patterns in the data for identifying themes. An in-depth description of the process of identifying themes is fully discussed in Chapter 3, the Methodology, of the study.

**Significance of the Study**

Given the increase in numbers of diverse students obtaining education in an urban school system, identifying their literacy needs to support the professional development of teachers who work with these students is essential to their success in school and life. The goal of the study was to contribute to existing research in the area of critical literacy and gender perceptions of urban third grade African American male students.

To date, research addressing the social construction of gender perceptions, more specifically the perceptions of masculinity, is often conducted to inform social constructivist and critical theory (Dionne, 2010). In addition, there are currently several studies that discuss the achievement gap of African American males in the area of literacy, but none address the initial experiences of African American males in the literacy classroom (Fisher, 2008; Godinho, 2003; Warrington, 2003; Younger, 1996). For this reason, the use of critical race theory was used to further inform the findings in Chapter 4. In understanding the lived experiences of their students, teachers will need to develop a robust, critical, culturally relevant pedagogy. The contributions of the work could also lead to further examination of other ethnicities’ experiences in the literacy classroom.

The social construct of masculinity of urban elementary African American males in the literacy classroom has not been thoroughly addressed by the academic community.
Misconceptions of masculinity in the critical literacy classroom has been found to have important implications for the academic success and engagement of young men (Dionne, 2010; Houtte, 2004). Dionne highlights the importance of developing critical literacy skills in young students in order to create equity within the classroom. This is accomplished when male students understand how texts are constructed and how authors influence the students’ understanding of the world. The relevance of the study implies that the social construction of gender perceptions is also influenced by texts available to students during literacy instruction.

Research has also addressed the need for understanding the experiences of young men in the literacy classroom in relationship to their overall achievement success on formal assessments. Gaer (2007) states that the boys who held less positive attitudes towards communication arts due to preconceived notions and attitudes toward school performed significantly lower than their female counterparts on standardized assessments. Therefore, by understanding the lived experiences and formation of masculinity in young African American males, future studies can build upon the knowledge to address the issue of the achievement gap in literacy among both boys and girls. This study explored masculinity as a means to address specific issues regarding gender perceptions of third grade urban African American males in relationship to their experiences in the literacy classroom. Chapter Two expands on the review of literature related to the study as briefly discussed in the theoretical framework. In Chapter Three, the methodology of the study is thoroughly outlined, including the sources of data collection, analysis procedures and the limitations of the study. Chapter Four outlines the findings of the study, and Chapter Five provides implications of the findings with recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of conducting this critical, narratological, social constructivist case study was to explore the literacy experiences of third-grade African American males and their relationships to masculinity in one urban public school within a Midwestern urban metropolitan area. I explored the following questions:

Central Question: What are third grade urban African American male students’ literacy experiences like regarding their meanings of masculinity in an elementary classroom?

• What traits of engagement, motivation, and metacognition are displayed by African American male students during literacy instruction?
• How do urban African American male students define masculinity?
• How does the use of critical cultural literacy practices engage these students in literacy instruction?

In my effort to explore the constructs within this study, I displayed firm understanding of what has been written about my selected areas of concentration. The review of literature for this study focused on five areas, including: (a) race in America, (b) the development of the perceived notion of masculinity in African American males, (c) historical structures and
practices of literacy in elementary education, (d) the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, and
(e) the incorporation of critical literacy in the elementary classroom. The three areas of
literacy were examined together in the review of literature, as they are closely related. A
critical literacy through critical race theory allows individuals to critique and express notions
of social justices that can occur within the world, while a culturally relevant pedagogy is
grounded in cultural understandings and knowledge of the world and those who inhabit it
(Ladson-Billings, 2000). My goal through the exploration of supporting literature is to
acquire initial understanding of elementary schools’ literacy classroom structure, the shared
notion of masculinity in urban males, and the classroom teaching practices that lend to
positive experiences in the literacy classroom. My purpose is to conceptualize the
implications of education as an agent for reform of literacy instructional practices through a
social justice agenda.

Race in America

Two hundred years ago, in 1765, nine assembled colonies first joined together to demand
freedom from arbitrary power. For the first century we struggled to hold together the first continental union of democracy in
the history of man. One hundred years ago, in 1865, following a terrible test of blood and
fire, the compact of union was finally sealed. For a second century we labored to establish a unity of purpose and interest among the many
groups, which make up the American community. That struggle has often brought pain and violence. It is not yet over.

President Lyndon B. Johnson, State of the Union Message, January 4, 1965

For more than two centuries the people of the United States of America have fought
for independence and equality. Some groups, particularly white males, of our nation have
suffered less in order to achieve these goals and dreams; being offered the right to own
property, the right to an education, and the ability to secure employment has not been denied
to the white man, as it is perpetually denied to others. The war on poverty was declared
during President Lyndon B. Johnson’s State of the Union Address in 1965. In his address, the President spoke of the nature of poverty and the need for the federal government to play a larger role in education.

Continued efforts to fight against poverty were found in The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which stated, “no person in the United States shall on the grounds of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under an program or activity receiving federal assistance” (Lerner, 2012, p. 264). Under jurisdiction of the Civil Rights Act, Title IV was created to empower the legitimate desegregation of public schools and Title VI was developed and implemented to allow for money to be withdrawn from schools that were still segregated (Lerner).

Continued struggle against poverty, brought forth Title I legislation through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Hunter & Bartee, 2003; Lerner, 2012). As part of the war on poverty, Title I was developed, offering remedial education programs in nearly every district to poor and disadvantaged children (Hunter & Bartee, 2003). The idea of offering early education to young children from diverse, lower income families originated in the notion that in order to fix or prevent continued growth of those suffering from poverty, that the family needed to be fixed, and this could be done through education. Those in support of ESEA and Title I held the view that “education could lift the underclass” (Lerner, 2012, p. 267). However, despite great efforts towards education reform, the feasibility of implementation and continued support was lacking amongst members of the government and academic community. To date there remains continued inequality and oppression of the African American family and their children in our public school systems.
Of particular interest to the subject matter of this study, is the continued inequality and oppression of African American boys in public schools. Through the examination of the African American family the social and academic experiences that are the foundation for the development of the African American males’ perceptions of masculinity can be fully embraced and understood as a central tenant of this study.

**Racial Socialization in the African American Family System**

The African American family is one that is strong and highly functional within the African American community, but given little credit among the dominant white perspectives of our nation that framed the meaning of family (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991). Despite the continued presence of acts of racism, inequitable standards of living, and sub-superior academic offerings, the African American family continues to display strength and flexibility. Sources of strength within the African American family consist of a strong religious focus, flexibility of family roles, and a strong desire for achievement and success (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991). While the typical outlook on the flexibility and overall success of members of the African American community is seen as a detriment to our nation, as outlined in the 1965 Department of Labor report, that stated if the nation did not join together to better the lives of the so called endangered African American community, they were at risk of ruining not only their ability to live and function in our community, but the overall American community as well (Department of Labor, 1965). This deficit view of family life within the African American community denigrates the various strategies that are employed to positively impact children’s identity within African American families (Hughes et al., 2006; Neblett et al., 2009). The majority of African American families find ways to protect their children through socialization regarding issues of race and education; thus,
providing awareness and coping mechanisms to their children in dealing with discrimination that exists in multiple areas of their everyday lives (Cooper & Smalls, 2010).

Raising African American children with grit is far more complex due to the level of inequalities, clear and hidden forms of racism and oppression, and the reasonable need to maintain true to one’s racial identity. The challenges that African American parents face in raising their children is significantly different from the experiences of White parents, as explained by Peters (2002):

the task [African American] share with all parents- providing for and raising children- not only are performed within the mundane extreme environmental stress of racism but include the responsibility of raising physically and emotionally healthy children who are [African American] in a society in which being [African American] has negative connotations. (p. 59)

Researchers refer to this unique act performed by African American parents as they prepare their children to live in a racialized society as racial socialization (Boykin, 1996; McAdoo, 2002; Peters, 2002). McAdoo (2002) refers to racial socialization as one of the single most significant responsibilities that African American parents possess in preparing their children to live as active members within our nation. McAdoo (2002) further claims that preparing children by teaching them how to recognize racism; the impact race will have on their interactions with others; and, in general, their roles in society are often tasks solely found among marginalized members of our society. Through the use of racial socialization, African American parents help their children to cope and rise above racial discrimination in a manner that protects their integrity and distances them from the dehumanizing assaults thrown at them for merely being black in a white society.

Embracing developmentally appropriate guidance and instruction for navigating different societal experiences is crucial to the racial socialization found in many African
American families (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Cooper & Smalls, 2010; Hughes et al., 2006). The racial socialization of African American children must equip them with the necessary skills to successfully navigate three societal experiences as described by Boykin and Toms (1985): the mainstream, minority, and African American culture. Each of these separate realities require young African American youth to develop and display a specific knowledge within each realm in order to be successful and maintain healthy standards of emotional and psychological well-being (1985). The mainstream realities, or white America standards, are often found in the experiences of African American children/adults in the public education system and the work field. The second reality for African American children is that of the minority [African American] culture, which requires knowledge of the historical struggles, lived by African Americans, and their social positioning both historically and socially within the American population. The notion of using minority as a descriptive title to the racial socialization of African American children is one that is of contested terrain. As the use of the term minority was developed to replace the use of the term black, it did not serve to rectify the inequalities and injustices represented in the use of either word. While the use of minority is still widely used throughout scholarly research, the term does not embrace the intentions of this study, which is to open up conversations about race (Race Equality Toolkit, 2014). The intent here is to acknowledge the contested terrain related to the use of the term minority, which does not serve to give voice to the African American community, rather, it only further oppresses them. The third reality involves the experience of being African American. As members of a socially oppressed and marginalized culture in America, African American children are taught resilience through racial socialization. Along the lines of racial socialization, African American children learn about their culture within their family’s own
cultural perspective. Boykin and Toms (1985) state that it is here, in this third reality, that African American children must develop their identity of self, gender perceptions, and societal identity. The concept of the development of masculinity in African American boys is further discussed in the section of this chapter, titled *The Development of Masculinity in African American Males*.

**Racial Identity**

The continued presence of a white America has never been more evident than in the aftermath of the victims of Hurricane Katrina and the election of a biracial president to the highest position in our nation. After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the President of our nation further legitimized the separation of class as found in the dismissal of the severity of need suffered by the marginalized members of our society. The continuance of race-based discrimination and inequality was seemingly a non-issue as the nation elected our first non-White president. However, careful examination of the conversations surrounding the election of the first biracial president were often not pertaining to the grounds which he campaigned, but rather recognition that for the first time it was not four white men campaigning for the highest seat in our government and whether or not our nation was ready to embrace an African American president. However, it should be noted that this conversation was often accompanied by the acknowledgement that the now President of the United States, Barak Obama, was indeed of mixed races, one of which being white, thus the fears of allowing an African American man were squelched as there was still a white presence in the Oval Office. The turn of 21st century has seen little more improvements for the African American members of our nation from that of the education, socialization and foundation of the African American family as seen in the 20th century (Department of Labor,
1965); a view that promoted deficit thinking. For this reason, I feel it is imperative to the foundation of the study to outline the key concepts of racial identity, central tenets for understanding the socialization of African American children, particularly males.

Racial identity is often viewed as component of the self-concept that is created through the influences of the parent’s experiences and their accounts of these experiences to their children (Spencer & Markstrom, 1990). The forming of identity in children begins through their exposure and endorsement of societal norms, which are legitimized by society (Allahar, 2014). Often times when self-identity differs from the accepted societal norms, a construction of multiple identities in one person begins to take root. Significant impact of the development of one’s social identity can be found in the theoretical framework termed *intersectionality* or *double consciousness*. From the:

> double life every Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American, as swept on by the current of the nineteenth while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth…Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals…(DuBois, 1903, p. 85)

The notion of a double consciousness represents the reality that many African American must face; or the idea of having one foot in the African American world of culture and ethnicity versus the dominant White society. It is within this double life that we must understand how each individual consciousness influences the other, recognizing the deeply woven relationship and the challenges they present in the African American community (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001).

According to Hughes et al. (2006), the process of racial socialization in forming racial identity embraces a high sense of esteem and pride in being African American. Children of the African American community are encouraged to learn about their culture and racial
“heritage, history customs and traditions” (p. 749). African American members of the community serve as a large family to each other, often feeling responsible for the education of all African American children regarding significant contributions that African Americans have made to society, ethnic foods, and the use of “culturally relevant books, artifacts, music, and stories” (p. 749). This method of racial socialization, helps African American children form a positive racial identity, and allows for them to be cognitively prepared to defend their culture, family, and beliefs against existing racial prejudice and discrimination that they may encounter as a result of their race.

Education practices are counterintuitive to the racial identity of young African American children. When teachers do not employ a critical, culturally relevant education, nor embrace the racial identity of students, including their home dialect, it is only furthering the racialization of our society. Current education practices and judgments against the ability of young African Americans ability to succeed academically and in the work field negates the teachings that are often embraced in the development of a proud racial identity in African American children (Hughes et al., 2006; Peters, 2002). African American family members often educate their children with the skills needed to excel in mainstream society, including the stressing of the importance of “hard work, virtue, self-acceptance, and equality” (Hughes et al., 2006, p. 757). However, these identities often conflict with the multiple identities that African American children, specifically boys, must embrace in order to be socially, academically, and emotionally accepted by their peer group. This notion of identity and perception of masculinity will be further examined in this chapter.

**Education Identity**
Many empirical studies have shown that African American students are at risk for decreased academic achievement, yet such studies do not reflect the emphasis placed on academic success within the families of African American students and the community (Boykin, 1986). Many empirical and socio-historical studies, have shown that regardless of whether or not the parent received an education beyond the secondary level that there is still high expectations for the children in the family to achieve academic success (Boykin, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Peters, 2002). Through the use of educational socialization in African American families, an emphasis on academic success is used as yet another protective measure against the racialized society that young African American children must experience. Chapman (2006) found that the emphasis of the need for academic success is often influenced by outside factors, such as a parent’s educational experience, composition of the nuclear family, economic constraints, and social experiences outside of the home. Similarly, Clark (1983) found that there was a high level of academic success in students whose parents showed a positive emphasis on the need for an education.

Additional studies conducted by Forham and Ogbu (1986), offer empirical evidence concerning the adverse influence that schools have on racial identity development of African American students. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that the culture of schools causes the majority of African American students to develop adverse feelings towards their academic success, thus their educational identity begins to embrace a notion that educational engagement does not always lend to academic success. According to Clark (1983):

> Increased knowledge of the home functioning patterns in different ethnic communities will enhance the prospect of developing appropriate school policies and procedures for increasing the knowledge levels of all categories of school children, while preserving the integrity of the school and the home in each neighborhood. (p. 213)
Hence, the theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy are explored in order to understand the importance of both in creating positive learning experiences for African American boys in the literacy classroom.

Boykin (1986) explains that African American parents speak highly of the need for an education in order to function in mainstream American and further emphasize the need and ability to do so while remaining true to the African American culture and community. This double consciousness as described by W.E. DuBois (1903) calls for the African American student to understand the teachings of the home and the teachings of the school, and to navigate the two as separate and combined entities. The cognitive development expectations of our education system, as well as the belief that young African American children are not apt to be academically strong places these children in an identity crisis. It is my belief that this crisis lends to the externalized disengagement of young African American students, specifically boys, in their schoolwork, as it is considerably more significant to remain true to the home teachings of being a strong African American than to conform to the norms of the white community.

**Conclusion**

Racial socialization is the process, which African American families employ to build the skills their children will indefinitely need in order to navigate their experiences as members of both the African American community and the larger society as a whole. Racial socialization and the development of racial identity begins at an early age for African American children and continues through the transition into adolescence and young adulthood. While raising children, African American or not, takes considerable and conscious efforts to equip children with skills needed to be active members of the
community, the role of African American parents to protect their children from the constraints of simply being born African American presents them with layers of complexity of identity development that must be negotiated. Parents want to prevent their children from being harmed or unaware of the potential dangers of racism on their identity. Coard and Sellers (2005) acknowledge the complexity and nuanced process of racial socialization, and the success of such education in African American families depends upon the delivery of the message and whether or not it is developmentally appropriate for the child.

Despite the use of racial socialization as a tool to adequately prepare African American students for a racialized society, their ability to navigate society is often characterized as disengaged and uninvolved in the educational process; and therefore, this area must be further examined. I believe that only through education individuals are able to successfully overcome societal expectations based on racial stereotypes. By the time an African American child reaches adolescence, they begin the process of integrating their own experiences, both positive and negative. At this point in their development, messages about how others view them begins to influence their racial identity. As cognitive reasoning begins to develop among African American adolescents, racial identity and self-identity begins to be more clearly defined. Spencer and Markstrom (1990) articulated that during the childhood of African American youth, parents play a significant role in initiating and maintaining conversations about race and identity with their children, and that these messages may begin to be altered as the children experience more interactions with people other than parents.

While research provides evidence that the African American community is indeed providing their children with skills to cope and succeed with a racialized society, this calls into question how the mainstream community addresses racism in order to embrace culturally
responsive approaches in all areas of life. The history of being an African American male in our nation is plagued with inequalities and brutality. Overcoming racial judgments as well as what it means to be African American and male requires an awareness of how racial stereotypes contribute to identity development. The examination of the perspectives of elementary age children about racial socialization and racial identity is critical to further understand their academic experiences, particularly in the literacy classrooms of African American boys and girls. Therefore, examining the evolution of racial identity in elementary aged African American males versus adolescent age African American males is important in understanding how children and youth encounter and navigate diversity in their lived and academic experiences. The lack of scholarly work in the area of racial identity in elementary aged children could lend to a misconstrued perception of positive attitudes towards school (Hughes et al., 2006; Spencer & Markstrom, 1990). The role racial identity plays in elementary youth has not been fully developed. The perceptions of what it means to be masculine to African American boys, which contributes to identity, will be addressed in the following section.

**The Development of Masculinity in African American Males**

Conceptualizing an understanding of the development of elementary African American males’ definitions of masculinity within their personal and academic spaces is necessary in order to understand the potential implications that this study has on the pedagogical practices that occur within American elementary public schools. Deeper understanding of masculinity perceptions in urban youth can only come from evaluating the development of masculinity in urban males through the perspective of young urban males within the urban community. Applying this lens allows further understanding of how the
urban space decisively impacts literacy outcomes for young urban males. Educators must embrace the cultural background and space in which our students live in order to better appreciate who they are as individual learners. I first discuss the physical make-up of masculinity followed by physiological aspects of masculinity.

As the focus of the study is driven by the literacy experiences of African American males, a broad scope of understanding pertaining to the discussion of sex and gender related to the development of masculinity is needed. Sex is a biological connotation; male and female. Sex is determined by science through the identification of certain physical conditions: chromosomes, external and internal genitalia, and hormones (Stoller, 1994). Upon analysis of the physical traits of a given individual, one is determined to be either male or female. In this sense, I have now defined sex as the physical and biological traits one is born with that contributes to the likeness of a male or female. To distinguish between sex and gender, I discuss the definitions and contributing factors, which define gender as distinct from sex.

Gender is a psychological and culturally developed trait (Archer, 2003; Stoller, 1994). With corresponding terms attached to each sex, gender is described as masculine for the male sex and feminine for the female sex. The concept of gender holds several sub-concepts that are central to understanding the full development of masculinity within the male sex, including: gender identity, or the awareness of belonging to one sex and not another, and gender roles, the behavior society expects of one sex versus the other (Stoller, 1994). These terms, gender identity and gender roles, are often used synonymously and interchangeably for the sex of an individual. However, for the purpose of the study, these sub-concepts belong to the original frame of the defined terms of gender as socially and psychologically
developed notions within a single sex individual and shall maintain autonomy in their
definitions (Archer, 2003; Nichols, 2006). Treating gender identity as a relatively stable and
fixed set of stereotypical views, attitudes, behaviors, and practices, allows masculinity to be
understood quantitatively. However, a qualitative analysis of gender identity allowed for the
understanding of perceived notions of masculinity within the social context of third grade
African American males in an urban community. In Chapter 3, the process for understanding
the perceptions of masculinity for these students is discussed.

Within the definition of gender, masculinity prevails as a quality that is directly
associated with male sex. If gender is the psychological relationship to one’s sex, then
masculinity is considered to be one’s cultural relationship to one’s gender. “Men are not
born with masculinity as part of their genetic make-up… rather it is something into which
they are acculturated and which is composed of social codes of behavior which they learn to
reproduce in culturally appropriate ways” (Beynon, 2002. p. 7). The masculine bravado can
be dated back to the beginning of our nation’s history (Nichols, 2006). The shame of desiring
to be a strong African American male was felt as they were forced to stand by and watch
their women, children and other family members being mistreated and abused by white men
and women. As African American men observed the masculinity of white men, African
American males were not able to immolate the observed masculinity causing distress in their
desire to be masculine.

The desire to be masculine in the African American culture is one that has been
compounded by the history of slavery, public hanging, and castration of African American
men, burning of African American men, marginalization, and the civil rights movement.
Radical movements of “Black” power during the 1960s have also led to the aggressive
assertion of masculinity in the African American urban male population (Chesebro & Fuse, 2001; Nichols, 2006). Many researchers have sought to conceptualize the significant influence of economic, interpersonal, and socio-historical backgrounds on how African American men learn to develop their masculine identities (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boles, 2012). The overly pervasive themes of both physical and emotional aggression as outlined above have led to a strong stereotype of masculinity within the African American culture. The many forms of oppression and questioning of masculinity have shaped the meaning of masculinity for African American males, resulting in defining masculinity in terms of a defense against the long history of oppression in the American culture (Archer, 2003; Chesebro & Fuse, 2001; Nichols, 2006). The oppression continues, as young African American males are educated with texts written under the influence of the dominant, white culture. In these texts, African Americans are displayed as weak, ignorant, and incapable of success.

Roberts-Douglass and Curtis-Boles (2012) have sought to address the challenges of young African American men in meeting their traditional gender role expectations versus the expectations of society. Archer (2003) states, “[M]anliness is a contested territory…an ideological battlefield, the site of struggles between different groups of men (socially and historically), over the symbols and meanings of being a man” (p. 30). With such evidence of a struggle of masculinity from a cultural and societal view, it is imperative to consider the internal struggle of developing perceptions of masculinity as well. However, there is little consensus as to what connection can be formed between the multiple identities of race, class, and ethnicity. Due to the lack of consensus about how the categories intersect and react to
each other, there is need for further research. In addition, the concept of masculinity in urban African American males at a primary level of education is needed, as none currently exists.

**Social Construction of Masculinity**

On a searingly hot day in July 2000, I escaped into the air-conditioned haven of the Barnes and Noble bookshop in Kansas City. Near the display stand promoting Harry Potter’s spectacular arrival in the USA was another, equally strident stand proclaiming “the crisis of our boys and young men.” Arranged on the stand were about a dozen or so newly published volumes. Each proclaimed, in one way or another, that America’s boys and young men were in deep trouble thanks to poor parenting, fathering, the corrupting media, the triviality of pop culture, sexual abuse, teen suicide, racial prejudice, bullying and violence, etc., etc. Half an hour spent dipping into the books at the stand convinced me that the richest and most powerful country in the history of the world was in an advanced state of trauma when it came to its young males. (Beynon, 2002, p. 75)

In a 1988 study, Jewell Taylor Gibbs described young African American males in modern day American society as an endangered species (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyles, 2012). An endangered species is broadly defined as “anyone or anything whose continued existence is threatened” (“Endangered Species,” 2013, p. 1). The concept of young African American males as metaphorically being an endangered species is vital to understanding their “at-risk” status within the American public school system and society; undereducated, higher risk of homicide; and highest representation of culture and sex within the criminal justice system (Archer, 2003; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyles, 2012). The change in social structure as women have entered the work force has caused additional confusion among men as they further attempt to understand their role in society (Archer, 2003; Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1985).

Few studies acknowledge the form of masculinity in urban African American males as a complex structure that deviates from the accepted norms of American social and educational values as their masculinity is constructed of cultural and social values specific to
the African American community (Kimmel, Hearn & Connell, 2005; Nichols, 2006; Roberts-Douglass and Curtis-Boyles, 2012). The larger societal depictions of African American males as endangered species are likely to negatively impact the perceived ability and subsequent behavior of African American males; therefore, it should not be surprising that African American males often experience difficulty in social settings, specifically a social setting such as school (Jackson & Moore, 2006). Acknowledging the influence of the African American culture as a cultural perspective outside of the broader American culture will allow for a broadened interpretation of the multiple facets of an urban African American male’s perception of masculinity.

In a qualitative study, Roberts-Douglass and Curtis-Boyles (2012) addressed the formation of masculine identity in a group of African American men. Using a mixed methods design, 15 African American men within the age range of 18-22 years old, were asked to recall and reflect upon their years as an adolescent and the development of their masculine identity during those years. Participants participated in a 2 to 2 ½-hour one-on-one interview. By having the majority of the participants within the same age range and area of residency, the researchers took great care to ensure that the participants would share similar social background upbringings which allowed greater insight on the influence of the society and culture one occupies during the development of masculinity perceptions.

Using the Multicultural Masculinity Scale (MMIS), which is scored on a five-point Likert scale range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher levels of masculinity being associated with the higher score of 5, the researchers found nine themes of masculinity associated with African American males (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012). Of the nine prevalent themes, the majority of the participants displayed extensive
perceptions of masculinity, which included: toughness, athletic ability, sexuality, wealth, flamboyance, and aggression accompanied by violence. Within the nine prevalent themes, there were seven sub-themes: (a) tough guys, (b) gangsters/thugs, (c) players, (d) flashy, (e) athletes, (f) providers, and (g) role models. The themes of perceived masculinity were further supported in the interview sessions held with each participant.

While the majority of the participants shared different aspects of their perceptions of masculinity, more than half of the participants expressed a sense of pressure to conform to certain social expectations of masculinity.

I’d have to say I saw more traditional images of masculinity such as being tough, not letting anyone roll over you, having multiple women, having money, power, and fame. Also, not treating people with respect because you’re bigger than them was an image I saw. (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012, p. 6)

The perceptions shared by the participant Lewis were echoed throughout the other participants’ interviews, with a few additional reflections on the lack of emphasis that education received. Many participants expressed a need to not be singled out from their peer group because of their willingness to do well in school. In addition to the social pressures to conform to expectations of masculinity, participants stated “physical strength and appearance and outward display of emotions [were] acceptable demonstrations of masculinity among the men in their families” (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012, p. 8). The qualitative research conducted by Roberts-Douglass and Curtis-Boyle found that African American males are able to form their own definition of masculinity based upon the influences of their culture and society.

Instead of identifying with the image of the white men of society, families of African American males were proven to be the largest contributor to the development of African American males’ perception of masculinity. As the foundation of the development of
masculinity, men within the family served as the dominant role model in young African American males’ lives (Roberts- Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012). Traditional gender development is modeled by fathers or grandfathers during the growth and development of a young man. Within traditional families, the male is the provider and role model to whom young boys and men look for answers about how to behave as a “man.” However, recent statistics have shown that 40% of African American men comprise the prison population, and this often results in the absence of the male role model in a family (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle). With the absence of the largest contributor of masculine traits, young African American males are forced to look elsewhere for guidance. The development of masculinity in young African American males depends upon the foundation of masculinity as is displayed by a father figure. The absence of a male role model is detrimental to their understanding of what it means to be a provider. Unable to positively associate the act of the matriarch of the family as the provider and role model, young African American men link the act or nature of the absent father figure to their definition of masculinity (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle).

For the purpose of this study, masculinity was defined as specific attributes assigned to or viewed within the male sex. In addition, the social class status of an individual was defined as two separate entities, with social representing the hierarchy of an organization or society and the inequalities of power associated within that framework, and class status referring to social distribution of prestige within society (Kimmel et al., 2005). In this particular study, I elected to focus on one area of social class status, otherwise referred to as socio-economic status (SES). The units of analysis within the SES component of the study were those families of urban male elementary students whose income places them in the
bottom tier of the wage hierarchy. Within this placement of inequitable power, I analyzed the characteristics of masculinity as found at the poverty level in an urban setting.

The influence of father figures on the development of masculinity perceptions was tested in a quantitative study with 29 boys, with an average age of six years and four months, who were enrolled in a summer program in Durham, North Carolina. All of the children enrolled in the study were from families whose income fell within poverty level, with 15 of the boys being African American. Employing a sex-role orientation assessment, the young boys were questioned on their choices of toys, games, and occupational preferences in order to determine if at a young age the boys were able to decipher what was deemed as masculine or feminine (Biller, 1968). Additional data points were found in interviewing classroom teachers of the participants. Teachers were asked to rate each child on their level of masculinity using a 15-item rating scale. Items on the rating scale consisted of topics pertaining to: “likes sports and active games,” “leads other children,” and “stands up for his own rights” in conjunction with highly masculine behaviors, and topics related to unmasculine behaviors included: “prefers table games,” “prefers to stay by himself,” and “is timid around others” (Biller, 1968, p. 1004). Data was triangulated through observation of classroom behaviors. The boys were rated on a five-point scale according to how frequently or infrequently behaviors associated with masculinity were displayed during the course of the day.

The boys with fathers in the home tended to display higher levels of masculinity on the sexual orientation scale. In addition, a two-way analysis was conducted to determine the significance of a male figure’s presence to young African American boys compared to their significance to White boys. The mean score of the differences of masculine traits, per the
sexual orientation scale, showed significant difference between the African American boys and White boys whose fathers were absent. The researchers concluded that the presence of an adult father figure significantly influences the development of masculine behaviors and perceptions in young males, specifically in young African American males, as the main culture offers young white males a sample view of masculinity within the context of their culture. However, masculinity is not typically seen as the norm within the mainstream society; thus the primary influence on the development of their perception of masculinity is the father figure in their life (Biller, 1968; Carrigan et al., 1985). If this source of developmental influence is absent, young African American boys are left to define masculinity through alternative means.

Within the poverty level of society there are key elements that contribute to the development of perceptions of masculinity; one of these is a sense of belonging to a family (Kimmel et al, 2005). The importance of a male role model in a young African American boy’s life has already been thoroughly discussed in the analysis of masculinity of young boys with absent father figures. The absence of a father has a detrimental effect on the development of gender perceptions in African American boys (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012). The second element of social class’ influence on the development of masculinity includes the need for an occupation. “It can be argued, in fact, that the idea of the provider is a major element in the construction of masculine identity; it is a moral as well as an economic category” (Kimmel et al., 2005, p. 169). While some titles, such as foreman or policeman, offer gender-specific titles, other jobs hold gender specific duties: dishwasher, central air repairman, or a cook of a restaurant. While young children have little influence on the occupational choice of a father figure in an urban family, the male role model’s
continuous desire for advancement and to hold an occupation in order to provide and acquire property establishes a firm sense of priority in the understanding of what it means to be a man or masculine (Kimmel et al., 2005; Morojele, 2011). The beginning communication of what it meant to be masculine can be seen in documents as early as the Constitution of the United States, where it is found that all men are created equal, but is later found to be state that a man is one who owns property. Again, the notion of what it meant to be masculine as an African American male was compounded early on in our nation, as African American men were not allowed to own property until nearly a century after the Constitution was ratified.

The final element of masculinity as described by Kimmel, Hearn and Connell (2005) is the desire to be the breadwinner, or the provider of support for one’s family. This concept of masculinity is supported in an interview with a local rapper during an interview for a qualitative thesis project (Nichols, 2006). In the interview, rapper Dumi stated that masculinity for a real man is the ability to be you and not succumb to the pressure of society to “front” or boast about what one is able to provide for their family. However, when confronted with the notion of masculinity within the hip-hop culture, Dumi feels the pressure to conform to a different identity of masculinity within the African American culture. This identity of masculinity as displayed in videos, television shows, and other forms of media is far too strong to ignore; thus many young men conform to the pressure placed upon them to be masculine as society pictures it (Nichols, 2006).

The absence of positive and/or present role models often leads young African American males to seek alternative, meaningful relationships with individuals from their similar racial background. Deductive reasoning would lead to the assumption that the
friendships found within the African American community in an urban setting are with persons whose home experiences are similar to that of the one seeking the friendship. These friendships serve as “a basis for social comparison and encourage testing and grading of each other on the variables of respect, power, and dominance” (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012, p. 9). Behaviors of athleticism, physical appearance, and lack of engagement in school appear to be prevalent in the acceptance of African American males within their adolescent peer groups. Failure to uphold these behaviors to the expectations of the peer group often results in exclusion, extreme bullying, mocking or “outing” of one’s alleged homosexuality (Archer, 2003; Beynon, 2002; Davies, 2003; Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012). The implications of adhering to peer expectations of masculinity in the literacy classroom are discussed in Chapter 4.

In an ethnographic study conducted by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), the fear of humiliation, questioning of heterosexual preferences, or rejection from the peer group led to African American males to conform to their peer group’s perception of masculinity. Often this perception of masculinity held negative outcomes in the academic field. Success in academics is not seen as masculine, as described in an interview with a participant. Marcus stated,

During adolescence, you had to be able to play sports in order to be considered cool in high school…I realized a lot of the guys I came across who played sports thought they were more masculine because they were athletes. They didn’t really focus on school or education, just sports. (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012, p. 6)

Many young men do not recognize the link between success and education; rather they view success in terms of becoming a star athlete or hip-hop artist.

The portrayal of masculinity as displayed by athletes, actors, and music artists in the media is often boastful, boisterous, and aggressive. African American media and music
provide an opportunity for artists to display their emotions, often with great propensity for crime and violence, and to display their wealth (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012). Evidence of violence, sexual aggression, materialism, and amoral behavior can be heard in lyrics of rap/hip-hop songs and televisions shows targeted towards the African American population (Nichols, 2006; Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle). Nichols references Dr. Jared Ball’s statement that hip-hop serves as a mass media for millions of people, and within this mass media the image of Masculinity is often found. For instance, in a typical music video for rapper DMX, Project Pat, or Ace Hood, the association of masculinity and the African American male is found in the yelling, threatening gestures and aggressive nature of lyrics and actions. The aggressive nature of an African American male as seen in the music videos and other forms of societal influence contributes to the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity allows the construction of masculinity through the influence of historical and idealized constraints of masculinity as evidenced in society. Therefore social media forums lead to an understanding of what it takes to be a man in the African American culture (Archer, 2003; Beynon, 2002; Brittan, 1989; Carrigan et al., 1985; Nichols).

Within the context of hegemonic masculinity, the constant belittling of another man’s masculinity is evident upon analysis of rap lyrics. In the lyrics of 50 Cent’s song “Back Down,” 50 Cent questions a fellow rapper’s masculinity and ability to maintain his heterosexual nature if ever imprisoned:

Any living thing that cannot coexist with the kid must cease existing. Little nigga now listen/ Your mammy your pappy, that bitch you chasing/ your little dirty ass kids, I’ll fuckin’ erase ‘em/ The success was not enough, you want to be hard/ knowing you go knocked, you’d get fucked in the yard (adlib “bend over”). You’s a pop tart, sweet heart you’re soft in the middle/ I’ll eat you for breakfast.
The effect of such lyrics on the development of perceptions of masculinity in youth is two-fold. First, the acceptance of homosexuality in the hip-hop culture is non-existent in the lyrics. With the heavy influence of hip-hop on the ideology of masculinity in African American youth, it is to be expected that homosexuality is severely looked down upon, and called out as a negative characteristic in an individual. Secondly, the use of such harsh words to belittle a peer for their physical stature and emotional state of appearing to be “soft” contributes to the notion of physical and emotional characteristics of masculinity (Archer, 2003, p. 55). Often adolescent African American males model themselves on what is seen and heard in these essential pieces of community socialization, actively separating themselves from anyone or thing that could cause potential questioning of their masculinity. The significance of media influences, such as television and music, were further explored in the analysis of data for the case study of third grade elementary African American males.

**Hip-Hop Nation and Masculinity**

Within the context of the African American hip-hop culture, the ability to provide oneself and one’s family with items of value are deemed important, and if you are unable to do so, it is considered to be un-masculine (Archer, 2003; Nichols, 2006). Evidence of this belief can be heard in lyrics of rappers such as T.I. and 50 Cent who boast of being able to provide themselves and loved ones with mink coats, gold chains, and expensive cars (Nichols).

The purpose of examining the influence of hip-hop’s influence on the development of masculinity in urban males is not to place a judgment on the African American culture, or to see only the negative in such a rich culture; rather, it is to focus on the areas in which young African American youth may turn for strength and reality of their lives in America. The
portrayal of African American men as weak or unable is strong throughout the American society: pictures of slavery, protest, and police brutality plague the texts that we use in the typical classrooms (Chesebro & Fuse, 2001). In most classrooms, youth are unlikely to be exposed to multiple texts where African men are viewed as resilient and able to surpass the negative expectations and racial stereotypes stemming from the larger society. Therefore, it makes sense for the youth of the African American culture to turn to the voices of hip-hop as the reality of what it means to be an African American male. The physiological energy that is felt through the display of masculinity in being a superior athlete or an aggressive, “top of the game” hip-hop artist is alluring to susceptible African American youth as they begin to form their concept of masculinity. In examining the prevalent nature of aggression and empowerment of self through strong masculine characteristics, I hoped to establish a foundation for examination of elements of literacy in young African American males’ lives that may influence their experiences as students.

**Education and Masculinity**

The intrinsic value of masculinity consists of extrinsic motivators: family, wages, and appearance of being able to provide for oneself and one’s family. The extrinsic factors of masculinity provide an intrinsic value to the development of perceptions of masculinity. The combination of extrinsic and intrinsic factors of masculinity lead to a point of contest within the African American male body, as the battle between public and personal expectations of masculinity do not often agree (Alexander, 2006; Archer, 2003). “[The African American male] is a site of public and private contestation, competing investments in Black masculinity that are historical and localized affecting notions of intellect and character” (Alexander, 2006, p. 74). In the academic setting, there is a direct conflict of the social and class
expectations of masculinity as described by Bryant Keith Alexander in Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity (2006). In the classroom, the subject lived the “good” African American boy image, and outside of the classroom, lived the “bad” African American boy (Alexander, 2006, p. 74). Recalling one situation in the classroom experience, the young African American boy had a young white teacher who valued his character in comparison to the rest of his race stating, “You are such a very nice Black man, a credit to your race” (Alexander, 2006, p. 74). Such statements further divide the personalities in the African American male between the characteristics of an African American male in the classroom versus those in the outside world. I believe that the mental ability to “switch-personalities” from one space to another is not developed at a young age; thus we see a great deal of conflict in young men as they act out their masculinity beliefs in the classroom.

In a qualitative study conducted by Roberts-Douglass and Curtis Boyle (2012), participants did not find education or their teachers to be of significant importance in the development of their perceptions of masculinity. Success in school is the one form of masculinity that is often not accepted among African American males (Kirkland, 2013; Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012). The ideas of being smart and cool are not displayed as mutually exclusive within the family or social influences. A young African American student, Derrick, unknowingly dropped his journal in the hallway of his school. Only after Derrick’s classroom literacy teacher picked up the personal document and read through it that she understood Derrick to be a literate individual, which was not reflected in his interactions with his peers or completion of work in her classroom. “Like so many Black [sic] men around them, Derrick and his friends saw themselves through the distorted lens and unspoken gestures of a troubled society” (Kirkland, 2013, p. 21). The silence of Derrick’s
voice in the literacy classroom aligns not with shame, but with an acceptance that he and his friends were not supposed to be literate according to the beliefs of their surrounding society.

In the development of masculinity in an urban classroom, the social obligations of being perceived as a strong African American male outweigh the desire to show success in order to meet the teacher’s approval. Key feminist ideologies pertaining to the plight of the masculinity crisis and the quality of education in young African American males was brought to the forefront in Epstein’s (1998) book *Failing boys?: Issues in Gender and Achievement* which discusses the understandings of masculinity in relationship to academic performance. In this study, boys were found to be biologically predisposed to not complete schoolwork; academics is simply not natural to their being. The argument that academics is not a biologically, natural state of success for young men alludes to the need for acknowledgement that academics goes against the characteristics that determine masculinity for males in general. In addition to the biology of the nature of motivation in school, there is the discourse of “slackness” within the African American perception of masculinity (Archer, 2003). Often the body language of young black males is viewed as aggressive by teachers, and they are likely to be misunderstood and punished for seemingly intimidating dispositions that lead to further distaste for academics or motivation for doing well in school (Earl, 2006; Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012). For many participants in a study, school was not seen as necessary in order to “take care of business” (Archer, 2003; Earl, 2006). Archer (2003) states that slackness is “embedded within the heterosexuality” culture of young African American males and causes individuals to walk a thin line between their reputation as being a strong male and gaining respect from their peers and teachers (p. 59). Therefore,
the appearance of participation and engagement in oral rhetoric during class can be viewed as an un-masculine trait.

Several characteristics of education are deemed as overly feminine, which is a direct contrast to masculinity and calls for aggression and nothing that would be deemed as homosexual (Archer, 2003; Mosse, 1999). An African American male, who is heterosexual in every aspect of their external characteristics of masculinity and preference for women, can be rejected as a homosexual for showing any form of a sensitive awareness of feminine issues (Lindegger & Maxwell, 2008). The actions or behaviors of “not paying attention and/or talking to friends during class, ‘playing up’ and talking back to teachers” (Archer, 2003, p. 68) were found to be typical behaviors among African American males in a qualitative study conducted in high school located within the urban core of Los Angeles. In fact, a positive association was made with being dubbed as ‘stupid,’ so long as there was little to do with interacting with others in the classroom during subjects that would be too feminine (Archer, 2003). As a result of a fear of rejection due to not appearing masculinity, African American males have a tendency to renounce an interest in education. However, little research is available on the specific conflict of masculinity with the emotional and feminine nature of current literacy instructional practices.

Using a social constructivist paradigm, the construction of gender identities of 23 boys and 27 girls from the seventh grade were analyzed through observation and informal discussions to understand the implications of gender perceptions on inequalities in school (Morojele, 2011). Gender inequalities in school were found to be closely linked to the pressure young African boys felt to conform to masculinity. The narrow road which African American boys are expected to walk in terms of masculinity has adverse consequences for
young men in school. Boys who failed to conform to these expectations face severe physical and emotional repercussions. Morojele (2011) concluded that in order to affirm young African males’ perceptions of masculinity and provide an education of equitable status to their female counterparts, school environments must be created that encourage and support the expression of multiple forms of masculinity. In addition, Morojele states, “curriculum reforms and revision of textbooks, and school practices which associate boys with hegemonic masculinity” (Morojele, 2011, p. 690) must be made in order to make males to feel comfortable in displaying alternative forms of masculinity that are not rooted in strong, aggressive behaviors.

The important piece of information to place within the context of this study is the social construction of giving priority to being a social member, and a lack of priority for education to advance in society. In the song “Niggaz 4 Life” Dr. Dre provides foundation to the development of masculinity sans education:

Why do I call myself a nigga you ask me/ Because my mouth is so motherfucking nasty/ Bitch this, Bitch that, nigga this, nigga that/ In the meanwhile, my pockets are getting fat/ Getting paid to say this shit here/ Making more in a week than a doctor makes in a year. (NWA, 1991, n.p).

Here Dr. Dre renounces the usefulness of education as means of masculinity and ability to be the sole provider or breadwinner for family by showing young African American youth that the battle of freedom is not to be won in the classroom through academic achievements, but success is gained in being aggressive and, in a sense, foul (Nichols, 2006). Adding insult to the usefulness of education, Dr. Dre deems himself a doctor without the extensive education background. While acknowledging the title as that of distinction, he is alluding to lack of importance of the education it takes to earn a title; stating that even without the education he can call himself a doctor and in fact make more money than a person who has the education
and title of a doctor. Although this concept is cognitively developed in inferences of meaning and interpretation, educators should not assume that the implied meaning is not understood by the youth listening to the lyrics (Nichols, 2006).

**Resiliency in African American Males**

Even though resiliency among races has increased over the years, there is still a lack of scholarly support of the resiliency of African American males (Brown, 2008). The deficit model of examining the lived and social experiences of African American males is often used to explain certain phenomena. There is reason to believe that the deficit model of research pertaining to African American males is no longer meaningful, as a high level of resilience has been established in young African American men and their ability to overcome circumstances to move on to experiences a higher quality of life (Miller & McIntosh, 1999).

The term urban, derived from urbane, is often used in reference to areas comprised of large populations of marginalized cultures, specifically those with large African American populations (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Urban areas and the schools that serve these areas often lack the status and reputations bestowed upon their suburban counterparts perpetuating the continued segregation of the African American race and culture from the greater society. Urban students face a multitude of problems that mirror their daily lives and place them at risk for failure in comparison to the achievement levels of white students. The reality of what urban education entails is dismal. However, within the scope of urban education, there are a significant number of African American students who find the will to succeed in spite societal expectations. While the aforementioned areas of masculinity outline many influences that young African American males experience in their development of
what it means to masculine, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the characteristics of resilience in the development of the definition of masculinity.

For the purpose of this research study, resilience was defined as the positive adaptation to negative ecological influences. Research on resilience is limited; however the research on resilience in African American members of our society has focused on factors that enable individuals to positively adapt within a challenging or threatening environment (Clark, 1983; Garmezy, 1991; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Clark (1983) chose to focus on the factors that contributed to the academic resilience of urban African American students and identified several common familial and/or social characteristics among high-achieving African American students through a support system that: sustained positive achievement orientation for the student; maintained a nurturing, supportive, respectful, and open communication between the student, the family unit, and the school system; and upheld vigorous involvement in the students’ lives. In addition, many African Americans have individuals outside of the nuclear family that serve as mentors or members of their larger support system. These members of the larger family may provide cultural context of the history of the African American culture and the “value of academic achievement, racial identity development, cognitive outcomes, and socioemotional outcomes, which may promote resiliency in African Americans” (Brown, 2008, p. 43). Having these additional sources of support in the community may be a determining factor that enables certain individuals within the urban academic community to achieve success in spite of their surrounding environment.

The theory of resilience in young African American male students has suggested an “inspite of” response (Rubin, 1996). While it was not the intention of this study to look at
the lived experiences of African American male students as a deficit to their academic success, and multiple safeguards have been put into place to ensure this is not the case, I found it important to acknowledge “the quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency problems they are at greater risk of experiencing” (Linquanti, 1992, p.2). This ‘in spite of’ quality may be inherent in some individuals or may be found through motivation and self-efficacy. However, researchers have found the children who display attributes of resiliency are often generally intelligent, highly motivated, and independent individuals (Bernard, 1995). McMillan and Reed (1994) describe resilient students as individuals who had self-discipline and healthy internal attributes, and took personal responsibility for their academic successes and failures. In addition, resilient students had a strong sense of self-efficacy, as well as a belief that doing well in school was directly related to their ability to do well in life (McMillan & Reed, 1994). The concepts of motivation and self-efficacy related to resiliency will be further discussed in The Structures and Practices of Effective Literacy in the Elementary Classroom found in the later part of this chapter.

Conclusion

Within the wealth of information on masculinity, few studies have been conducted to support the understanding of masculinity within urban youth. Furthermore, Archer (2003) notes that with the wealth of information on the underperformance of males in education, little to no information is available that draws a relationship between the perception of masculinity in urban males to their success in the academic setting. Recent studies have shown a direct focus on white males, as they assume the large population of the current
public education sector, but it is not their voices that need to be heard the loudest, as they are not seen as an endangered species with failing standards of academic success. For these reasons, current research on the development of masculinity in young African American males is needed in order to further understand the relationship of masculinity to academics in the urban setting.

I close the review of perceptions of masculinity with a quote from Chimamanda Adichie (as cited in Kirkland, 2013):

> Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. (p. 1)

In order to understand the stories of young African American male students, educators must seek to mend the broken and find texts that positively reflect the masculinity found in the African American culture. The next section will discuss three closely related topics: literacy, critical literacy, and culturally relevant pedagogy. Each topic serves as a separate entity that relies on the others for an understanding of the larger issue of critical literacy for empowers students to question the economic, social, cultural, and political intent of the world in which they live.

**The Structures and Practices of Effective Literacy in the Elementary Classroom**

Our nation is at risk…the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our future as a Nation and a people….If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.

—*A Nation at Risk* (Gardner, 1983)

To understand the context of the American literacy classroom, one must conceptualize the basic historical framework of the United States’ education system and the
evolution of literacy instruction within this context. Understanding the current classroom practices of literacy instruction, furthered the understanding of the potential implications that this study would have on the pedagogical practices that occur in urban elementary public schools. The term literacy is often seen as synonymous with reading. However, to understand the full scope of the study, I expanded the definition of literacy to include reading, writing, and other modes of communication. I believe that literacy is far too complex to limit to phonetic or phonemic awareness. In addition to the term literacy, I defined effective literacy not as a quantitative term, but as a term that includes self-efficacious and motivated behaviors of students in a literacy classroom.

Literacy instruction can be dated back to the proposal of phonics in 1527 (Groff, 1987). Less than a century later, literacy instruction was faced with its first disagreement as the whole word, or “look and say” method was introduced in 1614 (Groff, 1987). With few changes to literacy practices, it was not until the 1980s that expectations of instruction were altered. New Criticism literacy instruction became the foundational approach to teaching at that time. Within this particular school of thought, students were asked to deconstruct a text based solely upon the observable meanings found within the text. Slowly shifting towards cognitive psychology and cultural studies in the early 1980s, literacy education began to ask students to infer meaning (Damico, Campano & Harste, 2007), upholding the ideologies of schema theory (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997); re-conceptualized theory of Rosenblatt’s reader response instruction (1938) and transactional perspectives (Smagorinsky, 2001). Through the course of the next 30 years, literacy instruction advanced to encompass theories of discourse and discourse (Gee, 2001), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and multi-literacies (Lankshear, Knobel, Bigum & Peters, 2003). Current classroom literacy
instruction has deviated from the former model of isolated skill sets to that of contextualized and culturally relevant pedagogy (Street, 2003). Within this scope of literacy instruction, educators had a variety of disciplines from which to formulate pedagogy. Postmodern perspectives (Jardine, 2005; Giroux, 1991) re-termed reading to a broader, all-encompassing term of literacy (Gee, 2001). To read critically, a student must go beyond the literal meaning of text; students must be able to understand the areas of gray within texts and to create meaning using literary techniques. Literacy instruction became a pedagogy that would lead to the acquisition of skill sets to decipher messages through a variety of communicative and non-verbal cues, as well as the ability to effectively communicate ideas in an insightful manner (Archer, 2006; Hall, 2000; Leu, O’Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry & Everett-Cacopardo, H., 2009).

The Past Will Tell the Present about the Future

In order to fully understand the extent to which current literacy practices must evolve, the evolution of education that has already taken place must be acknowledged and examined. The following story is relevant to the current context of our academic system. Every major city in the nation has agreed to build a large toxic nuclear plant within city limits. The fumes and run-off water have contaminated the water sources for approximately 40% of each city’s youth population nationwide. Each city spends a great deal of money on medical assistance post exposure to the toxic fumes and contaminated water. A bill was proposed that would eliminate the fumes and run-off contamination; however, the bill was not passed. The bill was viewed as too expensive and only serving a small percentage of the overall population of youth.
This story is one that is parallel to the current dilemma in our urban public schools. Nearly 40% of urban youth are considered to be illiterate and unable to pass even the most basic of tests (Groff, 1987; Pikulski, 1994). Furthermore, a considerable amount of money is spent annually on national and district level remediation efforts for reading problems, while only a fraction is spent on actually preventing those problems (Pikulski, 1994). Surface level assessment of effective instructional programs may lead to the belief that they are not cost efficient, but considering the return on investment in savings in “human suffering, humiliation, and frustration” should far outweigh the cost of a program that would eliminate the majority of those experiences (Pikulski, 1994, p. 32).

Instructional practices in the literacy classroom have led to the decline of our urban youth’s ability to become productive members of society. The inability to read and write does more than place our children, specifically our low socio-economic status African American male children, at risk for failing their academic experiences. Faced with the notion of continued failure, many of these children will later opt to leave their academic experiences or act out in ways that are harmful to themselves or others (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012; Today’s Learners, 2012). If we wish to break the cycle of oppression and silenced voices for our young African American male students, it is necessary to stop pointing fingers at guilty parties and to assume the responsibility for teaching a culturally relevant pedagogy as an essential function of any teaching position. The persistence of inappropriate literacy pedagogy will not serve as the sole purpose behind the millions of children who have failed, dropped out, or simply given up; however, the continued denial of successful methods, programs, and instructional techniques to better serve our urban youth is the culprit behind their failures. What follows is an examination of traits of instructional pedagogies that lead
to increased traits of motivation and metacognitive abilities in our young students. I believe where motivation and strong metacognitive abilities are found in a classroom of students, one will also find students who say that they are having positive literacy experiences.

**Becoming a Literate Society**

In *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, reading is likened to an orchestra production.

Reading can be compared to the performance of a symphony orchestra. This analogy illustrates three points. First, like the performance of a symphony, reading is a holistic act. In other words, while reading can be analyzed into sub-skills such as discriminating letters and identifying words, performing the sub-skills one at a time does not constitute reading. Reading can be said to take place only when the parts are put together in a smooth, integrated performance. Second, success in reading comes from practice over long periods of time, like skill in playing musical instruments. Indeed, it is a lifelong endeavor. Third, as with a musical score, there may be more than one interpretation of a text. The interpretation depends upon the background of the reader, the purpose for reading, and the context in which reading occurs. (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 7)

The final concept that helped form an understanding of the important role that a student’s background plays in their reading experiences is determining what makes for a literate society.

A literate society should be the long-term goal of any global economy; however, this goal cannot be achieved without each individual culture receiving a quality education. An effective literacy instruction develops individuals who are able to recognize and decode words, read fluently, and comprehend information as read in texts (Adams, 1990; Anderson et al., 1985; Chall, 1967). In addition, an effective literacy program also produces individuals who are able to reflect upon readings, make connections, and create meaning (Allington, 2001; Flippo, 2001; Gambrell & Mazzoni, 1999; Pressley, 2002). The creation of meaning is often assimilated with connections made on a personal level to past experiences or previously learned information. Effective communication results in individuals who are
able to communicate these connections through the written word. Over the years, researchers have actively sought to identify effective literacy practices that result in the aforementioned skill sets. An examination of several studies that have been conducted in the search for an answer to effective literacy instruction follows.

Bond and Dykstra (1967) employed a quantitative, meta-analysis method to determine the impact of school and community components, such as pupil, teacher, class, school, and traits, in relationship to students’ reading readiness. In order to fully understand the relationship between certain school and community characteristics and a student’s reading readiness, teachers’ approach to reading instruction was examined as well. The results of whether reading programs were differentially affected by students’ level of readiness were documented in the report of the Coordinating Center of the Cooperative Research Program in First-Grade Reading Instruction. Twenty-seven individual cases were examined using post-instructional tests. These tests examined silent and oral reading ability, as well as writing and spelling abilities (Bond & Dykstra, 1967). The tests used were the Initial Teaching Alphabet, Basal Plus Phonics, Language Experience, Linguistic, Phonic/Linguistic, and Basal. In this study, girls were found to have a higher level of reading readiness than their male peers at the pre-first grade level and displayed higher reading achievement levels by the end of first grade.

In addition to the differences in reading readiness and achievement found in the young female and male elementary students, other themes were found throughout the study. Bond and Dykstra (1967) found that classroom size did not hold significant value to the reading achievement of young learners, and teacher characteristics, such as experience and efficiency, held only a minor relationship to the reading achievement of the first grade
participants. The duration of the study did not lead the researchers to test understanding of
culture and use of this understanding in curriculum and instruction. If Bond and Dykstra
had considered culture, additional support for their findings would be warranted. In addition
to the components that did not affect the reading achievement of a first grader, several areas
were found that did hold influence on first graders’ reading readiness and achievement. The
study concluded that not all reading programs had the same effect in every situation found in
different classroom settings.. The study noted: “No one approach is so distinctly better in all
situations and respects than the others that it should be considered the best method and the
one to be used exclusively” (p. 123).

The researchers also concluded that there were other factors that affect reading
achievement, and that these factors have a greater impact on reading success than reading
readiness (Bond and Dykstra, 1967). The research findings are significant to the value of my
research, as I assert that the areas of society and cultural influences on a student’s literacy
achievement have not been explored in an empirical manner. I assert my belief that reading
achievement and success can be categorized under the idea of a positive literacy experience.
I will return to the relationship between success and positive literacy experiences later in this
chapter.

The Follow Through Program (Stebbins, St. Pierre, Proper, Anderson & Cerva, 1977)
was a study designed to explore different models of education and their effect on
achievement for disadvantaged children at a national level. The study, under direction of the
Office of Education, was largely invested in by both the federal government and business
sponsorships. The program was designed, and data were collected by the Stanford Research
Group. A significant amount of data was obtained from the 350,000 student participants, and
the program has been noted to have contributed to the largest national gains in understanding of effective literacy instruction (Becker & Englemann, 1973; Gersten, 2001; Meyer, Gersten & Gutkin, 1983). However, the greatest critique of the study was that no specific model of literacy instruction can be concluded as superior to another without considering the “peculiarities of individual schools, neighborhoods, and homes,” which have a greater effect on student achievement than any other program (House, Glass, McLean & Walker, 1978, p. 130). The foundation of the research was intended to explore different models of literacy instruction with the intent to find a “best practice”; however, although I understand the critiques, I believe that a form of literacy instruction cannot be labeled as effective without the instruction including acknowledgement and integration of cultural awareness.

In 1983, the National Institute of Education established the National Academy of Education’s Commission on Education and Public Policy. The result of this commission was the report titled *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson et al., 1985). Three areas were examined by the commission: (a) reading process, (b) environmental influences of reading, and (c) instructional methods to identify effective practices in the teaching of literacy. The study listed specific components that are necessary for reading achievement: parental assistance in laying the foundation for reading; the need for early development of oral reading skills in kindergartners; early phonics instruction; use of engaging texts that are “interesting, comprehensible”; the use of oral and silent reading throughout the scheduled school day; and lessons that allow for “understanding and appreciating the content of the selection” (p. 57-58). The study recommended the integration of reading and writing, skills instruction, grouping of children, and the designated the amount of time that should be spent on reading (Anderson et al., 1985, p. 82).
Throughout the study, the commission examined multiple methods of instruction and influences that affect a student’s reading skills. However, the study did not take into consideration the multiple cultural influences that affect a student’s reading skills. By understanding the findings as reported by the commission, further exploration into the other factors that influence a student’s reading experiences can be conducted. Developing an instructional lesson that takes into account the findings of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* allowed additional components to be added that support the investigation of the relationship of a young man’s perceptions of masculinity and his experience in a literacy classroom. The nature of this qualitative study is to allow educators to strengthen their understanding of the development of a positive literacy experiences in young African American male students through an extension of previously conducted studies. The information gleaned from previously conducted studies and from current classroom practices can be useful in designing and implementing an effective literacy program that creates positive experiences for urban males.

**Precursors to Creating a Positive Literacy Experience:**
**An Investigation of Effective Literacy Instruction**

Research literature on effective literacy instruction has several recurring themes. The importance of the role of the teacher and the acknowledgement that not one specific strategy works best for all classrooms and individuals appear to be the most prominent conclusions (Anderson et al., 1985; Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Stebbins et al., 1977). My intention was not to conduct a study that will result in an assumed “cure-all” for instructional practices in the literacy classroom. Several scholars have noted that there is not a perfect method, as students’ literacy experiences depend upon the teachers, policy makers, researchers, and teacher educators recognizing the unique story each student has lived (Anderson et al., 1985;
In Duffy and Hoffman’s (1999) *In Pursuit of an Illusion: The Flawed Search for a Perfect Method*, it was stated that the teacher, not the method, has the greatest influence on a student’s reading experience. I believe, however, the combination of the teacher and the instructional pedagogy has the most influence on students’ literacy experiences.

The idea of an effective literacy instructional program was conceptualized by Gambrell and Mazzoni (1999) as a multidimensional system with teachers serving as “instructional designers who develop [instruction] in relevant, meaningful ways for their particular community of learners” (p. 13). Gambrell and Mazzoni suggest that the use of Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of “zone of proximal development” (p. 13) should serve as a reminder to educators of the importance prior knowledge has as the basis for all new learning. I assume the position that not only “book” learning should be taken into consideration, but also the learned beliefs, ideas, and understandings from a cultural perspective that serve as prior knowledge for students. Understanding the importance of prior knowledge from both a cultural and academic perspective allows instruction to be tailored in a manner that is relevant and motivating for students, specifically looking at the components of relevance and motivation as key pieces to positive learning experiences for young African American male students. Gambrell and Mazzoni (1999) go on to use the research of Paris, Lipson, and Wixson (1983) to support their views on how best to engage and motivate students through effective literacy instruction. Stating that educators must employ strategies that are appropriate and relevant for their community of learners, Gambrell and Mazzoni list ten research-based practices that are said to result in effective literacy instruction. These practices include:
1. Teach reading for authentic, meaning-making literacy experiences.
2. Use high-quality research.
3. Integrate a comprehensive word study/phonics into reading/writing instruction.
4. Use multiple tests that link and expand concepts.
5. Balance teacher and student led discussions.
6. Build a whole class community that emphasizes the important concepts and builds background knowledge.
7. Work with students in small groups while other students read and write about what they have read.
8. Give students plenty of time to read in class.
9. Give students direct instruction in decoding and comprehension strategies that promote independent reading.
10. Use a variety of assessment techniques to inform instruction. (p. 14)

Research on instructional practices as they relate to student achievement reflect the need for direct instruction, monitoring of class environment and student engagement, ability to multi-task, and the acknowledgement of providing a diverse level of instruction for multiple levels of learning ability and traits (Brophy, 1979). Further characteristics of an effective teacher, thus leading to an effective instructional program, include the setting of high expectations and goals for students and employing the use of clear and concise directions for all instructional practices (Brophy & Good, 1986; Porter & Brophy, 1988; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1984). In a study conducted at the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University, researchers focused on the planning and decision-making processes that determine teacher instructional practices (Porter & Brophy, 1988). The context of the research viewed teacher instructional practices from a basic understanding of a curriculum and classroom management skill set. However, within the decision-making processes, a reflective teacher should consider the multiple elements that influence students’ learning experiences; societal and cultural expectations of academic success and necessity are likely to influence a teacher’s development of curriculum. In taking into account the
areas of outside influence, a teacher should have the fundamental tools necessary to develop a critical, culturally relevant pedagogy that lends to a positive learning experience.

While achievement as evidenced on standardized tests tends to be the focus of instructional practices in our current academic system, I did not wish to understand a student’s ability to achieve on literacy exams until I had thoroughly explored the notion of positive literacy experiences for young African American males. I contend that future research can be conducted to explore the relationship between a student’s learning experience and their achievement rates. However, for the purpose of this study, understanding effective literacy instruction practices as a means of creating positive learning experiences in the literacy classroom will serve as a component of the larger purpose of the study. In order to define a positive experience, I examined areas of metacognition, motivation, and self-efficacy as products of effective literacy pedagogy.

**Metacognition.** Often the *what* and *why* of a student’s learning experience are explored but rarely the *how* is understood. The need for students to be aware of their own thought processes as they are engaged in their literacy experiences is a strategy referred to as metacognition. Fisher (2002) defines metacognition as “the consciousness of your own cognitive process—an awareness of what’s going on in your mind while you are doing something” (p. 63). The need for students to be aware of their thinking and reflective processes is a key component of the list of characteristics successful readers possess.

In a study comprised of 60 nine-year-old students in Ireland, Hall, Bowman and Meters (2000) sought to examine metacognition and reading. Using a qualitative design, students were interviewed and asked to describe themselves as readers. The resulting information showed a relationship between how students perceived themselves as readers
and the classroom teacher’s perception of their reading abilities. Students who were perceived as better readers by their teacher were able to give more detailed responses regarding their reading abilities. When asked how they could become better readers, a vast majority of the students responded that practice makes better readers. However, few students were able to recognize that being a strong reader is related to the mental processes and level of motivation they have when trying to concentrate and remember pieces of information from the text. Hall et al. (2000) concluded that, “learners ought to be helped not just to learn to read, but to become aware of how they learn to read” (p. 106). One way of guiding students in their understanding of how they read is for

the teacher to render the covert cognitive and metacognitive processes in an overt form by thinking out loud while modeling [sic] the task. It seems that just modeling [sic] task completion is insufficient, for then the strategic activity will be largely observable, and the product, not the process, will be getting the greater emphasis. (p. 100)

The implications of being aware of thinking and reflective processes are two-fold for young African American males in the literacy classroom. Successful readers understand the processes by which conclusions are formed and inferences are made. In addition to making conclusions and inferences, Successful readers must also have high levels of metacognitive awareness. Understanding how a student’s response can be different from the accepted norm is not only a teacher’s job, but a job of the student as well.

**Motivation.** Motivation is an important variable in student learning and can be related to the experiences students have in the literacy classroom. I believed external variables such as developmental differences, the influence of society and cultural norms, as well as socialization factors affect learning. For example, young African American males may be hesitant to enjoy school, as such attitudes may not be a socially accepted norm of
their peers (Archer, 2003). The interest level students hold towards texts will also influence their motivation in the literacy classroom. Wigfield and Asher (1984) define high interest reading texts as books that create a connection between the reader and the book. This level of motivation is significant for urban young males, as the outside influences may cast a negative light on the overall reading experiences. Thus, books that reflect the lived experiences of young African American males must be available to ensure a high level of motivation to read. As previously discussed in *Education and Masculinity*, young African American males may fear failure, and when faced with the possibility of failing, these young men would rather appear uninterested in academics in general (Archer, 2003). This form of learned helplessness can be detrimental to the level of motivation a student feels in the literacy classroom.

In a study involving 31 fifth- and sixth-graders in a literacy classroom, Oldfather (2002) found that students could be motivated by empowering them to find personal connections to their learning. Over an eight-month period, the researcher focused on students who lacked intrinsic motivation for a specific task. As Oldfather began to categorize student behaviors, three themes became evident: (a) students were intrinsically motivated upon determining the worth of the project; (b) students were extrinsically motivated based upon external variables, such as an accountability system; and (c) students were neither extrinsically or intrinsically motivated. Oldfather concluded the study by stating that if

we view the student as infinitely more important than the object, we will be more likely to respond to children’s motivational struggles in ways that support their
learning and empower them and motivate them, rather than in ways that make them feel powerless and alienated. (p. 252)

The implications of the study are evident in that when teachers employ an instructional pedagogy that acknowledges the students first, then and only then, can educators empower students to break their silence in the literacy classroom. In addition to the need to break the silence, finding the proper source of motivation for young African American males will allow them to use their perceptions of masculinity as a positive influence on motivation, and not as a tool of avoidance. Oldfather (2002) chose to focus on the intermediate level of the elementary setting; however, I believe that his findings are also relevant to the motivation of primary African American males in order to fully understand how motivation can lead to positive experiences in the literacy classroom. Theories of motivation as concluded in his study were taken into consideration throughout this study.

**Self-efficacy and engagement.** The power of individual beliefs is a fundamental characteristic of the human race, which directs behaviors and practices. The belief in self makes a difference in how individuals perceive themselves as learners. A focus on self-efficacy as a task-specific concept will lead to better understanding of how to create a positive learning experiences for young African American males. An example of self-efficacy is a young individual who is especially efficacious in the literacy classroom, but may not be excelling in literacy as reflected by standardized achievement test scores (Pajares, 1996). As previously stated, the purpose of this research was not to examine methods to increase young African American males’ literacy test scores; rather, the implications of this study are intended to provide a foundation for the development of a critical, culturally
relevant pedagogy that leads to positive learning experiences for African American elementary school males.

For this study, a student’s perception of self-efficacy was viewed as closely related to theories of motivation. For example, when students are engaged in literacy activities that require them to actively display comprehension skills and to make connections to the text, providing feedback about their progress can lead to increased self-efficacy. Therefore, a student’s motivation to engage in literacy practices will be increased (Schunck & Rice, 1993). In a thorough review of how instruction impacts a student’s reading engagement and self-efficacy, Gutherie and Wigfield (2000) found that the level of student engagement serves as a channel by which classroom instruction influences a student’s learning experience. Considering the conclusions of the study, educators must understand that the primary focus of any instruction should be the creation of positive learning experiences through high levels of motivation, self-efficacy and engagement, and use of metacognitive skills. In order to create positive experiences for young African American male students, a teacher would need to employ a critical, culturally relevant pedagogy.

Conclusion

The concepts found in this section are not to serve as the overall understanding of how best to provide positive learning experiences for young African American males, rather, my intention was to provide a foundation for the development of a critical, culturally relevant pedagogy to foster the development of young African American males. Great educators understand and acknowledge that it is through literacy that social justice can be found for all individuals. By understanding the crucial significance of creating literate individuals through the implementation of effective literacy pedagogy, a teacher is able to guide students past any
barriers that may negatively influence their experiences in the literacy classroom. A positive experience, motivated by the use of metacognitive skills and a strong sense of self-efficacy, can “empower us [young African American elementary students] to literally transcend fear, doubt, discouragement, and many other things” (Covery, Merrill & Merrill, 1994, p. 105) that keep them from sharing their stories in the literacy classroom and prevent them from becoming strong citizens who are able to effectively negotiate their lives. Having outlined key concepts of effective literacy instruction as a foundation for learning, a discussion of a reason for culturally relevant pedagogy that can lead to critical literacy as a tool to bridge the gap between attitudes toward school and perceptions of masculinity in urban elementary African American males follows.

**Owning Culture: A Reason for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Many scholars have noted that the academic difficulty African American students face in the classroom manifests from a lack of opportunity to connect to the content that is placed before them (Gay, 2000; Hefflin, 2002; Howard, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1992b; 1995; Milner, 2010). However, limited research exists from African American students’ perspectives about why they are unable to connect to the content (Milner, 2010; Ogbu, 1995). Concurrently, there are even fewer studies that choose to examine the relationship between students’ perceptions and their academic experiences in the literacy classroom. Ladson-Billings’ (1995) work on culturally relevant pedagogy was based upon the insight of teachers who were deemed to be effective educators of African American students; however, this did not take into account the students’ perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. In order to understand the purpose behind teaching a culturally relevant pedagogy, it is necessary to
understand its relevance from both the teacher’s viewpoint and that of the students. Far too often, the voices of the students are silenced, and even more frequently, the voices within our African American culture are silenced. However, the truly marginalized voices are those of the students. Jardine (2005) explains that while we may want to understand the plight of the African American students, we refuse to listen to them, thus their voices have become subjugated knowledge. In this study I wished to gain understanding of how the use of culturally relevant pedagogy can help young African American students regain their voices, educators may find the motivation to reform their educational practices and begin to truly find the means to increase educational outcomes for African American male students.

Will a culturally relevant pedagogy within an urban classroom lead to positive literacy experiences for African American third grade boys? To answer this question, the research of Ladson-Billings’ (1995), Howard’s (2002), and Milner’s (2010) approaches to the development of culturally relevant pedagogy are presented following an examination of the historical context.

**Historical Context of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) has been a tool for assessing the impact of national trends on student learning, with focus on fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students beginning in the late 1970s. Analysis of achievement trends from the 1970s to the present, shows notable racial achievement gaps, with an increase in scores of students from multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds during the 1970s/early 1980s and a slight rebound in the early 1990s as education reform was taking place. The education reforms that took place in the 1990s have turned a blind eye to the relevance of culturally relevant pedagogy; assuring that all curriculum is the same, taught the same, by teachers with similar
teaching practices. However, the truly interesting piece of data is the increase in achievement rates of young African Americans during the 1970s and 1980s.

The 1970s saw the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education* as many schools were forced to open their doors to young African American students for the first time and ensure that the quality of education did not change once the student population became more diverse. In addition to the desegregation of the schools, *Lau v. Board of Education* set the precedent for the use of bilingual education programs. The change in expectations for schools, districts, and teachers led to an influx of professional development for teachers that would address their lack of knowledge of culture (Gay, 1983). While it would be naïve to assume that the sole contributing factor to the increased achievement rates of African American students during this time was due to the newly acquired cultural knowledge of the educator, I feel safe in saying that this was a pivotal moment in education when the need for a culturally responsive education began to overrule the standard pedagogical practices found in American education. However, as education policy reform began to shift the focus to performance on standardized assessments and teachers began to feel the pressure to teach a curriculum that closely aligned to the assessments, the importance of a culturally responsive education began to lose its perceived relevance to general educators (Luke, Woods & Dooley, 2011; Sleeter, 2012). I believe that while teachers taught a culturally responsive curriculum, it was not truly a culturally relevant pedagogy; rather, it was composed of discrete educational experiences about particular cultures that were disconnected from the larger academic curriculum.
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

When using a culturally relevant pedagogy, the intent of the teacher should not be to help culturally diverse students feel better about themselves, nor make assumptions that certain groups of children have distinct learning styles that must be met. While having positive regard for all children and extending the ways they learn are important, culturally relevant pedagogy is an intentional system of academic practice that allows teachers to enhance students’ learning experiences through the use of cultural background knowledge in relationship to the curriculum established by the national, state, or district standards (Hefflin, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2010; Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008). Ladson-Billings established deep theoretical roots concerning the importance of using culturally relevant pedagogy to support the concept that education is a socially facilitated experience and is deeply connected to the students’ cultural experiences (Howard, 2002; Irvine, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1992b; 1995a; 1995b; Milner, 2010).

Ladson-Billings (1992b) began her investigation of culturally relevant pedagogy through identifying teachers who were implementing this approach. In one classroom, teachers inspired a safe environment through the use of open communication in an inquiry-based forum. Students experienced high levels of positive empowerment from the teachers as the students expressed themselves and their lived experiences. In this classroom, the teachers actively sought to create a “classroom of learners” where it was acceptable or “cool,” to be smart and engaged in the academic experiences. In this classroom, students rebuked the stereotypes of masculinity as they went beyond the accepted framework of “slackness” (Archer, 2003) and became engaged in their learning experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1992a). The notion of creating a curriculum that goes beyond the four walls of the
school building, extending out to the social and culture influences of students’ lives, allowed
the teachers to develop relationships of support and positive interaction with the students;
this in turn motivated and increased student engagement. In a study in Northern California,
Ladson-Billings (1995) sought to understand how school culture and home culture influence
each other. In examining the participants in the low-income elementary school, Ladson-
Billings found that when a student’s cultural background was acknowledged through the use
of a culturally relevant pedagogy, students were able to experiences academic success.
Conceptualizing the framework for culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1992a)
asserted that:

[Culturally relevant pedagogy] serves to empower students to the point where they
will be able to examine critically educational content and process and ask what its
role is in creating a truly democratic and multicultural society. It uses the students’
culture to help them create meaning and understand the world. Thus, not only
academic success, but also social and cultural success is emphasized. (p. 110)

Furthermore, it was asserted that in using a culturally relevant pedagogy, students developed
critical thinking skills that allowed them the ability to understand and rise above social
inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2010). In this study, my desire was to gain insight
into how the use of both a culturally relevant pedagogy and critical pedagogy can enhance
the literacy experiences for urban African American males. I believe that when the gap
between the dominant curriculum was diminished by the presence of a diverse culturally
aware curriculum, the young students of this study were empowered to connect with the
curriculum from an intellectual, emotional, and social frame of mind.

Ladson-Billings (1995) developed three tenets for a culturally relevant pedagogy.
The first element of culturally relevant pedagogy is related to student achievement. In a
study involving the elementary students in Northern California, Ladson-Billings (1995)
observed students who achieved great success on their standardized achievement scores, scoring at or above grade level. The empirical findings suggest that there is a strong relationship between high-standardized test scores and the teachers’ desire to assist their community of learners to high levels of academic success. In the study’s participating classrooms, teachers did not focus on standardized achievement as the sole foundation for curriculum development, but varied curriculum and assessment to reflect the lived experiences of the students. The language of this particular tenet suggests that the focus is directed towards assessment outcomes; however, I understand the term *academic achievement* to relate to students’ ability to apply information to multiple contexts. In other words, academic achievement is not measured solely by success on a standardized assessment, but may also reflect a student’s ability to assimilate and accommodate information within their schema. I believe that teachers must find pertinent information that pertains to the students’ lived experiences in order to go beyond surface level retention rates. Students need a curriculum that begins with the ability to compare and contrast new information with information that is already familiar to them. A culturally responsive system of learning has shown to lead to increased student engagement, higher motivation rates, and increased levels of self-efficacy in students (Howard, 2002; Irvine, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The second element of culturally relevant pedagogy as found in Ladson-Billings’ (1995) research is the cultural critique, otherwise termed sociopolitical consciousness. Cultural critique is defined as students who possess the ability to “recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities” (p. 476). In the same study in a low-income elementary school in Northern California, teachers were observed who actively sought to identify social
inequities, and to create a curriculum that was not only applicable to the students’ home environment, but also to be used as a tool for addressing the issue of social inequities (Hefflin, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lynn, 2006). For example, one teacher drew the students’ awareness to the make-up of the students’ surrounding neighborhood, which happened to be dubbed a wet zone, due to the high number of liquor stores found in the area. Using an integration method of instruction, the teacher developed a curriculum that allowed the students to write reports, develop maps and graphs, and create a solution for the perceived problem. Acknowledging the need for students to become responsible and educated citizens in their community, the teachers created an opportunity for the students to experience an alternative to success. Reflecting on the first tenet of a culturally relevant pedagogy, I found that success is not necessarily a rate of achievement on a standardized test; in the case of the classroom above, students’ successes were evident in their abilities to make informed decisions about their roles in the community upon understanding the society that surrounds them.

The third tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy is categorized as cultural competency (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Cultural competency provides an avenue by which students can maintain their cultural identity while gaining greater understanding of their culture within the larger society of cultures. Similar to Freire’s (1998; 2005) notion that students must be able to participate in discourse with all persons on the social spectrum, particularly those in power, Ladson-Billings asserts that students must understand the notion of power in the world and understand their role in functioning as effective citizens in their communities. The ideology of cultural competency supports the development of critical thinkers who are able to understand the inequalities of society and how to transform those social stratifications. The
relationship between culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy is furthered, as students are able to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead. (Milner, 2010, p. 72)

The world of culturally responsive education is often interpreted differently among individuals; therefore, for the purpose of this study, culturally relevant pedagogy is defined as (a) the infusion of culture into the curriculum to empower students to embrace their culture in the academic setting, (b) the appropriate understanding and use of culture as a teaching tool, and (c) the use of culture to make real world connections in a meaningful manner. Conversely, non-culturally relevant lessons are the opposite of what has been outlined above. Non-culturally relevant lessons do not integrate the importance of a student’s culture, cultural lens, or family upbringing with the core curricular areas of math, reading, science, and social studies. In addition to the characteristics of culturally relevant pedagogy, the importance of creating a culturally relevant pedagogy that can be seamlessly integrated into existing curriculum (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011) is required for a truly transformed curriculum.

In a two-year study of African American elementary and secondary students, Howard (2002) attempted to uncover the mystery of what made a teacher effective in a classroom of urban students. Additional criteria of the qualitative study investigated students’ perspectives of how their academic and social environments were connected. Examining five urban elementary and secondary schools in the northwestern/Midwestern area of the United States, Howard purposefully selected 30 students (17 boys and 13 girls) who, through cross-selection, met the criteria of a desired level of academic achievement and certain classroom
behaviors per their teachers’ perceptions. During the course of one academic school year, 1998-1999, these students were interviewed in groups and individually to gain insight into their perceptions of their teachers’ effectiveness or ineffectiveness. Additionally, classroom observations were made to provide a thick description of the academic experiences of each of the participants. The observations were then analyzed against the students’ interview responses, comparing the students’ verbal responses to their actual classroom performance and engagement (Howard, 2002).

A common theme that emerged from the data collected was the students’ beliefs that effective teachers were those who modeled their classroom instruction in a manner that reflected their lived experiences. The students felt that the teachers really cared about their learning because they made “school seem like home” (Howard, 2002, p. 431). The ability to reflect upon their home life and bring those connections to their academic environments provided the students with a tool of understanding pertaining to the curriculum. In addition, the culture of the classrooms was considered to be positive and supportive, and allowed the students to easily engage in playful banter with their teachers. This experience is similar to the relationship between an African American student and their parent; one in which the student can openly speak their opinion in regard to what an adult says, and not fear severe consequences in doing so. Howard (2002) notes that the interactions between an African American child and parent can be categorized by unique exchanges ranging from sarcasm, anger, resentment, joking, support, and encouragement. The teachers in this particular study embodied these interactions as a means of motivation and engagement strategy. An example was given of the use of sarcasm to drive home a point with a male student: A teacher asked him if he was waiting for Christmas to finish his book report.
The study concluded that the teachers’ ways of teaching led to increased engagement and willingness to learn (motivation) on the part of the students. Providing a culturally relevant pedagogy supports students and allows them to share their lived experiences in a positive, safe manner. This concept is supported by Kohl (1999), who states that teachers must be willing to create an academic experience in which voices that are otherwise silenced are offered a significant role in the dialogue that takes place in the classroom. Listening to the voices of the young African American male students may serve as an enlightening experience for educators and researchers alike who wish to find the tools and strategies needed to create meaningful learning experiences for urban African American students.

Further research supporting the use of a culturally relevant pedagogy is found in the work of Milner (2010). Revisiting the cultural competence tenet of Ladson-Billings’ conceptualization of culturally relevant pedagogy, Milner sought to gain understanding of a single science teacher’s ability to build cultural competency in a manner that allowed him to effectively teach his students. Conducting the research at a middle school for 19 months, Milner conducted classroom observations of a teacher’s pedagogical approach to teaching a diverse classroom of students. He also collected documents and artifacts and conducted interviews with the classroom teacher. Focusing on the idea of culturally relevant pedagogy being a state of mind rather than an act of doing, Milner (2010) found three themes that captured the classroom teacher’s experience in establishing cultural competency within his classroom. These themes included: (a) an ability to build and sustain meaningful and authentic relationships that allowed the teacher to share the learning experience with his students, (b) racial identity and racial inequity was actively discussed during instructional...
time, and (c) curriculum development was a collaborative effort that involved colleagues and students alike.

The importance of establishing a relationship with students through the development of a culturally competent classroom is highly regarded throughout the work of Milner (2010). Understanding that there may be times of disconnect, incongruence, or hurdles which allow race to become an issue within the classroom is crucial to the implementation of a culturally relevant pedagogy. In the aforementioned study involving the middle school science teacher, the teacher used the differences that arose through conversations about culture and inequalities as an opportunity to learn and to build cultural competency.

Using culturally relevant lessons and non-culturally relevant lessons, Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2011) sought to employ a multi-instructional approach that provided African American students with learning experiences that represented their culture. Set in a large urban high school in Colorado, the study took place in a purposefully selected classroom of 45 students. The study consisted of 12 to 32 participants, based upon student attendance. Approximately 33% of the students in the classroom were considered to be African American (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). Employing the use of three data collection techniques, the researchers collected student feedback forms, transition-termination group discussions and feedback forms, and African American focus groups. Conducted as a mixed methods research project, the quantitative data were analyzed using the ANOVA test, looking for a minimum of mean differences between the groups, and through clustering of qualitative data to find themes from established codes.

In a lesson called *The N Word*, the history, origin, and evolution of the current use of the N word were examined and discussed. During the lesson, eight African American
students were present and later described this lesson as one that was most relevant to their culture. In addition to *The N Word* lesson, the African American students found the culturally relevant field trip, during which they travelled to an African American Research Library, to be their favorite lesson. When asked to rank the two aforementioned lessons, the African American students cited *The N Word* as their favorite, and the culturally relevant field trip to be their next choice in lessons. During both lessons, heightened interest was evident from the African American students, as they were given the opportunity to discuss topics that were historic to their culture, but also relevant to their current upbringing and surroundings. While the classroom teacher was uncomfortable initiating a lesson such as this, it was found that when the topic was integrated with another content area, it appeared to be less controversial and non-racist to the students (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011).

After delivering the culturally relevant lessons, several focus groups were conducted. Many of the African American students stated that they merely wanted teachers to know who they were and to believe in their potential to learn. Nearly 30 times students mentioned that the interactions the teacher had with the students was important to whether or not they chose to participate in the lesson. One student recalled that when the teacher switched strategies from that of basic teacher-led discussions to that of call and response, they were unsure whether to be silent or to actually call out. Similar to the style of communication found in the African American home and church, call and response strategies may appeal to African American children, as the style more closely resembles their home life and makes them more comfortable in showing who they truly are at school (Howard, 2002; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011; Sleeter, 2012). Through the use of integrated culturally relevant lessons that built critical literacy skills, the students in this particular study preferred and were motivated
by lessons that closely resembled their home lives and lived experiences. While the authors of the study did not wish to extend the results beyond this specific population, many scholarly studies support their findings and call for the immediate reform of teaching practices to better reflect the lives of students in the classroom (Howard, 2002; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011; Sleeter, 2012).

In order to incorporate culture into curriculum, there are multiple components to implement during the course of teaching curriculum. Lee (1995; 2001) states that African American students tend to appreciate a vernacular that resembles the historical discourse used throughout the African American culture. In one study, Lee (1995) contends that the African American form of communication is “full of irony, double entendre, satire, and metaphorical language” (p. 612). When the environment of the classroom was structured in a manner that allowed students to participate in an open discussion forum, versus that of call and response, students were found to be more engaged in literacy experiences and were better able to navigate the hidden meanings found in the text. This notion of open discussion allows the concept of culture to be placed before mainstream approaches to education, rather than additive approaches to curriculum (Lee, 1995). Similar findings resulted when a group of science teachers chose to implement cooperative learning groups into their typical classroom style of teacher-directed instruction (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Sleeter, 2012).

In addition to the language or communication style of the classroom, culturally relevant pedagogy considers the culture of the classroom. In this case, culture did not reference the ethnic background of an individual; rather culture, in this instance, considers the levels of engagement and self-efficacy found among a group of students. When examining African American ethnicity, the family unit is extremely important and extends
far beyond those members considered to be “blood relatives” (Howard, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1992b). The tendency to incorporate individuals who are non-family into the family unit is a part of the African American culture that should be acknowledged within the academic setting. Educators must understand that culture cannot be taught or ignored. Culture must be acknowledged prior to the commencement of any learning experience, during the learning experience, and after the final expectation is achieved. Culture is a 365 days-a-year, 7-days-a-week concept that must be acknowledged when planning a lesson for a diverse classroom of learners.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogical Methods of Instruction**

The question may be asked, how do teachers use culture as a guide to their curriculum design? The answer is one that is not easily defined or achieved, or else educators would not still struggle with how to provide their students with a culturally relevant curriculum. There is not one simple solution; culturally relevant or culturally responsive teaching takes place when a teacher implements the use of instructional methods, styles, and activities that enhance or prove cultural continuity (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Lipka, 1991; Sleeter, 2012).

In a 2002 study, Foster demonstrated the effectiveness of planned culturally relevant pedagogical practices through the use of a call-and-response instructional style. The call-and-response method is one based on African American religious tradition where answers are simply called out without wait time.

Call and response is a type of interaction between speaker and listener(s) in which the statements are emphasized by expressions from the listener(s), in which responses can be solicited or spontaneous, and in which either the calls or responses can be expressed linguistically, musically, verbally, non-verbally, or through dance. (Foster, 2002, p. 2)
Foster (2002) did not attempt to draw a direct relationship between the use of call and response method and student achievement; however, concluded that students exhibited higher interests in content matter which led to an increased motivation and engagement in the students. As previously discussed, when a student is engaged and motivated, their retention rate increases as well. When teachers use learners’ prior knowledge as the foundation in the teaching process, partnered with classroom practices that are compatible with students’ social norms, a validation of the students’ culture and language that they bring into the classroom occurs (Au, 1980; Au & Kawakami, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Lee, 1995; Yamauchi, Wyatt & Taun, 2005).

In a deep south African American rural school, the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy was examined through the implementation of “stepping” as an area of motor skill development in a physical education classroom (Hastie, Martin & Buchanan, 2006). Using a teacher-as-researcher and ethnographic technique, the researchers selected 42 sixth grade boys and girls to participate in learning the curriculum. The home physical education teacher stated that the class was often unruly and unable to get through an entire lesson. However, the researchers found that when the historical significance of stepping was presented to the students, they quickly became motivated and an increased form of self-efficacy was displayed (Hastie et al., 2006). While stepping is not blatantly significant to the examination of providing a culturally relevant pedagogy in the literacy classroom, stepping is not a form of dance, but rather stems from the days of slavery in America, where African slaves were forced to communicate through different stomps and movement of their chains (Au, 1980). This form of communication in African American youth can often be seen in their use of gestures and expression of dance to better get their points across.
Literacy for the African American culture does not only encompass print pieces of literature, but also the spoken word or traditions of unspoken word (Ladson-Billings, 1992b). For the purpose of this study, communication in literacy could potentially embody the use of movement and non-verbal expression as a connection to the African American culture. In order to avoid the phenomena of essentialization or trivialization, the possibility of culture reflecting multiple facets of the racial or ethnic backgrounds of students must be understood; culture does not fit into one prescribed descriptor. The assumption of the use of non-verbal cues along with movement is not to generalize that the entire African American community will have positive literacy experiences if these are incorporated, but rather to understand the cultural possibilities that might relate to the students’ lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2012).

The development of a culturally relevant pedagogy that used African American children’s literature was chronicled as two teachers attempted to fit instruction into the social, cultural, and personal lives of their students (Hefflin, 2002). In this qualitative study, five guidelines for a culturally relevant pedagogy in the literacy classroom were established:

1. Literature must be selected from authors and illustrators who have established a reputation for publishing culturally sensitive material.
2. Analysis of character portrayals should take place.
3. The language the author uses should be analyzed.
4. Illustrations should be examined for ethnic sensitivity and authenticity.
5. Factual information should be evaluated for accuracy. (Hefflin, 2002)

Aligning the guidelines closely to the three tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy as established by Ladson-Billings (1995; 1995a), the researchers used the text *Cornrows* as their
literacy tool for creating a lesson embracing the African American heritage. Taking up the call and response pattern, as is often found in the church and homes of young African American students, the students were encouraged to engage in a discourse that supported their lived experiences, motivating them to participate and engage in the learning process. In addition, the teachers made use of journals to take the form of a written dialogue, again acknowledging the role that interaction and affirmation plays in the African American culture. Upon reflecting and acknowledging the impact that the altered frame of reference had on the creation of a culturally responsive curriculum, the teachers/researchers found that a broad lens was needed in order to view the students of the classroom and the world in which they lived (Hefflin, 2002). However, the true findings of the study can be found in the increased level of participation, understanding, and tolerance that the students displayed throughout their learning experiences. To reach beyond the classroom walls and to embrace the lives of the students allows teachers to create a safe and enthusiastic learning environment where acceptance and understanding are the guiding lights of the education journey.

**Cultural frame of reference.** According to Ogbu (1995), a cultural frame of reference is the expected way to act and behave according to mainstream culture. For the purpose of this study, the two cultures of interest include the African American culture in which the third grade participants live and the dominant American culture as influenced by the white race. Ogbu (1995) states that students of a minority background [of color] often experience an oppositional frame of reference “as [they] are expected to attain social mobility by behaving according to the cultural frame of reference of the dominant white Americans in school” (Ogbu, 1995, p. 197). As previously examined in the literature review
of masculinity, the actions, language, and attitudes of African American boys do not typically reflect the standard set by the dominant culture. Speaking white may be looked down upon by some individuals in the African American culture (Ogbu, 1995) and may elicit a negative response from a student’s peer group. Yet, others in the African American community recognize the importance of children acquire standard notions of speaking and writing in order to be successful in the larger society; advocating code switching as a means to communicate effectively using the language of the home and community. In order to create a positive learning experiences for young African American boys, educators must encourage students to traverse the dominant white culture and expectations in the classroom with a strong cultural identity and sense of self-affirmation. (Ladson-Billings, 1992b, 1995; Ogbu, 1995). If educators are to prepare students to be successful in a global economy, then a method must be developed that allows “students to ‘be themselves’ and choose academic excellence” (Ladson-Billings, 1992b, p. 317). As a young White female who grew up in extreme poverty, I struggled to understand books in which young girls talked of ponies and new dresses; had I been given a story of a young girl who lived in a shelter, I would have more easily found a common ground between my lived experiences and my education. While I do not share the cultural background of African American students, this same concept of finding common ground between young African American urban males’ lived experiences and texts stimulated my interest in the conduct of this study.

**Cultural congruence.** Au and Kawakami (1994) concluded that the relationship between school culture and home culture could positively or negatively impact student performance. When lessons are conducted in a manner that are not consistent with students’ social values or norms, they will suffer from not having the opportunity to engage in the
lesson (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Boykin, 1984; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). To create a culturally congruent pedagogy, which in educational terms is similar to a culturally relevant pedagogy, a teacher should focus on the development of lessons that interweave and complement the school goals and the community of the students. When creating a culturally congruent pedagogy, altering goals, duplicating the lived experiences or environment of the community, or replicating activities from the home of the students will not broaden the perspectives of students. The use of a culturally relevant pedagogy, or culturally congruent pedagogy, is important to help draw a parallel between the home, school, and community experiences; to teach the mainstream educational experiences in conjunction with lived experiences of the student (Ledward, Takayama & Kahumoku, 2008; Rueda, 2004).

When students do not see themselves in the curriculum, there is a cultural mismatch, or a lack of sync with the student’s culture; in this case, the African American culture and the academic experiences (Howard, 2002; Irvine, 2012). In a sense, by ignoring the African American culture in the classroom, the teacher is disrespecting the student, and this leads to a lack of motivation on the part of the student. Many scholars have noted that when African American students are engaged in educational experiences that provide an ethnic frame of reference coupled with the principles of ethics found in the African American culture, the student’s achievement and engagement greatly increases (Boykin, 1994; Gay, 2000; Howard, 1998; 2002; Tatum, 2000). The concept of connecting the African American culture with the curriculum promotes the use of a culturally relevant pedagogy.

Conclusion

The construct of a culturally relevant pedagogy suggests the importance for students to move beyond the simple ability of recalling knowledge; rather, the focus of education
should be to develop learners who are culturally adept and can critically examine information to better inform their perceptions of the world (Freire, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1992b, 1995a; Milner, 2010). The concepts gleaned from the research confirm that students’ voices should contribute to the discourse in any classroom, and through the emancipation of the voices of the young African American males, a sense of empowerment will allow further development of critical thinking skills. Students who are able to think critically are more likely to contribute to classroom discourse, succeed academically and socially, and navigate through the inequities of society (Ladson-Billings, 1992b; Milner, 2010). The next section will closely investigate the theoretical framework of critical literacy as an additional component of effective literacy instruction.

**Critical Literacy: Thinking Outside of the Box**

The theoretical framework under consideration in this section will discuss the concept of critical literacy for implementing a critical literacy curriculum in the elementary classroom as a partner to a culturally relevant pedagogy. Before the discussion of critical literacy can take place, the broader definition of literacy must be understood. While there was not a linear path to literacy instruction as evidenced in *The Rise and Fall of Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom*, literacy is generally believed to include the practice of reading, writing, speaking, and listening as related to texts (McCarty & Dick, 2003).

An educator who believes that literacy is the tool that will allow students to develop resilience to inequality and an understanding of how to overcome injustice, is an educator who believes in the concept of critical literacy that empowers students to question the economic, social, cultural, and political intent of the world in which they live. The notion of questioning the world goes beyond the four walls of the classroom, connecting the lived
experiences of the students to that of the academic experiences. Freire and Macedo (1987) provide an abstract concept of education examining itself as a smaller piece of a larger picture. The more educators realize that education must help develop an understanding and appreciation of the culture and society we live in, the more likely that education will serve as a portal to crossing racial, economic, and societal barriers. Through the use of critical literacy students are able to examine information far beyond the surface value and to gain understanding of the implications offered by different schools of thought (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 2006; Horton, 2003; Howley & Howley, 2007; Noddings, 2006). Smagorinsky (2001) states that it is only when students are taught to think critically so they may recognize the “codes” by which texts are produced that they will be able to form a relationship with the texts. Critical theory is necessary to the development of a classroom that incorporates critical literacy with a focus on critical race theory as a subset of critical theory.

The Historical Context of Critical Theory

The notion of critical theory dates back to the pre-World War II era, when an institute of critical theory was established in Frankfurt. Surviving the brutality of the Nazi era, the members of the institute continued to provide work that would later influence sociological practices and theories on education. Taking root in the United States, the work of critical theorists John Dewey and Myles Horton began to guide the development of new pedagogical practices and methods of inquiry (McLaren, 2003). Critical theory in the United States took on the belief that racism was normal, and so “enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in [the] culture” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 213).

I would be remiss not to speak of the development of critical race theory as a division of critical theory. The critical race movement questions the very foundation of social
equality, the alignment of law and policy with racial lines, and social hierarchies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). The primary tenet of critical race theory (CRT) affirms that racism is ordinary and not aberrational. The second tenet of CRT asserts that racism advances the interests of the elite white and working middle class portion of the general population, and therefore there is little to no incentive to address or eradicate racism, as it would create chaos in the social hierarchy of our society. The third tenet of CRT is significant to the purpose of this study, because it implies that the social construction of social thought and relations concerning race and racism are invented by multiple segments of the population and often ignore the science behind the biological make-up of individual races.

The conventional belief in the intellectual inferiority of visible racial/ethnic individuals has had a powerful impact on educational policy and curriculum development since before the 1800s. Because differences in achievement between White and non-White students were assumed to be genetically based, the inferiority paradigm allowed slavery to be condoned, which resulted in racial/ethnic groups, particularly Black and Indians, being considered uneducable and barred from formal or adequate schooling…The inferiority paradigm continues to manifest itself in the quality of education offered to non-White children. (Tate, 1997, p. 199-200)

The relationship between the social understanding of race and the achievement of certain races lends to the importance of a culturally responsive education that dismembers the illusion that members of a certain race are unable to learn at the same level as those of another (Tate, 1997).

It is from the notion of critical theory in relationship to race that critical literacy developed as a means of empowering the silenced voices of the oppressed, or those deemed uneducable. Taking root in the Hebrew idea of tikkun (“healing the world,”), critical pedagogy seeks to heal the world by addressing discourses that are commonly taught in our American classrooms (Jardine, 2005; McLaren, 2003). Critical literacy encourages students
to participate in conversations that draw a relationship between the curriculum and the world that extends beyond the walls of the classroom (Coffey, 2013).

Critical literacy educators (Freire, 1987; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; McLaren, 1992; Shor, 1992) contend that education will not be equitable in creating a literate society without the acknowledgement of the continued social stratification that public education fosters. By questioning the status quo, education will set the stage for the structured hierarchical institution of academia to transform (hooks, 1994; Kress, 2007). Kress (2007) notes,

The shift from teaching to learning speaks about challenges to and shifts in authority and power. And whenever social and economic factors are involved, we know the culture is implicated. This acts as a constant reminder that while global forces are at work, local factors will be [present] in equal measure. (p. 19)

Therefore it is crucial for teachers to address literacy through a critical theory lens that will help students to circumnavigate the injustices and inequalities of the world.

Archer (2006) argued that reading, writing, and meaning are specific tools by which students approach “sites of struggle over discourse, meaning, subjectives, and power,” and that the multimodal texts are “crucial sites for investigating access to academic literacy practices” (p. 453). For the purpose of this study, *multimodal literacy/texts* refers to the meaning-making that occurs through engaging in reading, understanding, and responding through the production of words, sounds, and/or movements that support a diverse array of print, visual, digital, audio, and oral texts (Faulkner, 2005; Walsh, 2010). However, current legislative language in the United States education system has limited literacy to an individual’s ability to decode and encode printed texts (Bullen, Robb & Kenway, 2004; Valencia & Wixson, 1999; Wixson & Pearson, 1998). Leading scholars in the area of critical literacy argue that in order to enact social change, the people must be powered through the acquisition of knowledge (Horton, 2003; Howley & Howley, 2007). The current definition
of literacy does not lead to the acquisition of knowledge or skill sets that will allow students to enact change. Understanding how young students view their lived experiences within the social structures of school creates an understanding that once again, school is simply a smaller portion of a much larger puzzle. Acknowledging how illiteracy continues to hold negative social implications for students should motivate educators to provide students with the power to seek and gain social mobility, equity, and justice (Giroux, 2006; hooks, 1994; Thibault, 2013). Literacy is the sword of the oppressed, empowering them to free themselves from social stratification and cultural biases. Literacy is freedom. Literacy is power. When educators provide students with the tools to explore the concept of power, students are able to develop an understanding of their personal needs and individuality as part of the larger picture of society (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Quality teachers understand that no two individuals share the same lived experiences; therefore their connection to academics will differ as well. When students are asked to conceptualize an idea, they will do so based upon their own experiences or understanding of how society works. Social constructivists support the notion of critical literacy as a lens for students to use when attempting to make sense of different experiences through their own logic, organization of thoughts, and interpretations of the world surrounding them (Fosnot, 1989). Barton and Hamilton (1998) broaden the definition of literacy to include the social practice of instruction:

Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people’s heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people. (p. 3)
The use of social constructivism in this particular study allows the researcher to view learning as a concept that takes place through interaction with diverse members of our society. The social practice of literacy provides access or limits access to individuals based upon their race, class, or sex (Luke & Freebody, 1997). It is only through social discourse in the literacy classroom that students are able to question the truths that society claims for each of us and to understand how to overcome the inequity of those truths (Apple, 1996; Giroux, 2006; hooks, 1994; Luke & Freebody, 1997; McCarty & Dick, 2003). Similarly, students are capable of holding multiple truths that apply to different situations and settings. Literacy is “much more complex, dynamic, and sophisticated than what is traditionally encompassed within school-sanctioned literate activity. [Students] have multiple and overlapping literacies” that influence their experiences in the literacy classroom (Phelps, 1998, p. 1).

Traditionally, society and those that develop and implement curriculum tend to not acknowledge the truths. “Traditional curricula that are isolated and separately delivered do not engage learners with the principles needed to handle most of life’s challenging circumstances” (Brown, 2006, p. 783). The use of critical literacy in a culturally relevant pedagogy allows teachers and students to challenge the truths accepted by society. hooks (1994) claims that in order for students to learn, they must first challenge the undiscussables of race by acknowledging their presence through the process of self-actualization. Through the concept of self-actualization individuals understand that we must stand together to fight for/with those that are victims of racism and class prejudice if we are to truly overcome the truths of society. A teacher who embraces the use of a curriculum that calls into open discussion the differences among students, the diversity of the lived experiences from one student to another, and the importance of developing respect for others is equipping their
students with the tools to critically analyze and self-reflect. Considering the overlap of multiple and potential conflicting literacies, educators are challenged to bring to the forefront those voices that are marginalized in our society as a tool for creating “transformative literacy practices that expand [on] children’s multiple literacies” (McCarty & Dick, 2003, p. 115). Rosenblatt (1995) issues a warning to educators who do not guide their students to question the general truths of society, as doing so allows injustices and inequalities to continue to be the general attitude of society. By questioning the general truths of society, students can begin to understand their truths.

Defining critical literacy has proven to be a complex task. While there is not a single agreed upon definition of critical literacy, researchers and theorists acknowledge critical literacy as a multi-layered set of characteristics that contribute to individuals’ ability to look at the world and examine it for meaning beyond the surface level of evaluation (Belsey, 1980; Coffey, 2013; Jones & Clarke, 2007). Taking into consideration the definition of literacy, critical literacy pedagogy can be described as the process of joining together the art of listening, discourse, analysis, and self-reflection in a classroom of diverse learners (Jackson & Cooper, 2007; Jones & Clarke, 2007; Nodding, 2006; Probst, 2007; Romano, 2007; Thibault, 2002). Keene (2002) identified seven attributes found in teachers who led highly effective comprehension pedagogical practices. Spanning grades one through twelve in six separate states, Keene (2002) labeled the seven attributes as: (a) deeper knowledge of the use of multiple literacy strategies while reading; (b) intensive focus on comprehension instruction; (c) high expectations for students’ ability to apply comprehension strategies to a variety of text-medias; (d) differentiated instruction that supports the multiple learning levels and styles of a diverse classroom of learners; (e) scaffolding; (f) opportunities for students to
demonstrate their knowledge through multiple forms of communication; and (g) a deep understanding of theory and research supporting critical pedagogies.

The aforementioned pedagogical practices are further supported by the concept of teachers as facilitators of students gaining knowledge that applies outside of the classroom (Marzano, 2007). A critically focused classroom is one that allows open discussion, critical analysis, and gained understanding of social implications of current economic, political, and cultural infrastructures (Allington, 2001; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Noddings, 2006; Probst, 2007; Romano, 2007). In creating a sophisticated understanding of social implications, a student is able to use the curriculum to develop greater intellectual thoughts that are applicable to a variety of contexts (Durkin, 1969). This frame of thinking is what takes traditional literacy pedagogy to critical literacy pedagogy.

Critical literacy pedagogy encourages the student to think freely, openly question, and actively reflect on self and society (Allington, 2007; Coffey, 2013; hooks, 1994; Nodding, 2006; Probst, 2007; Thibault, 2002). hooks (1994) claims critical literacy practices as a pedagogy that embraces education as the “practice of freedom, for it allows students to assume responsibility for their choices” (p. 19). However, I contend that students are not born with the cognitive ability to naturally engage in a critical thinking process; therefore it is left to the teacher to implement a pedagogy that teaches these skills. Students who find themselves unengaged and lacking in self-efficacy in the literacy classroom are under the instruction of teachers who do not implement a critical, culturally relevant pedagogy.

Good teachers must truly be present in the classroom, deeply engaged with their students and their subjects, and able to weave an intricate web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students, so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. (hooks, cited in Palmer, 1998).
Implementing a Critical Literacy Pedagogy

Analyzing current government expectations as set by the national and state standards, one may come to understand that current literacy expectations call for students to explain, analyze, and critique works of literature as a means of developing higher order thinking skills. In addition, current social studies standards ask students to explore the economic, political, and social influences shaped by governments, cultures, and individuals who contribute to society. For example, a student may analyze the work of Maya Angelou and its influence on society’s understanding of racism as an integrated social studies and literacy activity. Even in the midst of high stakes testing and mandated curriculum, there is still a place for the development of critical literacy pedagogy.

Reflecting on the practice of culturally relevant pedagogy as discussed in the previous section, Owning Culture: A Reason for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, teachers act as the driving force behind the delivery of positive literacy experiences. Understanding that both a critical and culturally relevant pedagogy are guided by the diverse needs and experiences of the individuals in a classroom, teachers must be prepared to reinvent their literacy curriculum each year. Educators must not assume that this is the path of least resistance, as this effort is a road less traveled by curriculum developers, educators and administrators. Each year what becomes important and relevant to the students in the classroom will change, making curriculum revisions necessary for teachers to help students to critically analyze and question societal norms or truths through diversifying literacy instruction as an answer to critical literacy pedagogy.

Critical literacy differs from the typical literacy classroom as there are no workbooks to complete or book reports to give; critical literacy classrooms can be described as
classrooms that use open dialogue as a tool for critiquing thoughts found in texts. A critical literacy classroom is one that considers the students’ lived experiences as issues of critical literacy; their questions, perceptions, and understandings act as the foundation for all curriculum decisions. In addition, a critical literacy classroom establishes a safe environment where differences can be embraced and openly voiced. As African American males’ voices are often silenced in the literacy classroom, a critical literacy classroom would allow for their voices to express concerns, opinions, questions, and critiques regardless of the accepted truths of society. The job of the classroom teacher is to ensure that the aforementioned elements are honored. A critical stance must also be taken by the classroom teacher as well. In the elementary literacy classroom, this means addressing how something happens and how it makes us feel (Edelsky, 1999). A final component of critical literacy classrooms is the promotion of justice and equity across the board. Lewis (2001) encourages teachers to work with students to develop projects that promote the reinvention of cultural truths.

In order to implement critical literacy in their classrooms, teachers must first distance themselves from current teaching practices, reflecting on their own assumptions concerning race and class. It is only through a critical lens that teachers will be able to address and revise long-held beliefs (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002; O’Quinn, 2005). Singer and Shagoury (2005) ask teachers to look at what practices promote hierarchal or white privilege. What is considered to be literacy? How are languages decided to be acceptable or unacceptable for classroom discourse? And finally, what roles are to be assumed by teachers and students in the classroom? Hinchey (1998) offers additional reflective questions for educators who wish to implement critical literacy pedagogy in their classroom:

To do well in my class, must students abandon their native speech and cultural habits?...Who has what kind of power in my classroom? Why? Who gains what, who
loses what, because of my arrangement of power? How might it be otherwise?...What classroom practice or school policy do I carry out even though I don’t like or believe in it? Why?...What would be gained, what lost, in other alternatives?...Does my class help students learn to question current conditions and assumptions? Does it teach them to be researchers, to develop the critical literacies they need to become change agents? (p. 158)

As teachers and students embark upon the journey of critical literacy, a new reality begins to be socially constructed, as the world we live in is questioned and critiqued. Separating oneself from the traditional practices of literacy leads to a need to “understand the new, constantly changing environments” and to prepare individuals for “transformative engagement with the world” (Kress, 2007, p. 29).

Re-directing curriculum is not a simple task, as was previously stated. “Schools and individual teachers must own the inequalities that exist, and must find their own ways to address them in local contexts. This requires commitment by individuals as well as whole-school support” (Comber & Nixon, 2009, p. 337). In the elementary classroom, categories, definitions, and ability grouping must be deconstructed. Diversity should not lead to oppression or silencing. Students’ questions inform the direction of instruction and long-term goals of addressing culture and knowledge. Using a critical and social constructivist lens, teachers should strive to work towards an understanding of their students’ lived experiences, the diversity within those experiences, and the social constructions of their perceptions as influences on their classroom experiences (Foss, 2002).

**Using a Critical Literacy Lens**

In an attempt to find more similarities in diversity than polarities, a critical literacy lens was used to help guide students through engaging conversations about issues in our world today (Greenbaum, 1999). The primary texts of this study were fiction and non-fiction picture or primary chapter books. Bishop (1992) states, “no one book can represent the
literatures of an entire cultural group” (p. 47); therefore, critical conversation must take place to understand how the book applies to different individuals’ lived experiences. Gee (2001) and Kress (1999) termed the perceptions that students develop regarding the world and how it works as “cultural models” and “shared meanings,” respectively. It is through these cultural models or shared meanings that students develop perceptions of what is normal, appropriate versus inappropriate, especially in regard to gender expectations. These notions are developed at very young ages and influence the experiences students have in the literacy classroom. However, teachers must understand that the use of texts as a tool to deconstruct gender, power, or cultural assumptions can often be considered as another form of oppression. Texts mandated by large printing companies as part of the curriculum often present certain worldviews from a limited view of a culture and are often filtered through the lens of White, middle-class, male dominated, heterosexist powers. In the classroom, children use their socially constructed perceptions to name their identity as well as that of others. A typical socially constructed perception is that of gender and gender identities, or what society expresses as being “male” and “masculine.” As previously discussed in Chapter 2, these two terms are not synonymous, nor are they to be considered static. Rather, the perception of masculinity is continuously being developed, negotiated, and contested (Anderson, 2002). Using the critical literacy lens in relationship to gender will help students understand and analyze the dominant ways in which gender is represented in various texts (Vasquez, 2004). Gender equity challenges individuals to transform the perceptions of masculinity; thus, through the implementation of critical literacy, urban elementary African American males are able to address the stereotypes of masculinity and move forward in creating their own truths. Questioning how we name and label “ourselves as well as others” educators are able to bring
“visibility and existence that which was formerly hidden or kept silent” (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995, p. 18).

I believe that children should look at ways in which popular culture provides sites of struggle, resistance, and social critique as a way of interpreting the messages to which they are exposed. Morrell (2002; 2004) argues that incorporating popular culture into classrooms can not only raise critical consciousness, but also lead to the development of a positive literacy experiences for students. The term *popular culture* is defined by Morrell (2002) as an exchange of knowledge between two cultures: the dominant, mainstream culture and the lived experiences of urban youth. Alvermann and Xu (2003) state:

> Developing students’ critical awareness as they read, view, and listen to popular culture texts can help them see beyond the more familiar or personal connections they have with these texts. It can also lead to a better understanding of how they and others are positioned by texts within a variety of contexts. (p. 153)

Critical literacy instruction is the process of embarking on a journey that allows students and teachers to learn from and with one another while participating in a discourse that is focused upon the lived experiences of the students. The urban African American male elementary students assume the role of not only participant, but also creator. Urban children are not illiterate, rather their lived experiences do not reflect the dominant or mainstream culture as represented in the public school curriculum. Reading books or novels that are written from the point of view of a child from another culture allows students to view the world from another person’s perspective; a critical literacy approach. If students have the opportunity to discuss their religions and their experiences versus classrooms that do not encourage these conversations, the students are engaging in critical literacy. Each of these activities serves a similar purpose: to open the eyes of the students to the world they live in, to learn to understand and appreciate other people’s situations, and to empower students to
climb above the social stratification, gender, and racial injustices of the world (Thibault, 2002).

Another area on which to focus critical literacy efforts is in students’ written work. What topics are validated or silenced by the teacher? Do children have to adapt another persona to be successful in the school environment? Students bring socially constructed perceptions of the world to the classroom, and often express those expressions through written language (Whitemore, Martens, Goodman & Owocki, 2005). Through writing, students can express themselves from different perceptions or beliefs and “learn to recognize how perspective can mask or expose the social and political assumptions that influence reading and responding to texts” (Pace, 2006, p. 585). This form of written work can also lead to forms of drama and/or role-playing, which allow students to further manipulate their understanding of the world and to take on multiple perspectives outside of their own (Bean & Moni, 2003). Vygotsky (1978) theorizes that play allows children to explore the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of their world, thus expanding their understanding of societal truths versus their personal truths. Vygotsky states:

[P]lay creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development. (p. 102)

Through play students are able to look at various perspectives each child has to offer. Play allows students to make sense of their personal lived experiences and experiences of others (Davies & Harré, 1990). The importance of play as a portion of critical literacy is furthered by Kress (2001), who notes that transformative practices, such as drama, play, reading, and writing allow students to reinvent themselves through acts of representation of others and
communication of diverse thoughts as presented in texts. These critical literacy practices allow students’ lived experiences to be the focus of instruction, rather than treating students as passive consumers of knowledge.

**Return on Investment**

Implementing a critical literacy is not a simple undertaking, a critical stance of culturally relevant pedagogy is even more difficult to implement. Many teachers view critical literacy as a direct threat to their accepted truths and are unable to critically reflect upon their beliefs about power, race, and gender as influences on their teaching practices. Even more teachers will feel discomfort in allowing the instruction to be guided by the needs and lived experiences of the students. However, through time and practice the use of a critical literacy pedagogy accompanied by a culturally relevant pedagogy begins to display evidence of student progress and growth as critically literate individuals (Edelsky, 2004). Teachers who understand the relationship between culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy are able to help their students to restructure their views of the world. This, in turn, can lead to transformative opportunities—opportunities for equity and social justice. If teachers desire children to become active agents for positive social change, then providing the opportunities to develop the necessary critical thinking skills is imperative to every literacy classroom.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this critical, narratological, social constructivist case study is to understand the relationship of African American males’ perception of masculinity and their literacy experiences. The social construction of urban males’ perception of masculinity begins to develop at an early age and largely influences their decision-making process. The perception of literacy as a feminine subject does not support the extent of the perception of masculinity held by young urban African American males.

My hope is that findings from this work will provide a foundation for deeper understanding about how to implement a critical, culturally relevant pedagogy in the primary elementary classroom for African American males. Through the use of critical, culturally relevant literacy pedagogy, teachers could have a direct influence on the development of higher order thinking literacy skills in young African American students. The following central question and sub-questions were explored:

Central Question: What are urban African American males’ literacy experiences like in an elementary classroom?

- What traits of engagement, motivation, and metacognition are displayed by African American male students during literacy instruction?
- How do urban African American male students define masculinity?
- How does the use of critical cultural literacy practices engage these students in literacy instruction?

I assert that all educators must commit to their ethical obligation to present critical, culturally relevant literacy pedagogy to eradicate further oppression of the African American males in our society (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995; 1995a). This assertion is supported by the notion
that teachers have a direct influence on students’ ability to act as contributing members to society (Counts, 1978). Teachers are the constant in students’ development and engagement with others in our global economy. The instructional design, implementation, curriculum expectations, and moral standards taught influence not only the classroom environment, but also how students choose to interact and engage with one another outside of the classroom. Communication skills, inter and intrapersonal skills, and comprehension of abstract concepts are heavily sought after in society; thus teachers must teach these skills to all students through the use of pedagogy that creates critical thinkers. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe the rationale for qualitative research, the theoretical traditions selected, data sources, analysis of data, the limitations of this study, and issues related to validity and reliability. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of ethical considerations pertaining to this study.

**Rationale for Qualitative Research**

Understanding the role that urban African American elementary males’ perception of masculinity plays in the classroom will allow techniques and pedagogies to be developed that offer a critical, culturally relevant literacy experiences to the young African American males. This process of inquiry is constructed through a qualitative inquiry process. The use of qualitative research allowed me to bring my own lived experiences to the inquiry process. The major assumption that undergirded this study was my social, educational, and cultural experiences would inevitably contribute to the purpose of the study, as I was once a teacher in an urban classroom who employed the use of critical, culturally relevant pedagogy (Patton, 2002).

The explorative nature of qualitative research is noted by Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) as:
1. Human activity and emotion can be better understood when observed in the actual settings in which they occur.

2. Data are not a collection of numbers, but rather an experience as represented in interview transcripts, observations, and documents that represent the lives of participants.

3. Qualitative research is important to understanding the “how” so that the “why” in relationship to people’s reactions is better understood.

4. Researchers collect data and then decide upon the important questions of consideration through the understanding of themes or patterns in the data.

5. Qualitative research is focused upon how people make sense of their lived experiences.

The aforementioned understandings of qualitative research were further supported by Merriam (1998), who defined qualitative research as, “an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as a part of a particular context and the interactions there” (p. 6). In other words, the researcher is able to identify with the participants of the study in order to understand their perceptions of the world around them (Schunk, Pintrich & Meece, 2008). In the case of this qualitative study, the experiences of the participants were examined to understand their perceptions of masculinity in the process of becoming literate. Qualitative research focuses on the “how” first, whereas quantitative research tends to focus on the causation and the generalizability of data collected within multiple contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998, 2002). Thus the implementation of a qualitative design allowed greater depth of understanding while exploring the literacy experiences of urban elementary African American males.
In qualitative research, the researcher is allowed to construct the meaning of the world in accordance to what has emerged from their findings. This form of emergent data allowed open data collection and participant feedback. However, with such freedom comes an implication for caution, as ethical standards regarding data collection processes, and the treatment of the participants must be reflected on consistently (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). The process of reflecting upon ethical considerations is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

**Major Methodological Technique: Case Study**

The case study of six elementary African American males was influenced by narratology, social constructivism, and critical theory. Case study was the major methodological technique in the exploration of perceptions of masculinity for urban elementary African American males and the relationship of these perceptions to the literacy classroom. The history of case study can be traced back to early research conducted in Europe, but most commonly acknowledged as a true form of research developed at The University of Chicago Department of Sociology in the 1900s and 1930s (Hamel, Dufour & Fortin, 1993). Early in the use of case study as a major theoretical tradition, many researchers in the field did not view this approach as a viable source of research; however Hamel and colleagues (1993) and Yin (1984, 1989, 1993, 1994) argued that regardless of the sample size of a typical case study, a case study can provide a thorough analysis of a particular phenomenon. Case study was suitable for the design of this particular study and allowed me, the researcher, to illuminate relevant phenomena. While early opponents stated that case study did not allow for a thorough analysis of a particular phenomenon, and therefore, could not be cited as representing larger group phenomena. I believe that the use of
case study as a single case analysis allowed the complexity of the phenomena to be fully understood from the participants’ perspective and not the researcher’s (Hamel et al., 1993; Patton, 2002). This study fills the important need to examine phenomena from the perspectives of African American male students.

For this study, I drew from the experiences of six African American male elementary students. I collected and analyzed data from these six students from within a bounded experience, viewing the six participants as a group that comprised a single case study (Yin, 1994). The use of a single case study allowed me to gain further holistic understanding of phenomena (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). I first examined data from the six male students individually in relationship to the three sub questions of the study, and then conducted a synthesis of the findings organized by research question. The use of a single case study ensured “that the end product of [the] case study was a rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 1998). Using an exploratory, intrinsic model of case study, I explored the nature of the phenomena with the freedom to create a framework for the study ahead of time through the completion of a pilot study (Grandy, 2010; Tellis, 1997). I then focused on one particular group as the interest of this intrinsic case study (Grandy, 2010). To further support the use of an intrinsic case study model, my interest in the individuals in the study guided the exploration of the topic. By looking at the unique interaction of masculinity and urban males’ experiences in the literacy classroom, I was able to gain an in-depth understanding of what the situation truly implied and what those implications meant for all parties involved (Merriam, 1998). An insider’s perspective served to broaden the lens, as I have been a teacher for five years, and have gained considerable
understanding of the influence of a culturally relevant pedagogy on the students’ literacy experiences.

Narratology

Qualitative research focuses on the lived experiences of people and how those experiences contribute to their perception of reality. The use of narratology allowed the individual participants of this study to expose the researcher to their experiences as they perceive them. While the idea of a case study is to look at a single component to understand the many layers of its complexity, a narratological framework allows individual to tell their stories which contributes to complexities. A narratology framework permits the researcher to “honor people’s stories as data that can stand on their own as pure description of experience” (Patton, 2002, pp. 115-116). Clandinin and Connelly (1994) state:

It is equally as correct to say inquiry into narrative, as it is to say narrative inquiry. By this we mean that narrative is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study. To preserve this distinction, we use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon story and the inquiry narrative. Thus we say that people lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and wrote [sic] narratives of experience. (p. 416)

The foundation of the study began with the constructed stories of the participants from their lived experiences through in-depth interviews. Schuman (2005) explains that storytelling is a vital component of creating an opportunity for repressed voices to be heard and understood. The use of narratology in the study allowed the participants of the study to provide a pure and clear view of their lived cultural and social experiences.

I used empirical research studies – both quantitative and qualitative --, and a theoretical framework of race in America, theories of masculinity, historical understanding of literacy pedagogy, and critical, culturally relevant pedagogy to create meaning of the lived
experiences of young African American urban males in the literacy classroom as seen and heard throughout their “stories” (Patton, 2002; Shuman, 2005). The next section will describe the significance and relationship of strong perceptions of masculinity among African American elementary-aged males and their participation in their literacy experiences from a social constructivist lens.

Social Constructivism

Exploring the literacy experiences of elementary African American males was further supported through the social constructivism tradition. Constructivism theory “begins with the premise that the human world is different from the natural, physical world—the world of human perception is not real in an absolute sense—but is ‘made-up’ and shaped by cultural and linguistic constructs” (Patton, 2002, p. 96). This concept of reality being shaped by outside factors, such as cultural and societal influences, may provide clarity for changes that must be embraced in the literacy classroom to reflect the lived experiences of young elementary-aged African American students. I believe that as young African American males go through life they “experience various important events and their memories and the reconstructions of this form a critical part of the construction of self” (Grbich, 2013, p. 72). As themes were formed, I was able to fully immerse myself into the stories of the lived experiences of the participants.

Creswell (2013) notes:

The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual’s lives. (p. 24-25)
The basis of social constructivism allowed me to interpret the perceptions others hold of the world. Through these interpretations I aimed to explore the literacy experiences of African American elementary males. The next section will describe the purpose of using a critical theory lens to delve even further into understanding areas that are not as evident as others.

**Critical Theory**

The hope of contributing to change for urban African American males provided me with the desire to “raise consciousness about present oppression and to demonstrate the possibility of a qualitatively different future society” (Agger, 2006, p. 4). Giroux (2006) acknowledges the importance of everyday experiences within a young student’s gender, race, class, and sexuality as they are developed through cultural understanding and will also influence a student’s academic experiences. A critical theory lens allowed me to step back from the research and misrepresentation of African American male students as they are depicted in the media and journal articles. In a discussion about Hollywood films and entertainment, Giroux (2006) notes how African American male youth are depicted as violent and predatory; however, in using a critical lens, it was my hope to share a different story of African American male youth, one that empowers them and sheds a positive light onto their masculinity; a true story of resilience and passion for education.

My desire to influence a social movement for change in literacy pedagogy was supported by the role critical theory plays in the use of critical pedagogy. Critical theory also allowed me to better recognize the influences of the numerous cultural components on students’ behaviors in order to better understand their academic experiences in a literacy classroom. The tradition of critical theory is crucial to curriculum supports that allow
changes in literacy pedagogy so that young African American males may better be reflected in the lessons they are being taught.

The tradition of critical theory assisted in drawing the implications about perceptions of masculinity among six African American males and their experiences in the literacy classroom. Creswell (2013) notes, “critical theory perspectives are concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class and gender” (p. 27). Using the critical theory lens, the ideology of democracy may help to illuminate the voices of the constrained individuals—in this case, the African American males—whose voices are not heard in the literacy classroom. I believe when educators are able to hear stories from their perspectives, they will be able to better meet their educational needs. My “desire to comprehend” and “transform the underlying orders—that constitute society” (Morrow & Brown, 1994, p. 211) communicates who I am as an educator.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) views “race” as the most significant form of social oppression; with a primary focus on racism, racial subordination, and discrimination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The use of a critical race theory lens allowed me to attempt to “uncover or decipher the social-structural and cultural significance of race in education” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 51). Taking root in critical theory, which focuses on the injustices and subjugations that marginalized individuals face in the American society (Patton, 2002), critical race theory delves deeper into the inequalities of our racialized society in hopes that issues of race can be addressed and used a tool for understanding social inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT asserts that schools should embrace culture as an important component when educating marginalized children. Grande (2004) questions whether there is an acknowledgement of race and culture in schools, which most educators
avoid. CRT recommends that scholars and activists focus their work on eliminating racism and poverty and all the influences of such in order to establish equality (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001).

Critical race theory (CRT) broadens researchers’ understanding that race continues to be a significant contributing factor to the inequities faced by African American males in our education system and larger society. Furthermore, identifying racial inequity through the lens of CRT allowed me to identify the conceptions of race found within the literacy classroom that are often so embedded within the curriculum that the continuation of marginalization of classes and races, while inherently hidden through the use of politically correct terms, has only furthered the de-legitimization of the African American culture (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the [African American] by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 50)

The creation of conceptions of race allowed the founding fathers of our nation to categorize human beings as property. While laws have deemed the African American society as active members within our nation, the societal norm of whiteness continues to dissuade African Americans from reaching beyond the conceptualized expectations for their lives as placed upon them by the white society.

The inherent struggle to meet the white standard of living can be seen in the academic setting as well, where the majority of students of color are compared to white children and their achievement in school. Furthermore, the white standard of living is often reflected in both the fiction and non-fiction texts used in the American classroom, which can cause an
innate struggle within African American readers who might fail to position themselves within the literary whiteness (Morrison, 1992). Thus, CRT in education requires a radical critique of both the status quo and the purported reforms that have taken place within our education system. In the words of Marcus Garvey, “In a world of wolves one should go armed, and one of the most powerful defensive weapons within the reach of [African Americans] is the practice of race first in all parts of the world” (Grant, 2008, p. 37); therefore, CRT served as a guiding light in this study to embrace the racial identity of third grade African American male participants in their literacy classroom.

Summarily, I designed a case study through the perspectives of critical theory, narratology, and social constructivism. Such a design allowed me to make meaning of participants’ ideas about masculinity and literacy instruction. The design of the study describes the setting, sampling techniques, and participants.

**Design of the Study**

**Settings**

This study was exclusive to one Midwestern urban elementary school setting within the eastern boundary of a major metropolitan city. The community population consists of 22,846 people; 11,400 male and 11,446 female (Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, 2013). The surrounding community is comprised of primarily lower class to extreme poverty African Americans (42%) with the average household income resting at $22,619 (“43206 Zip Code,” 2013). Twenty-seven percent of the residents in this community live below poverty level, with nearly 13% living on an income that is 50% of the poverty level (“43206 Zip
Eighty-four percent of the community population has attained a high school or equivalent degree ("43206 zip code," 2013).

Trying County was the state’s fifth largest school district; nearly half a million students attending the district’s 110 schools, which include 67 elementary schools. For the purpose of this qualitative study, six third grade students from one urban elementary school, Delight Elementary, were selected to participate in the study. Delight Elementary was located in a community comprised of primarily lower income families with a large African American (42%) population ("43206 Zip Code," 2013). Delight Elementary was located in a residential neighborhood within the city limits of Trying County. Many of the homes in the neighborhood were recently restored due to a government grant to restore the urban core of Trying County. The homes were either considered Section 8 housing, or housing was offered at a rate that made it possible for families living at an extreme poverty level to live in a townhome or duplex like structure (Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, 2013). Delight Elementary served a student body of roughly 400 hundred students and more than 300 of the students received free lunch services. As revealed by test results from the national state achievement exam, Delight Elementary scored 13 % below the state average of 89% and 11% below the district average for reading at the third grade level during the 2011 school year ("43206 public schools," 2014). In spite of the extremely impoverished community surrounding Delight Elementary, the school maintained a high level of pride in maintaining an environment for students that was welcoming, clean, and charismatic.

In addition to the demographics of the school, the demographics and crime rate of the surrounding neighborhood were taken into consideration. As discussed in Chapter 2, the social construction of perceived notions of masculinity is often related to a child’s family,
society, and culture. The purpose of examining the demographics and crime rate of the neighborhood was not to develop a negative lens, but to better understand the many influences on young African American male students’ development of their masculinity from a social context. The intent of choosing a school within this particular area of the community was to embrace the lived experiences of the participants of the study, including those societal and community influences that may impact their academic experiences in the literacy classroom. The specific criteria for choosing the school was not based on a previous relationship with the school, nor was it because of any public or personal information obtained that would cause the researcher to believe that specific traits of the school would be beneficial to the outcome of the study. Permission to conduct research in the district and school was obtained through the use of consent forms as found in the Appendices A-E.

**Sampling Techniques**

To gain a deep understanding of the literacy experiences of African American urban males, I used purposeful sampling, which involved a criterion-based selection process to intentionally identify potential participants (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Merriam (1998) notes:

> The criteria you establish for purposeful sampling directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases. You not only spell out the criteria you will use, but you say why the criteria are important. (p. 62)

First, I established the criteria for this study by specifying that all participants were classified as eight to nine year old third grade African American males at an urban elementary school. Secondly, the participants were enrolled in reading intervention programs as identified at the school and district level. The students may have been in the reading intervention program for one consecutive year prior to their participation in the
study; however this was not a pre-determining factor involved in the purposeful sampling technique. Individual reading intervention plans of those who participated in the study could have identified one to three areas of literacy challenges or areas of needed growth. Potential participants were identified by the classroom teacher based upon their placement in the reading intervention program, and/or their standardized assessment scores of below level and failing grades of C or lower in communication arts from the previous school year’s assessment scores. The standardized assessment for the selection process was the third grade score on the Fall Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) assessment. The NWEA assessment is an assessment given to all third grade students enrolled in the school during the fall and spring semester of the third grade year. The NWEA is a predictive indicator of what a student may score on the spring state assessment. For the purpose of selecting students for the study, I sampled students who scored below two grade levels on the NWEA assessment. Finally, participants who met the designated criteria were classified as general education students with no academic record of Individualized Education Plans (IEP) or 504 plans.

Once individuals were identified for potential participation in the study, parental consent and student assent forms, as found in the appendices A-E were sent home for review along with a pre-stamped envelope. Student assent forms with self-addressed return envelopes were sent to the homes of those individuals whose parents signed and returned the parental consent form.

**Participants**

The criteria for selecting the participants was shared with the classroom teachers of the selected school building. The teachers then selected the students who met the criteria of being an African American male, third grade student, eight to nine years of age, and reading
below grade level, and sent home all needed forms for the students to participate in the study. Participants were chosen based upon the order which the consent forms were returned to the researcher. Due to the order that the consent/assent forms were returned, all six participants were used from a single third grade classroom within the selected elementary building. The criterion-based sampling allowed for six participants to be at the third grade level in one classroom throughout the duration of the study. In addition, all six of the participants were general education students and had no Individual Education Plans (IEP) or 504 plans that allowed for alternate assessment accommodations based upon a medical diagnosis.

Only two of the six participants had been enrolled at Delight Elementary for the entirety of the academic experiences. The remaining four had been enrolled and attended two or more elementary schools in the past four years. Two of the six participants were eight years old at the time of the study, and the remaining four were nine years old throughout the duration of the study. Each of the six African American males lived with their mothers, and three of the participants had a father whom lived at home as well. Of the six participants, only one was found to read at the third grade level upon conclusion of the study; however, when the process of selecting participants began, this young man was tested to read below grade level and was placed in a rigorous intervention program that contributed to his increase in reading ability. Of the remaining five participants, three read at a first grade level and two were reading at the second grade level. The school reading assessment and district reading assessment were used as the information source of the students reading abilities.

A profile of the participants, as discovered during study interviews or document analysis, revealed certain shared demographics among the six African American male participants. Each participant came from a family with two or more children, and three of the
six participants were the first-born children in their family. Each participant lived in a home or apartment with two or more rooms, and all shared a bedroom with one or more siblings. Each African American male shared that Delight Elementary was not their first elementary school placement, and two revealed that Delight Elementary was their second school for the third grade school year.

The participants’ primary socialization centered on school and sports-related relationships. Four of the six individuals participated in non-academic related sports teams. The four participants who participated in sports found long-term friendships in their teammates. These relationships help serve as the foundation to the African American male participants’ social construction of masculinity. Four of the six participants experienced changes in their family structure since enrolling at Delight Elementary. Four of the participants lived in a household with the mother serving as both the patriarch and matriarch of the family, or had a father who was present some of the time, but not considered to be a figure who was present in the household at all times of the year. Of those four with a mother as the head of the family, two of the African American male students were unaware of where their father was or no longer had contact with him. In addition, three of the participants lived in households with families comprised of three generations living under the same roof. One of the participants lived in a household with nine siblings and three adults.

The teacher participant was selected based upon the following criteria: current employee of the selected urban elementary school; current teacher in a third grade classroom within the urban elementary school selected; and have students enrolled in their homeroom classroom who had been selected for participation in the study as student participants. In the event that a selected student participant elected not to participate in the study or withdrew
during the data collection process, the selected teacher was still considered a participant because the remaining five student participants of the original six were members of the classroom. A teacher consent form allowed observations of the students to take place in the classroom of the participants. The teacher of the study participants signed the consent forms to ensure that they were aware of the purpose of the study.

The teacher participant of the study agreed to allow me to conduct observations during the literacy instruction period. The number of teachers participating in the study was initially dependent upon the number of classrooms that the student participants were enrolled in as homerooms with literacy instruction; however, the required number of student participants was found within one classroom, thus only requiring one classroom teacher as a participant in the study. Throughout the duration of the study, I sought to ensure that I was conscious of observing the students’ engagement with the literacy lessons, and not observing or noting the teacher’s instructional techniques and strategies. The next section discusses the data sources in the case study.

**Data Sources and Analysis**

**Personal Documents**

Personal documents are a reliable source of data concerning a person’s attitudes, beliefs, and the view of the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 116). The documents for this study were the stories as told by the African American males of their literacy educational experiences. The participants’ stories served as a major data source for this study. I maintained a written and audio journal of my personal reflections as their stories were told to me in the interview process or during classroom observations. Journals were used to record reflections during the qualitative inquiry process to make note of questions, impressions, and
other thoughts “on the problems, issues, and ideas you encounter in collecting data” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27).

To initiate the storytelling process, participants were provided with an opportunity to listen to two short stories and to then reflect on their understandings of the story in their personal journals. The two short stories that were shared with the students were *Jackie Robinson: A Life of Determination* and *Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* The purposeful selection of the short stories allowed for the researcher to observe the reactions of the study participants to stories depicting the lives of strong, successful African American men who faced adversity in reaching their goals. The study participants had the opportunity to write in their journals after hearing each of the stories.

During the course of the study, the participants were asked to write a total of five times in their journal. Journal entries and stories written by the participants served as a qualitative data source. “Qualitative data tell a story…they capture and communicate someone else’s experience of the world in his or her own words” (Patton, 2007, p. 47). The participants of the study were allowed to use the journals as part of their class work and at home. Journal entries provided valuable information and insight to their experiences in the literacy classroom. In order to ensure further in-depth interpretation of the stories, I used my reflective journal to “describe in detail how data [were] collected, how categories [were] derived, and how decisions [were] made throughout inquiry” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27). I was also able to capture my reactions to the data using reflective comments.

**Interviews**

Interviews with the students took place to ensure that further understanding of each group member’s experiences were captured. Focusing on particular moments of importance
in an interview or observation, allows the researcher to facilitate later exploration of deeper 
themes or meaning and coding of those themes (Creswell, 2013; Gilgun, 2012; Maxwell, 
2013; Moustakas, 1994; Wolcott, 2002). A total of five interviews were conducted for each 
participant, an introductory interview followed by four semi-structured interviews. A semi-
structured format afforded me the opportunity to focus in on the interview process through 
development of the interview guide set, and also provided me with the opportunity to probe 
the participants to gain further understanding of information pertaining to the study.

The interviews did not serve as the sole tool to understand the participant’s view of 
masculinity. The interviews served as the source of understanding into how the participant 
experienced and reacted to alternative genres of books that represented a strong African 
American character as the person of focus and success. In addition, the interviews were used 
to support the other sources of data collection; in hopes that the explicit and implicit findings 
in the interviews would provide crystallization of the findings. All interviews took place on 
school property in an area that ensured the identity of the student was kept confidential. This 
area was available for use in the morning, prior to the commencement of morning lessons. 
Meeting with the participants before the commencement of school or upon the end of the 
official school day allowed the participants confidentiality to not be violated, as their peers 
were not able to single them out as a participant in the study.

Each interview took place for approximately ten minutes prior to the beginning of the 
school day. This decision was made and agreed upon by the classroom teacher, building 
administrator and the researcher. The participants were not to be removed from the 
classroom during classroom lessons or instruction time to participate in the interviews.
The use of a qualitative research interview structure allowed the relationship between the researcher and participants to be fully developed while the researcher collected pertinent data for the study (Newton, 2010). In addition, due to the age of the study participants, a qualitative interview structure allowed flexibility in the structure, number of questions, and timeframe of the study so the participants did not feel overwhelmed, exhausted, or burdened at any point during their interviews. A standardized interview format would not have allowed deviation from the predetermined question set; and thus, was not an ideal interview structure for the nature of this study.

**Observations**

Observations served to crystalize the findings of the interviews and documents pertaining to meanings of masculinity and their relationships to literacy experiences of the six students. They also contributed to the understanding of the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, or thematic pedagogy, to engage students of a non-dominant cultural background. My goal was to enter the classroom and to gain further understanding of the use of a student-centered curriculum, which is developed as a result of the teacher’s understanding of the social and cultural experiences of the students.

District, school, and teacher consent forms were reviewed and signed by all necessary personnel prior to any observations taking place. In addition, parent/guardian consent and child participant assent forms were reviewed and signed by all study participants. Communication between the classroom teacher and me was necessary in order to ensure that the observations took place during the classroom literacy times. A daily class schedule was requested from the classroom teacher, and a list of potential observation visit dates were given to the classroom teacher to ensure that a literacy lesson was to take place on the dates.
of proposed observations. To ensure authenticity of the literacy lessons, the dates supplied to the teacher served as a foundation for the classroom observations, and not as a set schedule of visits. The teacher of the classroom was not expected to lessons during any scheduled observation, but it was explicitly understood that on the agreed dates of observation that teacher-choice was used to teach a literacy lesson. In addition, the teacher was encouraged not to pre-plan a unit in accordance to the desired topic of the research study; the content of each literacy lesson was aligned with the mapped out curriculum as set and agreed upon by the district, school, and grade level.

Each of the students was regularly observed within their learning environment to establish a level of comfort between the participants and myself. Designation of why I was present in the classroom was not given in a manner that placed focus on the participants, or in a manner that alluded to my purpose for being in the classroom. In addition, students were not be singled out nor personally addressed by myself during classroom observations. Each student was treated as a separate unit within the single case allowing comparison of data during the synthesis of findings. A total of fourteen two hour-long observations took place during the duration of the study and participants were observed no less than two times; however, based upon the number of student participants in one classroom each participant was observed more than the minimum of designated observations.

Yin (2003) notes, “observational evidence is often useful in providing additional information about the topic being studied” (p. 93). Merriam (1998) notes the importance of observation in qualitative research. “[Observation] offers a firsthand account of the situation under study, and when combined with interviewing and document analysis, allows for holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated” (Merriam, 1998, p. 111).
Every effort was made to be discreet during recording. Video recordings were not used during observations. Through my fieldwork notes of each observation I was able to gain understanding of the learning experiences of African American boys in a third grade classroom that used culturally relevant pedagogy. Through the use of direct observation, I was able to understand the continued level of monitoring that the teacher must use, the kinesthetic approach found consistently throughout the instruction, and the relationship or social support, which must be developed in order for the instruction to effectively take place. This information, in addition to the interviews, provided a rich description of the relationship of social development and the literacy classroom.

During observations of the classroom teacher, I looked for 13 pedagogical concepts that supported or defined the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, these concepts are discussed in findings related to observations in Chapter four. The list of pedagogical concepts was not given to the teacher prior to the lesson as these concepts may have unintentionally altered their planning process to more closely align the literacy plans to the suggested culturally responsive frameworks as found in the pedagogical concepts. Using these pedagogical concepts as a guideline for my understanding of culturally relevant literacy instruction, I attempted to capture the instruction that led to positive literacy experiences for African American boys. During the observation of the teacher in the third grade classroom, I made note of the teacher’s gestures and interactions with students, then transcribed, coded, and analyzed the information to promote crystallization of findings.

Data Analysis Procedures

As outlined earlier in this chapter, data were collected from three sources: interviews, observations, and document analysis. Each of these three sources served as data for the
development of the findings in the study. Data were collected to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants were properly maintained; this was done by using participant aliases and proofing transcripts to ensure that all distinguishing traits or responses related to the participants had been removed. All data were stored in files that were color-coded and assigned to each participant. I anticipated that the data collection process would result in a significant amount of data. As data were accumulated, information was organized, analyzed, and interpreted in a timely fashion to ensure openness and honesty in the reflection process. I found that the process of data collection needed to be conducted in a flexible manner from the beginning to the end of the study to ensure validity of findings. This point was reflected in Marshall and Rossman’s (1999) statement:

Data analysis is the process of bring order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat. Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data; it builds grounded theory. (p. 112)

In relinquishing my need to overly plan and purposefully seek meaning in areas that were not finished being explored, I was able to honor the participants’ stories while collecting, organizing, and analyzing the data.

The first step in data analysis is termed epoche. During this step, the researcher assesses personal biases in order to refrain from judgment (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2007). “Epoche is a process that the researcher engages in to remove, or at least become aware of prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under study” (Katz, as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 36). It was here that I placed aside my own experience as a literacy teacher who used culturally relevant pedagogy. Once the data were collected, the process of reduction occurred. Creswell states that reduction
allows the researcher to “continually return to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself” (Creswell, 2013, p. 94). Through the process of analyzing the data for meaning, key concepts were identified. I used the process of open coding to “identify information about the data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 164). A line-by-line analysis of the information was conducted, and labels were assigned to key phrases and concepts within the observation. These descriptive codes were then categorized using a process called interpretive coding. Once interpretive codes were placed, themes began to surface as data were pulled together in a more meaningful way (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p 69). Patton (2002) describes this process as clustering, or the assimilation of statements into groupings, noting that these statements have similar meanings or themes.

Each case was analyzed to find significant themes throughout each of the data sources. Then, the data were synthesize through constant comparative data analysis that allowed me to note similarities and differences among themes in data sets for each participant; documents, interviews, and observations. This process assumed that the data collection process and analysis of the data were recursive; thus one process informed the other throughout the course of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The following section will describe the limitations of the study, as well as the steps I took to ensure the validity and reliability of the study.

**Limitations**

Limitations often result from factors that the researcher cannot control (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Furthermore, the researcher’s job is to transparently present the limitations of the study in order to avoid criticism. I realize that the study has limitations because of the direct focus on the literacy experiences of urban elementary African American male students.
in the Midwestern area. It was not my wish to extend the findings beyond their relevance; as the researcher I sought to contextualize the findings of the study to the specific setting and participants, thus creating a connection of the findings to that specific time and place (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 66). This particular limitation was a result of the students’ viewpoints and perceptions of masculinity to their specific social and cultural upbringing, which was deliberately sought and thus has meaning for this particular context. As a qualitative researcher, I wished to understand the phenomena “in context-specific settings, such as real world setting where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest” (Golafshani, 2003, p. 603). Unlike in quantitative research, I held no hypothesis that social considerations are components of an objective reality that can be measured and quantified through numeric data (Golafshani, 2003).

Having disclosed an initial limitation of the narrow focus on a single content area in one elementary school within a large district, there was still relevance in the case study. The purpose of the case study was well grounded and supported in that the findings provided common features and connections to serve the academic community (Creswell, 2013). As the researcher, my intention was to remain open to the students’ experiences as they were exclusive to the current time and place in which the data collection occurred but could be replicated in similar settings.

When considering the experiences of urban elementary African American males in the literacy third grade classroom, I wanted to take into account possible confounding and extraneous variables: motivation and test anxiety, respectively. Some male students may have had an innate motivation to perform well regardless of their perceived notions of masculinity.
During this narratological study I consistently asked myself the following questions:

1. How did my presence influence the participants’ actual experiences in the literacy classroom?

2. Does the transcription of data accurately portray the subjects’ intent or purpose of discussion?

3. Have I, the researcher, remained reflexive throughout the data collection and coding process?

Unable to eliminate the threat of reactivity of the participants to my presence, through journaling I maintained detailed accounts of behavior changes, as my presence became one of the classroom norms (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

In conclusion, addressing the limitations calls for an astute level of awareness within the design of methodology and data analysis. Through transparency of thought processes and adherence to design elements and analysis procedures, I sought to answer the research questions. My vigilant attention to data collection and analysis contributed to the reliability and validity of the study.

**Reliability and Validity**

Rossman and Rallis (2003) note that reliability within research is derived from the researcher’s ability to “render an account of participants’ worldviews as honestly and fully as possible” (p. 65). To address the issue of reliability in the study, I used several strategies to identify the specific design of the study and the coding of data collected through observations and interviews. I ensured that the purpose of the study was being met through the use of observations and interviews by asking the participants to review the information and provide additional feedback if necessary (Creswell, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).
While the validity of the study can carefully be monitored, it is “not guaranteed by following some prescribed procedures…validity threats are made implausible by evidence, not methods” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 121). Acknowledgement of the multiple threats to validity was necessary in order to ensure credibility of the study. Therefore, as the researcher I sought to conduct an intense, rigorous, discrepancy-free study with findings based upon a plethora of evidence.

Patton (2002) states that the use of a variety of methods in a study will result in the strengthening of each method of data collection, simultaneously minimizing the weaknesses of one single approach. The use of multiple methods ensured that I maintained continuity throughout the study as well as remained true to the purpose of the whole study, and not one fraction of it. Finding a connection amongst multiple truths in data is known as crystallization (Ellingson, 2009). Crystallization in qualitative research allows for depth in the analysis process to be achieved through the compilation of many different sources of information, or the interweaving of data (Noblit, 2011). To provide a comprehensive perspective on the relationship of urban elementary males’ perceived gender perceptions in relationship to their experiences during literacy instruction, a combination of observations, interviews, and document analysis was used to validate and cross-check findings. As previously stated in the limitations, as the observer I did not know the effect of my presence would have on the participants of the study. In addition, my biases, as previously disclosed, could potentially have led to a distortion of perceived experiences of the participants in the third grade classroom in the analysis of observation and interviews (Patton, 2002); however, the use of crystallization allowed for an increased degree of reflexivity and consideration of my perceptions and the role they may have played throughout the study (Ellingson, 2009,
Noblit, 2011). Acknowledging my own vulnerability and positionality as elements of crystallization and recognizing the complexity of the findings, I discovered that there were no existing truths that could easily be assumed, rather there were multiple and partial truths that I was able to piece together to construct meaning (Ellingson, 2009).

To monitor my biases, I utilized critical friends to review the data, pose questions for reflection, critique work, and identify work for additional biases as the analysis process progressed (Merriam, 2002). Rossman and Rallis (2003) describe a critical friend as a “person [who] serves as an intellectual watchdog for you as you modify design decisions, develop possible analytic categories, and build an explanation for the phenomenon of interest” (p. 69). The role of critical friends played a role in maintaining the integrity of the purpose of the study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Researchers have an ethical obligation to conduct their study and their actions in a manner that supports the basic fundamental rights of all individuals (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The development of understanding and trust between the researcher and participants begins with the sharing of confidentiality agreements upon disclosure of the purpose of the study. Ethical data collection, analysis, and reporting of findings are imperative to maintaining the value of the work. Additional adequate precautions were implemented throughout the research process and the completion of the dissertation to ensure that the confidentiality of the participants was maintained at all times. The precautions that safeguarded against a breach of confidentiality included the use of aliases and maintaining all data collected and related research material in a locked filing system. The locked filing system was located in an office of which was kept locked, with only the researcher and chair
of the study having access to the research materials. The locked filing cabinet stored all collected physical documents, interview notes, and observation notes. Electronic files were maintained on a password secured thumb drive, which was locked in the cabinet in an envelope. Additional provisions for protecting the identity of participants included maintaining the confidentiality of the data through the use of coding system, the destruction of all identifying information, and limiting access to the core data sets. As the sole researcher and the main instrument of data collection, I identified and established a set of protocol structures to protect the participants, such as informed consent, disclosure of findings to participants, and involved academic community members (Creswell, 2013).

There are numerous potential risks related to the breach of confidentiality and privacy when conducting research in an elementary setting as well as when using young elementary students as participants. There was risk in the possible identification of participants by their peers within the classroom or within the school. This risk was being guarded against by scheduling meetings between the researcher and the participant in a private room found within the school prior to the arrival of the student body. In addition, the researcher entered the room as an observing guest of the school and did not make mention of the intention of observing particular students within the classroom. In the event that a student participant was identified by a peer in the classroom or school building, the participant and participants guardian were to be asked to meet at an agreed upon time to discuss the implications of the breach of confidentiality; however, throughout the duration of the study, there was not a breach of confidentiality, and the aforementioned plan was not needed. In addition, all participants were given the option to continue on with the study or to withdrawal their
participation if they felt as though there was a breach of confidentiality or if they no longer wished to participate. This, in turn, would have led to further limitations of the study.

In addition to the confidentiality of the participants being maintained, their privacy was taken into consideration throughout the study. When conducting research, it was important to understand the cultural norms of privacy and how the collection of data and compilation of information into the final draft of the dissertation may have violated certain cultural norms of the African American culture, the standard of educational privacy per the classroom teacher, and the standard of educational privacy per the selected urban elementary school. In order to address the potential risk of a breach of privacy, it was necessary for each participant to understand the purpose of the study as well as with whom the study would be shared upon completion of the data collection process. This information was orally given as well as included in the signed consent forms of the participants.

In the event that a student’s confidentiality had been breached or privacy had been unintentionally violated throughout the duration of the study, and resulted in harassment from outside members of the student body, faculty and/or staff of the determined urban elementary school, or other unknown individuals, the student's or teacher's participation was considered to be a risk that was more than minimal, as designated in the original protocol, and was therefore excused from further participation in the study. In this vein, the risk to all participants did not increase beyond that of minimal implications, therefore participants actively took part in the study throughout the duration of the data collection process.

As a mandated reporter, as agreed upon per Missouri, Kansas, and Ohio Teacher Licensure procedures, I am aware that the observation process may have resulted in the need to report incidents of observed abuse or neglect, or a demonstration of verbal or physical
harm to a child that would result in physical or sexual injury to a student participant (Samuels, 2006). In addition, as the researcher it was necessary for me to be aware of the possibility that the conduct of the study could result in an “unanticipated problem involving risk to human subjects, and [would be] reported to the IRB, only if it were unexpected, serious, and would have implications for the conduct of the study” ("Guidance for clinical," 2009).

When conducting the data collection process of the study, it was important and necessary to monitor participants for adverse events based upon the data collection process. As interviews and observations were conducted it was important to note the level of comfort the students displayed while providing information or during the presence of the researcher in the classroom. In addition, it was important to note the expected level of privacy of the student and teacher participants during the classroom observation process: therefore the researcher closely monitored for any adverse events that may have arisen due to the observation process. In the event that an adverse reaction was evident during either an interview or observation, it was necessary for the protocol to be altered to meet the needs and expectations of all individuals involved as participants. In the event of significant changes, the protocol may have needed to be altered and resubmitted to the Human Subject Review Board for approval in order to proceed and maintain participant comfort throughout the study; however, the scope of the study was maintained, therefore this step was not necessary nor needed to proceed with the study. As previously stated, the intention of the study was to provide a foundation for future studies to build upon the understanding of culturally relevant literacy education for urban students and not to disrupt the daily lives, routines, or classroom experiences of the study participants (Merriam, 1998).
The University of Missouri Kansas-City Institutional Review Board (IRB) structured further ethical considerations. The fundamental purpose of SSIRB was to ensure that those individuals who participated in the study were ethically protected throughout the duration of the research. Voluntary consents forms were issued to both participants and parents to meet IRB regulations. Another responsibility of the researcher was to educate individual participants about the nature of the study and to be sure their participation was voluntary. It was imperative that the data for the study was maintained in an organized and protected fashion. Physical data was scanned for accuracy and maintained in a locked file cabinet located in a secure, locked office.

I ensured the parents of the participants understood the purposed benefits from the research as well as any implications or possible risks caused by the research. I provided the building administrator, classroom teacher, and guardian of each participant with a comprehensive summary of the intent and process of the study. In addition, each participant’s identity was kept private throughout the duration of the study. In the case of an adverse event, participants would have been referred to the school counselor for proper guidance. As the researcher of the study and a mandated reporter it was my role to ensure confidentiality was maintained, as well as the privacy of the participants; however, it was necessary to understand the importance of reporting adverse events and sharing those events with the proper school personnel who were certified to help support the needs and safety of study participants. Aliases were assigned to each study participant and were used in all data collection. The potential risks of the study included the intrusion into participants’ daily routines and privacy. The process of observation in the study as a method of collecting data allowed for the researcher to observe and record information that the participants may have
considered to be personal or private. However, this risk had been safeguarded against, as all information remained under participant aliases in addition to being securely locked in a filing system during the study and for seven years after completion of the study. Additionally, all information was recorded and written within the final dissertation under participant aliases in order to prevent any future harm or risks to the participants in a psychological or social manner. As previously stated in the limitations of the study, multiple forms of checking for biases and proper analysis were implemented to ensure the safety of all participants.

The benefit to the participants of the study was considered to be the insight into their own feelings towards literacy. As the researcher I designed a study where the risks were minimalized to the greatest extent and when considering the possibility of risks I contemplated whether the research design was sufficiently important enough to the research and academic community to justify even the smallest of risks. The teacher participants of the study may have gained benefit in providing an education researcher with the opportunity to gain further understanding into the lived experiences of African American male students, who are the largest growing population of our American school system. The recreation of the study by future researchers for the purpose of curriculum development could lead to further benefits of the larger teacher population, as well as to those individuals involved in the original study. Student participants found benefit from the study by gaining the opportunity to engage with an adult to actively express their literacy experiences and to feel anticipated ownership in the growth and development of the research conducted by the researcher.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This single descriptive case study was designed to integrate the theoretical traditions of critical theory, narratology, and social constructivism to explore and understand the literacy experiences of African American male elementary students and their perceptions of masculinity that guided their responses to literacy. As a single case, the focus was on the analysis of the experiences of a group of six individual participants, bounded by space, the same third grade classroom, and shared literacy experiences. The central phenomenon that was explored was the literacy experiences of third-grade, African American males regarding their perceptions of masculinity in the literacy third grade classroom. Research has shown that for young African American males, the social norms of their culture contribute to the development of notions concerning masculinity (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012). High levels of perceived notions of masculinity often result in certain physical and emotional characteristics in young males (Gosse, 2011; Morojele, 2011; Newkirk, 2002). These characteristics of masculinity are often associated with fear of homosexuality, classism, racism, and shame of being vulnerable through failure or outsiders’ perspectives of an individual who may fall into one of these categories.

As the feminist movement took place in education, causing academics to tailor instruction to the needs of the struggling female student body, the use of metacognitive techniques and inference skills were heavily emphasized in the American classroom, resulting in a discrepancy between the inherent cognitive reasoning skills of the American boy and the expectations of the classroom curriculum (Salisbury, 1999). The task of making connections to text and inferring meaning from fictional texts differs from the analytical and
sequential thought processes often employed by young males. Furthermore, the heavy emphasis on both fictional texts and non-fiction biographical texts as a source of teaching does not meet the typical literacy choice of young males, as their preferences of texts are typically geared towards manual-like documents, engineering-based topics, and other Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) based texts (Salisbury, 1999).

This chapter presents findings from a single case study of six African American male elementary students in one Midwestern urban school. The identities of the school, the student participants, and the classroom teacher participants have been eliminated or changed to ensure anonymity. All participants of the study were assigned a pseudo-name upon the commencement of data collection to ensure that there was no breach of confidentiality. The pseudo-names assigned to the individual participants surfaced through the processes of data collection and analysis and reflect a trait that was unique to them and their individual stories. Before presenting the findings of the study, I reflect on how the study unfolded, my relationship with the participants, and the data collection and analysis phase of the research that led to the findings.

**Reflections on the Process**

The study spanned a ten month period from October 2013 to July 2014 that began with identifying the research site, gaining approval for the study through the Social Science Institution Review Board at UMKC, acquiring access to the research site, obtaining consent and assent of participants, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, member checking and verification of data, writing up and reporting findings, and exiting the research site through a final informal session with all participants. I did not know any of the participants before the study started and worked to gain their trust through informal conversations that helped to
establish positive rapport and provide opportunities for participants to ask questions about the study. These sessions were devoted to gaining trust; I refrained from collecting data at this point, listening intently to what they had to say about their daily experiences at home, school, and in the community. Positive rapport was established with all participants; overtime, I became closer to them and more comfortable in their worlds.

My original purpose to explore the literacy experiences of third-grade, African American males regarding their perceptions of masculinity in the literacy classroom did not change during the course of the study. While the language of the research questions changed and was refined, overall, they kept their original purpose. For example, how does the use of critical cultural literacy practices in the classroom develop deeper engagement in literacy instruction among urban African American male elementary students was changed to more precise language of how does the use of critical cultural literacy practices engage these students in literacy instruction.

Case study illuminated participants’ lived experiences that may have had a direct influence on their socialization within the African American culture and their perceptions regarding masculinity and engagement in the literacy classroom. Each participant’s story was directly influenced by their social and lived experiences, which contributed to their academic knowledge and skills related to literacy.

In this study, I also embraced the use of narratology as a process of data collection, as well as an opportunity to hear their stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Shuman, 2005). The paradigms of social constructivism and critical theory, with a finite view of critical race theory (CRT), supported the analysis of the social influences African American males experienced while exposing their notions of masculinity in the elementary literacy classroom.
The use of CRT within the broader lens of critical theory and social constructivism contributed to answering the central question and sub-questions of the study: What are third grade urban African American male students’ literacy experiences like regarding their relationship with masculinity in an elementary classroom?

- What traits of engagement, motivation, and metacognition are displayed by African American male students during literacy instruction?
- How do urban African American male students define masculinity?
- How does the use of critical cultural literacy practices engage these students in literacy instruction?

The six individuals, purposefully selected for the single descriptive case, were African American elementary males enrolled in the third grade at an urban Midwestern school. Selected African American male participants were considered general education students; following consent from parents and guardians, they gave assent for participation in the study.

The type of data collection was determined by the researcher prior to entering the research site. Data collected were determined by the research questions as well as guided by the theoretical framework of the study and included five individual interviews with each of the six participants for a total of thirty interviews. Journal entries from each participant and field observation notes were used to further support crystallization of findings. For each participant, my field notes that captured the interactions displayed in the engagement of literacy instruction were noted and reflected upon immediately following each observation; constituting 140 pages for a total of 840 pages of field notes over the course of the study.

The interviews served a two-fold purpose in the study; as data for addressing the research questions and a means of establishing a positive rapport with the students, which allowed for
them to feel confident in sharing their experiences both orally and written using their journals.

In order to manage the large quantity of data, a constant comparison approach was conducted with all thirty interviews. In order to understand the implicit and explicit learning experiences for each participant and the social context in which these occurred, observations took place in the general classroom. I observed the participants’ interaction with their classroom peers and the classroom teacher, as well as their individual behaviors while participating in teacher-directed and independent work activities.

All data sources were inductively analyzed using a process of descriptive, interpretive, and thematic coding (Grbich, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). As the researcher, I then re-read the data sources for emerging themes. Descriptive and interpretative codes were assigned to individual events or statements that held similar underlying patterns (Gall et al., 2003). The process of open-coding allowed different ideas or themes to be highlighted and organized in a manner that was reflective of my own progression of analysis. This process helped to make meaning of the social construction of masculinity and its meaning for the participants in the literacy classroom. In addition, the system of coding allowed for the data to be tested for completeness, ensuring that the data presented a consistent story true to individual participants, but once compiled for the group the data presented a holistic view of the phenomena and did not exclude any valuable pieces of information (Patton, 2002).

I present the findings of this study using narratology with critical theory and constructivism as major lens or paradigms. In using narratology, the story of each participant was honored through the construction if data “as pure description of experience, worthy as
narrative documentary of experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 116). Key themes signaled the location of significant concepts occurring throughout all sources of data. This process as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), allowed me to make sense of each student’s literacy experiences and notions of masculinity as well as to analyze their cumulative stories and identify common themes within the group. The unsequenced structure was used to report on the study’s finding which is recommended for descriptive case studies. Brown (2008) explains the rationale for using the unsequenced structure:

   The descriptive case study utilizes a linear-analytic, comparative, chronological, or unsequenced structure. If the unstructured choice is made, as it often is in the descriptive case study, the researcher must determine that all topics are covered, or there will be a concern about bias. (p.5)

I first present participant profiles to communicate the individuality of each participant; secondly, findings from the three data sources of interviews, personal documents, and observations are presented drawing on data from the group of six, third grade African American males; and finally with the central question in mind, I provide a synthesis of findings organized by sub-research questions with common themes and their interpretations identified in multiple data sources.

**Participant Profiles**

In a society that has effectively silenced the voices of so many African Americans from the days of slavery to the long struggles of protest and perseverance, resiliency can be found in the lives of many successfully African Americans. McMillan and Reed (1994) described resilient students as individuals who had self-discipline and healthy internal attributes, and took personal responsibility for their academic successes and failures. In
addition, resilient students had a strong sense of self-efficacy, as well as a belief that doing well in school was directly related to their ability to do well in life. Azi, Rashidi, Baruti, Daren, Chike, and Jabarl (pseudonyms) were third grade African American males, who attended Delight Elementary School (pseudonym) in Trying County, the state's fifth largest school district and reflected in their young lives were markers of resiliency. Exposing these young people to critical cultural literacy provides them opportunities to question the inequities and tensions surrounding race that is endemic to American life. While these boys shared some commonalities, living in the same community and sharing sports related interests, each possessed unique characteristics; I have used meanings captured in the data to construct brief profiles of who they are as individuals. However, the true essence of their social beings are found in this single case study through multiple data of interviews, personal documents, and observations.

**Participant 1: Azi**

Azi, was a playful and lighthearted child. He was given the pseudo-name Azi, an African name for “youth.” Some of Azi’s favorite activities were playing basketball and football on his league teams. Azi lives with his mother, aunt, and five siblings in a townhome near the school. Azi has two sisters who live with their dad in a state in the southeast.

Azi embraced his youth and enjoyed simply being a “kid, who like[d] to do kid stuff.” His youthful like behavior often times led him to be redirected during lessons in his third grade class. Azi appeared to be an outgoing child who did not lack in verbal ability to express himself to his peers or adults. He was a student who was often called on for answers in class, and did not hesitate to raise his hand to supply an answer.
Azi enjoyed having a good time in school with his friends. His favorite activity in school was math, during which he often “learns more things,” but thought the homework was “kind of tough.” Azi expressed an enthusiasm for reading books “where you could find funny rhymes,” sports books, or books on sharks. He considered his favorite books to be about First Lady Michelle Obama, but stated there were “not many of them” for him to read in school. For three months of third grade, Azi participated in an early reading intervention program that would help him reach desired reading levels for a third grade student. At the end of the program, Azi was considered an independent reader as measured by the assessment system employed by the school district.

**Participant 2: Rashidi**

Rashidi, was an African American male third grade student, who identified himself as both African American and as a child of grandparents who “moved here from Somalia.” Rashidi is a second-generation immigrant child in the United States. Rashidi was a self-professed “wise” kid, and “[knew] a lot about everything.” The name Rashidi was an African name for “wise” which was a direct reflection of the self-perception held by this young man.

Rashidi lived in a three-bedroom home with his mother, father, and three siblings, the youngest of which was merely eight weeks old when the study began. Rashidi’s mother stayed at home to care for the family’s needs, while his father worked at a local convenience store. The family placed a heavy emphasis on academics, one that Rashidi found “annoying…it means I don’t play my video games a lot and then I always have to read.”

Rashidi displayed an overwhelming love for the socialization aspect of school; however, he did not care for the academics or class lessons. Rashidi enjoyed reading comics,
mystery/detective books, and sports books, “I really like books about Lebron James and how he does slam dunks, but we don’t have none of those kind in our class…so I just don’t read until I can get one of them books.” Rashidi was considered a general education student, and had not been placed in a reading program, although he was tested to read at the first grade level. He displayed inconsistent abilities in language arts; reading at the first grade level, but writing at grade level. This discrepancy led classroom teachers and building administrators to believe he was simply not applying himself in the literacy classroom.

**Participant #3: Baruti**

Baruti was an energetic and helpful third grade African American male student at Delight Elementary. Baruti earned the pseudo-name that means “teacher” through his constant engagement with his peers as “the teacher’s helper.” Baruti stated, “A lot of my friends just don’t pay attention, or they think about games or football, and then, they just don’t know what to do. So I help them. A lot. It just keeps them out of trouble.” This natural instinct to look out for others was also evident in Baruti’s birth order. As the oldest child in his family, he stated that he took care of his brothers and sisters at home when the adults were at work.

Baruti recently relocated to Delight Elementary School from the East coast. At the commencement of the study, Baruti lived with his mother, father, two brothers and sister, and two other families, one of which was white. The three families shared a three-bedroom home in the neighborhood for financial purposes, as well as for ease in finding an adult to watch the children while others were at work. Upon conclusion of the data collection stage of the study, the white family had relocated to another home, and one child of the other African
American family had moved to another family member’s home. This change in living was often a significant point of conversation for Baruti.

Baruti enjoyed playing sports, especially basketball. He also found joy in reading books about people who “are special.” Baruti openly shared his love for listening to adults read to him, both at school and at home. Baruti was a third grade student who suffered from test anxiety. Baruti received accommodations while taking the state assessment, which allowed an adult to read the exam aloud to him. Baruti tested poorly on state examinations but did not display the same cognitive ability gaps in his schoolwork. For this reason, Baruti received special reading support that was not considered reading intervention, but was delivered by the building support specialist. This support did not differ greatly from the reading recovery program offered to those students who were considered as individuals in need of reading intervention support.

**Participant #4: Daren**

Daren, an outspoken third grade African American male student, was an artist at heart. Passionate about drawing “things about New York, like Times Square, and the Statue of Liberty,” Daren focused his time both at home and school on becoming a “great artist.” For this reason Daren, meaning “great,” which is an African name that was given as a pseudo-name to the aspiring artist. Daren developed a love for New York during a visit to the city, where he stayed, with a relative. Daren spent his summer in New York, so that his “mom could take care of all her kids.” Daren lived with his mom, grandmother, and five younger brothers. While there were a large number of people in Daren’s immediate family, he often felt lonely at home and played video games or listened to music to pass time.

Reading was not a subject that Daren claimed to enjoy.
It’s kind of complicated. Most of the times I don’t feel like I am a reader. I have to like, talk to myself and just shake it out. But then, I am a good reader, ’cause I made it to page forty-two in my book.

Daren stated that he still enjoyed picture books even though his friends did not read picture books anymore. Daren was enrolled in a reading intervention support group and at the conclusion of the study was tested to read at the level of a mid-year second grader.

**Participant #5: Chike**

Chike, African for “talented,” was given the pseudo-name to pay respect to his talent as a student. Chike was a third grade African American male who lived with his mom, who was actually his birth mother’s aunt and had raised Chike since he was in first grade. Chike had several children in his family who were either direct relatives, or were children from his church family who stayed at his mom’s house as often as six days a week. Chike had an older brother who was gunned down in front of the family’s home due to a disagreement with a neighbor over a girlfriend. Chike was the first individual to see his brother’s body and participated in counseling throughout the duration of the study.

Chike was an active participant in class discussions and was a diligent student to his studies. Chike’s mother was quick to come to the school should the teacher have any concerns, and was often “just in the neighborhood” when she would unexpectedly stop by the classroom to see how Chike was behaving in school. Chike was actively involved in his church, and often did not have his homework completed upon arriving to school because he had been at church the evening before or had had choir practice. Chike would use the time at the beginning of the day designated for doing morning jobs to hastily complete his homework as well as his morning job in order to avoid classroom consequences for not doing one or the other.
Chike enjoyed school and the socialization that it allowed, but did not state any enjoyment of the academic aspect of school. “I know I got to come to school, but it don’t really matter to me. But my mom cares, so I got to come to school.” Among his peers Chike was seen as the dominant male figure in the class, and could often set the direction for how a lesson or discussion could go through his interaction with his peers. Chike tried to steer conversations with the class or individual friends towards topics he cared about: football, music, and YouTube videos. These diversion tactics often resulted in Chike being instructed to write, respond to, or read about specific topics as chosen by the classroom teacher.

Chike often did not complete assessments or classroom tests and was given accommodations on the state exam to ensure his full participation. It was evident that there were significant differences between his state assessment scores and his ability to perform in the classroom; however, Chike was a participant in an extra-curricular reading club per his mother’s request and not because the school mandated him to participate. This club was for individuals who had been waitlisted for reading support for the school year, but needed immediate support of some sort, regardless of the structure of curriculum and instructional delivery.

**Participant #6: Jabarl**

An African name for valiant, Jabarl was the pseudo-name given to a third grade African American male student who described his academic experience as “okay, but sad sometimes.” Delight Elementary was a temporary school for Jabarl, who readily spoke about how often he moved with his family. He stated that it did not take him long to make friends, but he “only like[s] one or two good friends, ‘cause it hurts friends when you move, and [he doesn’t] want to hurt his friends like that.” This fearless young man described himself as
“funny” and loved to share jokes with his friends, teachers, and myself, regardless of whether or not the situation warranted a joke. Often times, Jabarl was found to tell a joke if called on to give an answer in class or if he was made uncomfortable by a particular situation. His bold social personality was often used to mask his soft-spoken, timid academic personality.

Jabarl spoke with a soft “r” and received speech therapy services both at school and through his family’s medical insurance provider. Jabarl performed at least two to three grade levels below the third grade level in the area of language arts, and because of recent district initiatives may face a growth year during the upcoming school year if significant improvement is not displayed by the end of the third grade school year. Jabarl described his experience with language arts as “not [his] fault. I just don’t talk like everyone and that makes it hard for me to read and write like all my friends. I’m not dumb. I just don’t do things right. Ever.” However, Jabarl was an active participant in the school’s Science Technology Engineering and Math program and performed at or above grade level in those areas.

The next section provides findings from multiple data of interviews, personal documents, and observations in the form of themes and their interpretations with thick description integrated in using quotes from interviews, captured instances of narrative from personal documents that included student journals, written assignments, and field notes that illuminated observations of literacy lessons and the interactions of the boys with their peers and teachers. Reflections from my journal, maintained throughout the study, and interpretations grounded in the research are used to make meanings of the data.

**Discussion of Findings**

**Interviews**

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The six participants were interviewed five times for a total of thirty interviews, producing over five hours of transcripts for each participant. Interview questions were derived from interviews using a semi-structured format (see Appendix F). In order to develop a positive relationship with the African American male student participants, I employed a qualitative interview format, allowing for flexibility in the interview structure and number of questions asked per interview session. In addition, if the participants began to share a story, the qualitative nature of the interview process allowed the narrative to take place openly and to be embraced as part of the narratological experiences of the data collection process.

In my attempt to make sense of each individual student’s literacy experiences in an elementary classroom, I embraced the process of contrasting and comparing individual stories, and then collecting the stories into one cumulative piece that allowed common threads to be explored throughout all of the stories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I began with a process of open coding, which led to the development and identification of themes, which were further filtered by placing the themes into meaningful categories through interpretive coding. For each data source I identified the themes, their definitions, and the subcategories that helped to illuminate their meanings.

The first theme to emerge from the interview data related to the understanding of the traits associated with masculinity, as an explanation to the larger central question pertaining to the literacy experiences of African American male students in the literacy classroom. Statements related to gender captured in experiences during reading, writing, or literacy centers allowed me to identify broad topics or interpretative codes, which were later categorized into individual themes. As Patton (2002) states, the process allows a researcher
to group meanings together that are relevant to the intention of the study. Repeated occurrences of thoughts on the development and traits of masculinity prompted me to label this theme *Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite*, defined as the awareness of perceived expectations of masculinity as seen in social and academic interactions between young third grade African American boys. This theme was developed from smaller interpretive codes: *(a) limitations of gender; (b) me, my friends, and I; and (c) acceptable situations.* *Limitations of gender* relates to the cognitive awareness that participants displayed when discussing certain traits of masculinity and how masculinity influenced their day to day activities. Instances of cognitive awareness surrounding masculinity were found in an interview with Daren:

> I have seen how he acts. Me and my friends think he tries to kiss up, you know, show up to the teacher in reading class. He acts like he wants to read a book at recess, but I seen him watching us play. He really want to play, ‘cause you know that’s what we supposed to be doing. Fighting. Playing ball.

In this interview Daren spoke to the knowledge of what it means to be masculine and the physical activities that are accepted by his peer group. As the data began to crystallize, the interpretative code, *me, my friends, and I*, was developed to support the multiple forms of masculinity that were displayed from a single participant. *Me, my friends, and I*, was defined as the need for a double consciousness or a social and academic identity in the literacy classroom. The need to have multiple identities was found in the statement by Azi:

> I like reading. But you know it…my friends…well… it’s just not like the cool thing. So sometimes, like, I get in trouble cause I act like I don’t pay attention. But you ask me what we did in reading…ASK ME! [Interviewer: Alright mister, what did you do in reading?] We read a book about bones. I can tell you all about bones now. But in class I got in trouble like fifty times by her (the teacher) cause she thought I was talking at my friends. But I don’t think they were listening really.
As Azi attempted to navigate the academic identity, he found that it was not aligned to his social identity, thus he formed a double consciousness that allowed for him to meet the social expectations of his peers, but also quenched his thirst to learn during the literacy lesson.

The final interpretative code acceptable situations supported the theme Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite, as the patterns of resiliency in the six participants began to manifest throughout the data. For this reason, acceptable situations, was defined as the attitudes of resilience found in African American male third grade students that contribute to their academic success and positive social interactions. Jabarl stated:

I get that my friend don’t think it’s right to read like I do. My brother picks on me too. But I want to be big time when I leave school. Like on Shark Tank. You know that show? Like the guy who owns the Mavricks. That’s gonna be me. I just got to be smart and when I am, people gonna know it’s cause I did me and I don’t care what they be saying.

The belief in education and the desire to achieve greatness was found as the driving force behind these young participants’ desires to rise above the social norms and to create their own definition of masculinity in spite of the perspectives of others.

Chike often told me during our time together that school was not important to him, rather that he worked hard in school so that he could make his momma happy. The notion of school not being a necessary tool for success is common to the findings of Archer (2003) and Davies (2003), who both found that “slackness” was embedded within the African American male culture; however, the studies were both limited to their deficit model of thinking and did not take into account the influence that an active parent might have on the motivation to succeed of an easily influenced children. While Chike claimed that he was independent and did not need anyone to help him determine who he was, it was obvious that there was a conflict of influences taking place in Chike’s life:
(I): “Chike, you dress so grown. Look at your button down and starched shorts. Who taught you how to dress?”

Chike: “My brother dressed like this and told me this is how grown men dress. He ain’t here no more, so I got to do it myself now. My momma helps me and calls me her little grown man.”

(I): “Where did your brother learn to dress?”

Chike: “Oh he learned from watching BET. He dressed real nice like Jay-Z and T.I.”

(I): “You like feeling grown up?”

Chike: Yeah I do. At school though my momma says I am supposed to act like a kid and learn and listen and do what the teacher asks me to do. That gets stupid to me.”

(I): “I bet it does. Does that mean you think it is stupid when the teacher does things she would do for little kids for you? Like when she makes you sit on the carpet to listen to her read? Or asks you to write about your weekend? Does that seem stupid?”

Chike: *(Chike looks at me with a face that let’s me know what I am asking is stupid).* “Yeah. We did that stuff in first grade. Nothing changed since first grade. It’s the same work. Everyone acts like they like it but they just being gay.”

(I): “Like boys and girls?”

Chike: Yeah, like [name removed] is always going up to the teacher and asking if she can have more books, but she knows she can’t read them all. And Baruti is always telling people what to do and telling them that they don’t know what they read and telling me what he thinks about stories. No one cares. It’s annoying.”

(I): “But you still do your work.”

Chike: “Yeah but it don’t matter. My momma wants me to do good. But my teacher never tells on me. Sometimes I don’t do it and then I get to stay in and do it and she don’t care.” *(The referral to she is to Chike’s classroom teacher).*

The formation of Chike’s perception of masculinity and the internal and external battles taking place as he tried to assimilate both views into his classroom experiences were found in the above interview. Outside influences, such as male role models, absent father-like figures, and media images from hip-hop added to the dynamic formation of masculinity as an African American male for Chike; however it was the presence of a strong and supportive
mother figure in Chike’s life that determined his academic perceptions of masculinity as an African American student.

Many of the interviews pertained to the theme of Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite. The interpretative codes limitations of gender and acceptable situations were illuminated when the participants were asked about how they would feel if they were to receive a book as a present, the responses included for limitations of gender were:


Baruti: Did my mom and dad give it to me? Or like a friend? [Interviewer: Your mom and dad did, but in front of your friends.] Oh. That’s like, um, that’s not okay. I would like it if it was a sports book, but that’s it. No other book would be okay with me.

Rashidi: I don’t know. I’m not gonna read it anyway.

Chike: I guess I would read it, but...would my friends get the same book too? Or just me?

Acceptable situations responses included:

Azi: Oh, that would be cool. I bet it would be a book on sharks, or even about the Obamas. I like to read about them a lot cause he is Black like me and he is the president.

Daren: It would probably be a book about how to draw or about codes for my games. Like a game book. Not a real book.

The disparity of the relationship between masculinity and literacy takes on a role of discreetness or in some cases, full denial of association with reading was found within these individual statements. Similar to the findings of Fordham and Ogbu (1986), the fear of humiliation and rejection by peers influenced participants’ conformation to the norms of masculinity; they either rejected the idea of receiving a piece of literature as a gift, or placed stipulations that endorsed their masculine traits onto the gift in order to appear cool among
their peer group. The true value in this theme was found in the independent nature of the interviews, in that each participant was allowed to answer the question as he pleased and did not have concerns that their answers were going to be shared; yet there was still a strong sense of personal beliefs of what is expected of African American males.

The second section of the interview protocol contributed to the theme of Evidence of Engagement defined as the use of motivation and display of engagement throughout literacy lessons, conversations pertaining to literacy, and reading workshop activities. Two interpretative codes supported the development of this theme: (a) motivation and (b) engagement. Motivation was defined as a positive and passionate work ethic that led to self-efficacious behaviors in the literacy classroom. When Baruti was asked whether or not he liked to read, he stated:

I guess I do, but not like all the time. You know, like, teachers make us read all the time and it’s not stuff I like. Like I like sports and playing games, and my teacher, she don’t even have books about that stuff. Sometimes I pretend I am reading books on animals and then my teacher goes and gets more books for me about animals. I don’t even read them though. I just pretend. If I had a book on how to play ball or new games to play, I would read them all the time.

Baruti discussed a personal connection to texts as well as his teacher’s perception of his connection to texts, which supported the interpretative code of motivation as found in behaviors that support engagement, the use of voice and self-awareness through metacognitive awareness for understanding how learning occurs. Oldfather (2002) states that it is only when students are viewed as the source of learning in the classroom that true teaching can take place. In other words, when teachers utilize instructional pedagogy that acknowledge the students interests first, then they may be able to close the gap between the lived experiences and experiences in the literacy classroom for their students, specifically those experiences of African American males. When Baruti voiced his desire and personal
motivation to read books pertaining to sports and/or games, he was providing an insight into what personally would motivate him to pick up a book and read independent of teacher-led instruction. This insight would provide the groundwork needed to enable teachers to find the proper source of motivation in their young African American male students; allowing the African American male students to act upon their perceptions of masculinity in a positive and academically responsive manner.

Azi’s story shared multiple instances of both Evidence of Engagement and Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite. During the interview with Azi, several statements illuminated engagement and motivation. I defined motivation as highly connected to engagement that involves metacognition, an awareness of what one possesses of what you are thinking and why (Fisher, 2002). Azi had no trouble in sharing his thoughts with whomever asked him to do so.

(I) Interviewer: How do you feel when you read a book in school during free time?

Azi: I like it. I know that it is weird for me to like to read, but I like it.

(I): Why is that weird?

Azi: You know, Mrs. B. None of my friends read like me. I don’t get to play video games at home like them, so I just read. And then it feels cool to know everything. Like real cool. And people, they come to me for help. It’s better here cause I don’t have to worry about not knowing the answer, I just know everything.

(I): Do you feel like people get that? Or do you feel like you don’t fit in with your friends because you read?

Azi: Some people act like I am stupid, but then they want my help and I get to say no cause I know something they don’t.

(I): What do you like to read about the most? I know you know everything, but what’s your favorite?
Azi: I like to read about Michelle Obama. I can tell me mom what she does and then maybe my mom can become like her. She is really smart too. She made a new food plate and it helps kids like me stay skinny.

(I): So do you check out a lot of books about females?

Azi: No. Not really. Just her. At school I have to check out books from the library and they are old.

(I): Got it. So, if you had to read a book and write a story about it, what type would it be?

Azi: It would be about like animals or famous black people. We studied black people in school and you just missed it. We got to read books and do reports on people like Martin Luther King and some peanut man.

(I): That sounds really awesome! Why did you like it so much?

Azi: I like reading about people. I like learning cool things. My auntie goes to this game night where they ask a lot of questions and you win if you know the answers. I want to do that and win. You get money for it. I am going to have lots of it.

What emerged from these statements and countless others from Azi, were rooted in the previously discussed themes of Evidence of Engagement and Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite, reflected in Azi’s perceptions of what it meant to be masculine as an African American boy and how he did not fit within those accepted norms found in the academic setting. Referring to himself as weird and acknowledging his desire to read illuminated his acceptance of a lack of masculine traits. Further evidence of engagement was found in his personal motivation to read and write about his experiences, both in the classroom and out of the classroom.

The significant impact of creating a pedagogy that is engaging and motivating was found in the discourse between myself and Azi when discussing why he found third grade enjoyable:
Azi: “I like third grade cause it’s different to me. I used to get real scared about liking school. My friends, Student A and Student B, they always told me I was a teacher’s pet, and that made me mad, but now in my class our teacher makes it fun and everyone likes it.”

(I): How does your teacher make learning fun for you and your class?

Azi: She asks us what we like. Well, sometimes. Sometimes it’s like you want to fall asleep and you got to do this (holds his eyelids up with thumb and pointer finger while opening his mouth wide).

(I): You got to keep yourself awake?

Azi: Yup. You know what I mean, don’t you, Mrs. B?

(I): Oh yeah, I do. I really do. So when it’s fun in class and you don’t feel like falling asleep, what is your teacher talking about?

Azi: Well like, I like to move (emphasis given by student as he wiggled in seat) and when she let us do centers, or listen to music during our centers it is real fun. Sometimes she gives us dance breaks if we are getting too loud, and that helps me get my wiggles out. Sometimes I hear a song and then I can write about it. Just like Dr. Seuss. You know. His books you can sing.

(I): Really? Tell me how.

Azi: They rhyme and so do songs. That’s what we learned in music class.

The above transcription reinforced the supplemental interpretive codes of the theme Evidence of Engagement. As stated by Milner (2010), effective literacy teachers are aware of the need for a culturally relevant pedagogy and actively implement it in their classrooms. It became abundantly evident that Azi enjoyed the use of centers and lyrical connection to Dr. Seuss, which was a collective effort between his classroom and music teachers to integrate a literacy lesson into the music curriculum. Similar findings were evidenced by Nichols’ (2006) statement that youth find meaning in the lyrics of music, and within that mass of meaning is often a societal definition of what it means to be masculine. However, in the case of Azi, a positive connotation in music was found and served to support his desire to be academically strong.
Rashidi truly enjoyed the interview process and was more than willing to ask the researcher the same questions asked of him. He found reading to be enjoyable and believed he was most engaged with his text when

[I am] reading detective stories like Nate the Great. I would read those books all the time. There are a lot of Nate the Great books, but only one in our class. I have read that book a lot. I also think that I like books about animals and people. [Interviewer: Like who?] I like people like Michelle Obama cause she reminds me of my mom. My mom is really smart like her and raised us kids on her own. I like to know more about people like that so I know how to make a lot of money when I grow up and get rich.

The notion of engagement cannot be denied in the above statement, as it was a perfect example of engagement through the reading of a critical, culturally responsive text that mirrors the lived experiences and expectations for growing up in an African American culture as defined in the interpretative code of engagement. Such experiences in the literacy classroom allow students to transcend the fear, doubt, and discouragement of not knowing how to grow up to be successful, or lacking in shared lived experiences of adults who represent an ideal life as a masculine African American male (Covery, Merrill & Merrill, 1994).

The concept of metacognition, as defined in the interpretive code of engagement, was often found in the third grade literacy classroom of this study. Based on the importance of possessing knowledge about personal cognitive processes (Fisher, 2002), metacognition is a central concept of traits of successful learners. The theme, Evidence of Engagement, as supported by motivation and engagement, was found throughout the conversation between Daren and myself regarding his literacy experiences.

(I): “Do you have a favorite series that you are reading now?”

Daren: “No, not really.”
(I): “Really? Do you like to read?”

Daren: “Well yeah, I do, but it is, not me.”

(I): “I understand that. When you do have to read what helps you?”

Daren: “It’s fun to read when it is something I like to read about. Like drawing. I go to the library and get lots of books about drawing animals, cars, and buildings. That’s what I do. I am an artist.”

(I): “Can you be an artist and a reader at the same time?”

Daren: “Um… (Sits and thinks for approximately two minutes). I think you can. But you have to be smart. Like you have find good books and look at the pictures to learn how they drew them. So you can do both.”

(I): “Is that what you do in class? The teacher tells you to read a book and while you are reading you know it is important to look at the pictures too so that you can learn to be an artist?”

Daren: “I am an artist, so I look at the drawings a lot. But if my teacher tells me to read then I do both. The pictures make the words easier for me to know the words too. They are like clues just for me. They help me so I don’t fail.”

The engagement and motivation to read found in Daren came from internalized factors from Daren’s life and fear of failure. As discussed in Chapter 2, young African American males may fear failure (Archer, 2003) and it was through the metacognitive awareness of how he personally learned that Daren was able to find strategies to help in the literacy classroom. This belief that the pictures provided him with tools to successfully read as well as to become an exceptional artist provided Daren with the motivation needed to engage in the literacy classroom.

The third section of the interview was related to the experiences the six young African American male participants had in the third grade literacy classroom which supported Relevancy of Literacy, defined as the strategies necessary to engage young African American male in all aspects of the literacy classroom. When asked how they felt when it
was time for reading in class, the responses of students highlighted the *Relevancy of Literacy*. This theme emerged from interpretations of: (a) *culturally relevant pedagogy*, (b) *critical literacy*, (c) and the need for critical literacy and/or culturally relevant pedagogy. *Culturally relevant pedagogy* was defined as a literacy that was empowering and culturally congruent, similar to the definition of culturally relevant pedagogy as found in Ladson-Billings (1995) work; a pedagogy that focuses on the empowerment of the collective group, and not on one individual. Several students expressed how engagement changes as a result of *culturally relevant pedagogy* and the need for critical literacy and/or culturally relevant pedagogy:

Chike: She [my teacher] don’t read stuff I like. She only reads grown-up books to us. Like about dinosaurs, bugs and bones. But I don’t care ’bout that. I like comics, and sports, and stuff, like for kids, you know? Like how to fight and ninja moves.

Azi: It’s [reading] is okay. It was Black History Month and we got to read a lot of books about Black people, which was cool. Now we are reading about spring. We always read about spring in school. I guess we are supposed to but I know a lot about spring. It would be cool to read about Easter or like how to make candy. Something cool like that.

*Critical literacy*, was defined as a literacy that was eye-opening, equitable, and created positive emotions towards expression of thought.

Jabarl: One time we had a student teacher and she used these stations during reading. We could talk to each other during our station. One station was with her and we got to talk about the book she read to us. It was really fun and I liked it a lot.

The notion of *critical literacy* was supported through the implementation of a culturally responsive curriculum in Rashidi’s third grade classroom. During one literacy center, Rashidi was given the opportunity to use his lived experiences of being the son of an adult who works in a convenience store as an assignment at the creative writing center.

(I): “Tell me what you wrote about during the creative writing center.”
Rashidi: “Well, my dad works at a store, and Mrs. Teacher said it was okay if I wrote about that. So I wrote this play about working there with my dad.”

(I): “Very cool. I see that your dad says, “Go, go read! It’s good for you to read!” a lot in your illustrations. Wow! Do you like that or does it get old?”

Rashidi: “It’s okay. One time though Jabarl was with me, and my mom made us both read. I got in trouble cause I said no.”

A response from Baruti illustrated both *culturally relevant* and *critical literacy*:

I like when we do reading. I like to learn new things. Sometimes it’s boring because we only get to give connection thumbs to the teacher. [Interviewer: What do you mean?] Connection thumbs means you made a connection, but I want to share about my connection and see if my friends have it too. Like when we read about bones, I broke my bone once and I wanted to tell my teacher, but she told me to be quiet. But I know Chike and Daren wanted to share too cause they were with me when I broke it and we were excited about it.

The use of critical, culturally responsive education prompted the six participants to speak to the significance of their literacy experiences and to share the topics that they enjoyed the most. These topics were often a direct reflection of their current understandings of what it meant to be a young African American male student.

The need for critical literacy and/or culturally responsive pedagogy for curriculum relevancy depicts the absence of both *culturally relevant pedagogy* and *critical literacy* and noted in these responses:

Chike: It’s dumb. We have to sit on the carpet and listen to a story, then the girls always raise their hands to ask questions. Then we have to come back to our seat and do worksheets about what we read. Sometimes the teachers call us back to give us a test, but mostly we just sit at our desk and do worksheets. It’s not fun.

Rashidi: I don’t do good in reading and writing. [My teacher] always tells me to write the right way, but I don’t get it. One time I wrote about a leprechaun and it was a good story. I didn’t get all my points cause I didn’t write like she wanted me. I hate writing. I didn’t get what I did wrong.
My analysis of Chike’s story also illuminated the theme of *Evidence of Engagement.*

I noted that many of the situations noticed or spoken of by Chike were sole reflections of his experiences in the elementary literacy classroom.

My teacher, she don’t get me. She picks books for me that I don’t get.

That book on King (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) was real nice. My momma says that if it weren’t for him, I would be a slave still, like my people were. That isn’t right. I talked to my momma bout that book. She said I should be happy I learned bout him. And I am.

I know I don’t learn good when I don’t care. It’s like an airplane is in my mind and I can just hop on and go away. Sometimes I have to talk to myself and say to listen to my teacher to myself. But then I try to keep telling myself that and then I really don’t listen. It gets me in trouble. My teacher calls me out for staring. Then I get mad and I don’t pay attention cause she didn’t have to do me like that.

My neighbor just went to the army. He got to sign up and go to a camp. He says he is going to be real strong when he gets back. He told me he might go fight. That scared me a lot cause they have guns and I saw someone who was shot and they died. I don’t want him to die. My momma and I went to the library to find a book about the army. I been reading a lot about the army so that when he comes back I can tell him stuff. And I can tell him how to be safe with his gun and to only kill bad people.

I don’t like reading class. We always have to write and listen. I don’t do good at listening. When we get to use letter cards or hold the book at the listening station then I get it [reading] better, but my teacher says she can’t afford to buy all the books. So mostly we just have to listen to her read from one book. I can’t see the words and sometimes I don’t get what she said.

As Chike recounted his lived experiences and described the many roles literacy plays in his life, it became obvious that he found true *engagement* and *motivation* to read or participate in acts of literacy when they were directly related to the experiences in life he was having at that moment. In addition, Chike was a struggling learner who was making attempts to find mental regulation in his learning. He knew his capabilities of learning, and when he was not focused enough or did not care enough to take away meaning from a lesson. Davis (2003) found that young African American males’ demeanors were often punished in the
classroom, which was the case experienced by Chike, who, even though he was cognitively aware of his lack of attention and made a mental attempt to connect to the lesson, was still reprimanded by his teacher.

In listening to the voices of the six participants, it became evident that when the curriculum embraced topics of interest, topics which allowed higher order thinking, and encouraged the student to look at their learning as a mirror of their lived experiences they were engaged and motivated to participate. In a student who was normally unaffected by literacy lessons, there was one particular lesson that was outstandingly engaging for young Jabarl. The themes *Evidence of Engagement* and *Relevancy of Literacy* were fully illuminated here. WS7AR7

The following observation notes followed by an interview and reflections show the importance of implementing a critical cultural literacy lesson in an elementary classroom:

Observation notes: Today’s lesson is about Native American tribes, the history in the United States of poor treatment towards the Native American people, and then a connection to a daughter of a German concentration camp survivor. I am interested to see if the students are thoroughly engaged. (*The lesson commences with a read aloud about the Trail of Tears*). I notice that Jabarl is sitting quietly and during a quiet moment he raises his hand. Jabarl, a class clown of sorts, is an example of a task avoidance individual. I am shocked by this action. “What was that word you used?” asked Jabarl to the teacher. Her response is an explanation of oppression. Jabarl nods his head.

Later in an interview Jabarl and I discuss the lesson:

(I): “What did you think of that book about World War II and the Jews?”

Jabarl: “I was so sad. But you know, it’s like what happened to Indians and Blacks too.”

(I): “Tell me what made you think that.”

Jabarl: “In church we sing a song about it. My grandmamma sings it real loud.”

(I): “Can you sing it to me or tell me the words?”
Jabarl: “It’s about Moses.”

(I): “Does it say *let my people go*?”

Jabarl: *(smiles)* “Yup. You know that song?”

(I): “I do. How does that song remind you of the reading lesson?”

Jabarl: “Well all these people got pushed around like being bullied by other people. That lady said lots of people died and I know Black people died too and so did the Indians when they had to move from their home to a new place and it got real cold. So, like, a lot of people died cause other people hated them. You know that Chike’s brother died cause someone hated him too.”

Not only did Jabarl find active engagement, but also this particular lesson led him to a critical frame of mind in which he was able to make connections across multiple curriculums and to build upon his understanding of the world surrounding him (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In order to empower a classroom of diverse learners, teachers must understand and embrace positive meanings of masculinity and find ways to transform and expand notions of masculinity that may negative influence their academic experiences. Such an acknowledgement would allow the development of a literacy curriculum that is differentiated for a diverse student body of learners. For example, Azi, who actively participated in team sports, wrote about his future as a football player, embracing the general nature of the writing prompt, but finding significance in his lived experiences as a student athlete and his desire to continue on to become a professional athlete.

When I grow up I want to be a football player. First I like to play football because it is a fun sport. Second it is fun because you can run and get good exercise. Third you can play with your friends at football.

The connection to self was relevant and sustainable in his knowledge about football, the benefits of playing, and the acknowledgement of a positive interaction with his peers. The use of a curriculum that embraced who Azi was as a student as well as who he desired to be
as an adult, supports the theme of *Relevancy of Curriculum* through *critical literacy* and *culturally relevant pedagogy*. In allowing Azi to write about a career in football, the classroom teacher was creating a critical, culturally relevant pedagogy that allowed the African American male perception of masculinity to be positively represented in the literacy classroom. Additional support of the interpretative code *critical literacy* was found when Azi stated, “When our teacher teaches a good lesson, it makes me think why? Or how?” The evidence of critical thinking in this statement supported the idea that a critical literacy was one that generated deeper thought and helped students to critique the world.

While reading to Baruti, an informal interview took place that provided great insight into the theme *Relevancy of Literacy* supported by the interpretive codes *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP) and *critical literacy*. Ladson-Billings defines CRP as, “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (1994, p. 17-18). She broadens this concept by employing the term critical literacy as students’ ability to “engage in the world…[in a manner] that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (1995a, p. 162). During the interview, Baruti and I discussed his learning and how he felt it helped him engage with others as their peer and “kid teacher.”

(I): “I noticed that you really enjoy listening to stories being read to you. Do you feel like you understand them more that way?”

Baruti: “Yeah kind of. It’s like when I go to church I know that when Pastor [name removed] talks up front I am gonna love it. But when I go to class and Sister [name removed] makes us read from the book I get so bored. That’s why I like when you read to me.”

(I): “Well that’s good to know. Thanks for sharing. So can I ask you another question?”
Baruti: *(Anxiously shakes head and bounces up and down in his seat)* “Yes!”

(I): “What books do you enjoy being read the most?”

Baruti: “Like detective books. Or books about me?”

(I): “What do you mean?”

Baruti: “Well, like we studied black history month and it was cool to read about books about me.”

(I): “Books about African Americans.”

Baruti: *(shaking head anxiously again)* “Yeah! That’s real cool to do. You know, I wrote a story about Nate (a character from the book *Nate the Great*) and he was black like me.”

(I): “What?!? You did! That’s awesome! Do you wish you saw more African Americans in books?”

Baruti: “Well duh, Mrs. B. Don’t you? It would be like seeing me everywhere.”

(I): “I do. It would be awesome to see you everywhere! I totally agree!”

This unique young African American male elementary student found himself in the literacy classroom and knew that African American culture and voices are often marginalized; however, through his own engagement and motivation to embrace the African American culture, he placed the presence of being a strong African American male at the forefront of his role in the classroom and re-wrote a classic story such as *Nate the Great* with the lead character as an African American boy. He truly embodied resiliency and voice, being able to speak for self, as found in the theme *Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite.*

**Personal Documents**

Each story from the participant helped to highlight the unique experiences held by six exceptional young African American third grade males in the literacy classroom. As I began
to collect data for the study, I was aware of the purpose of observing the experiences of the young African American male participants in a manner that maintained the authenticity of their learning, but also allowed their voices to radiate in their personal stories and connections to the study. I approached each individual participant separately, as outlined by the study protocol, and explained the purpose of my study. Each of the six participants were elated to participate and were diligent in sharing their experiences with me in whatever way was required during a particular session. Personal documents, journal entries, or completed classroom work helped me capture their individual stories and use the documents to pursue further inquiry in the interview and observation phases of the study.

The findings from the personal documents established categories that reinforced the central question of the study: What are urban African American male elementary students’ literacy experiences in an elementary classroom? Through reflection and crystallization of data the three themes emerged as contributing factors to the literacy experiences of African American males. As discussed in the previous section, these themes were (a) Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite (b) Evidence of Engagement and (c) Relevancy of Literacy. The analyses of these three themes follows.

The themes of Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite is deeply connected to the concept of the development of masculinity in African American males. Despite incredible hardships and presence of social structures that may limit the socialization of African American males and their ability to adapt to the greater expectations of the American society, many African American male students have developed characteristics and social cues that enable them to achieve academic success (Winfield, 1991). As young African American male elementary students develop their beliefs and definitions of what it means to
be masculine, they are also beginning to develop their ideas of what it means to be successful and to achieve greatness.

*Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite,* surfaced from the document analysis of collected classroom work and journal entries from each African American male student participant. These personal documents denoted that the students had a unique concept of their masculinity and what that masculinity entailed as a third grade African American male elementary student. The interpretive codes that comprised this theme were (a) *limitations of gender,* (b) *me, myself, and I,* and (c) *acceptable situations.* Roberts-Douglass and Curtis-Boyle (2012) state that the development of masculinity in African American males is constructed through a social emphasis on physical ability and the proper display of emotions. An emphasis on masculinity was heightened in the classroom social setting for these young males. A journal entry from Rashidi spoke to this finding of *limitations of gender:*

[The] subject that I enjoy the most is gym because we can play and run…when you get hurt in gym or recess you need to get up and play more. If you hurt too bad then tell a good friend you have to go to the bathroom. You just need to take a break or something.

The rich descriptions of masculinity in a physical and emotional sense suggest that young urban African American males are influenced early on in their construction of masculinity; assuming traits of masculinity to be physically strong and emotionally independent. Their understanding of masculinity influences their academic performances as well. In a study conducted by Archer (2003), individual African American participants in a classroom were more likely to be accepted by their peers if they were perceived to be uninterested in academics. In particular, if an African American male student showed little interest in areas of study that were considered to be highly feminine, such as literacy, he was
granted a higher social status by his male peers. This phenomenon was reflected in the collected work of two participants who sat within arm’s distance of each other in their third grade classroom and often played off of each other’s actions. During the course of one literacy period, the classroom teacher asked students to think of three activities they enjoyed in third grade, to write a paragraph about the activities, and why they were important to the student. Daren who enjoyed drawing, drew a building on the writing paper with graffiti-like art stating, “Sucks” and “Stupid.” This paper was turned into the completed basket in the classroom for a grade. Rashidi, who initially began writing to the prompt, attempted to complete the assignment by writing:

First, I like 3rd grade because we do fun stuff. Second, we have good books to read. Third, I can have fun with my friends.

However, over the writing, Rashidi marked out his response with the words, “Dumb” and another word that was illegible; having seen the work of a peer, escalated his meanings of masculinity or being unengaged in expressions of emotion through written word, and he copied the same traits onto his own written work. This observation was interpreted as me, myself and I and limitations of gender. Patton (2002) notes that the idea of social groups contributing to the constructed reality of individuals has long been acknowledged throughout history. “The thread throughout is the emphasis on the socially constructed nature of reality,” (Patton, 2002, p. 98), and the realities of the construction of masculinity in African American males are evident in the physical and emotional reactions to academic expectations in the elementary classroom.

Rooted in the resilience of African American males in the academic setting, instances began to emerge of perceptions of masculinity in the young African American male participants that led to positive experience in the literacy classroom. These traits of reformed
masculinity were developed in spite of the strong physical and emotional expectations of masculinity. For instance, Chike, refused to utilize his journal as a tool to write down his thoughts or feelings in traditional rhetoric; however, it was agreed that he could use the journal as his hip-hop journal, which led to his engagement in the writing process. His double consciousness, or the need for an academic identity and a social identity, helped to support the interpretation of *me, myself, and I*. In his journal for lyrics he wrote:

I gotta be strong. What you did was wrong. Leaving us behind. Trying. A[i]n’t gonna ask, just gonna do. We miss you. Do you know? I’m gonna do better[r]. Gonna be strong for you. I gotta be strong.

His displayed a perceived notion of masculinity, which required him to appear to be disengaged from the traditional learning experiences. These notions of masculinity were further reinforced by the need to be socially accepted by one’s peer group. The need to have a socially accepted perception of masculinity by a peer group was aligned with the interpretation of *acceptable situations* connected to the theme of *Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite*. The socialization of masculinity often involves the act of being “cool,” being admired or liked by the opposite sex, and seeming to be both physically and emotionally strong (Biller, 1968). The theme *Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite* was further supported, as it was in spite of the participant’s perceived beliefs about masculinity that the student found himself being emotionally vulnerable and writing lyrics to his brother who served as the father figure in his life until his brother’s own life was taken.

The theme, *Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite*, was further captured in the words of Azi. In the following journal entry Azi was prompted to write about why he liked third grade. In this response Azi displays the interpretive codes of *acceptable situations* defined as the attitudes of resilience found in African American male third grade
students that contribute to their academic success and positive social interactions and me, my friends, and I defined as the need for a double consciousness or as social and academic identity in the literacy classroom. Resilient individuals have self-discipline and healthy internal attributes, and take personal responsibility for their academic successes and failures. These characteristics are displayed by Azi:

First, I like third grade because we do fun stuff. Second, we have good books to read. Third, I can have fun with my friends.

He enjoyed third grade and possessed intrinsic values related to learning. As reviewed in the literature resiliency acknowledges “the quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency problems they are at greater risk of experiencing” (Linquanti, 1992, p.2). In spite of living in a family with an absent father, Azi was learning to overcome adversity and was encouraged to read at home.

The need for a double consciousness was illuminated in Azi’s journal entry that spoke to the impact of a missing father figure in the development of perceptions of masculinity. A double consciousness is defined as understanding that as an African American, one must negotiate two different worlds. In this case, Azi had to negotiate the meanings of masculinity that conflicted with more feminine characteristics, acquired through family socialization. As a young African American boy raised in a household dominated by women, Azi displayed characteristics typically associated with young African American girls: compassionate towards others, emotionally vulnerable, and interested in examples of strong African American females who are successful by standards set by American society. The lack of a father figure in Azi’s life allowed him to piece together his beliefs about masculinity by looking to alternate sources for examples and traits of what it meant to be a masculine
African American male (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012). The findings of Roberts-Douglass and Curtis-Boyle (2012) stated that the lack of a father figure was detrimental to the development of the gender perceptions of young African American males; however, Azi proved to be an outlier to these findings, as evidenced by his literacy center writing response entry regarding whether or not third graders should do their own laundry.

Yes, third graders should have to do their own laundry. The first reason is to keep our laundry clean for school. The second reason is so their clothes won’t look dirty. The third reason is they want people to look at them.

Here we see a positive outlook on the responsibility of doing one’s laundry, a gender role that is typically determined to be a female household task. However, contrary to the roles of masculinity, Azi has embraced this feminine role, despite the fact that it could potentially lead to rejection from his peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Azi further defied the perceived notion of masculinity in the classroom. This need for a double consciousness in order to find enjoyment in school is supportive of the interpretive code *me, myself and I* as young Azi found his identity in the love of academics, but in so many other aspects of the study displayed strong characteristics of traditional masculinity as formed through family and social influences.

The influence of social media, such as television and video games, is emphasized in Azi;’s journal entry where he places emphasis on notions of masculinity which represented individuals with money, or the ability to provide for themselves and their loved ones, and highly-elevated on the social ladder. This idea of masculinity supported the interpretative code of *limitations of gender*, or the cognitive awareness that participants displayed when discussing certain traits of masculinity and how masculinity influenced their day to day activities:
Azi: When I grow up I want to be a movie star. First reason is that you can have your own car, but my car name is Sicon FRS. Second reason is that you can drive really fast like one hundred million miles per hour. Finally you can be a very cool police officer. There are the reasons why I want to be a movie star like Van Diesel.

The construction of reality and lack of emphasis on the importance of education is found in the media’s contribution to the construction of masculinity for young African American males. Unable to derive deeper meaning from the scenes of movies, this young student deducted that being a man means acting a certain way and having star-like qualities. Taylor and Bogden (1984) remind us that the reality of the participant is important as it is constructed of both the present and the absent, often the absent holds the heaviest influence on the development of young African American males’ perceptions of masculinity.

The theme of Evidence of Engagement as supported by the interpretive codes of motivation and engagement supported the research questions pertaining to engagement and motivation through the use of voice and metacognitive awareness. The stories, Jackie Robinson: A Life of Determination and Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., were used during two interviews and served as journal prompts. The two texts varied in length and biographical focus (i.e. sports related and historical figure). The texts were purposefully chosen to connect to the participants’ interests in sports and to offer a broad perspective of masculinity. Merriam (1998) states that the use of personal documents in a study provides a reliable source of data concerning participants’ beliefs and attitudes toward the subject in question; therefore, reading the books to the six participants and collecting the journal entries of reflection on the readings offered insight into their views of masculinity and characteristics of strong, influential African American males.

The stories told through the young African American males’ personal journal entries “capture[d] and communicated[d] someone else’s experience of the world” (Patton, 2002, p.
47), as seen and heard through the reading aloud of the two short stories. African American male participants were able to share their connections to masculinity in their stories, and what their beliefs were regarding what it means to be strong. Jabarl was irritated by the stories, writing in his journal:

I would be mad. It don’t make sense that black people get treated like that and don’t do something. It’s just not. My mom says that when someone is bullying me that I got to stick up for myself and Dr. King and Jackie didn’t stick up for themselves. Dr. King got put in jail all the time and if it was me I would haven’t been in jail. I would have been mad and hit someone. My friend told me that if someone calls me the bad word like that that I need to beat them to. And I would. Can’t call me that word. I would hurt them cause that hurts me. But at school you can’t do that. You got to wait until you get home. Then you might have help from a friend or brother. That would make not so bad.

In this short, but true to self, journal entry Jabarl expressed his perceptions of masculinity as well as a heightened connection to the history and struggle that African American have experienced in order to gain human rights and to be respected. Lee (2001) found that if the curriculum or lesson delivery was structured in a way that allowed African American students to see their culture mirrored in the lesson, a natural increase in engagement was to be expected, which is evident in his strong reaction and recollection of information from the texts. This personal document served to support the interpretations of motivation and engagement.

In an entry that was written to a given prompt, Azi wrote:

When I go to school I have lots of fun. My favorite subject is math and reading. This is a great school for me because I can have fun. With my friends and the teachers are fun too. We like to do homework to get smarter every day. When I go to school I have success with me. School is fun because I have friends and teachers to help me every time. Schools are great.

This particular example of motivation and engagement in reading, as well as math, is overwhelmingly self-perpetuated by his desire to “get smarter every day” and to “have
success with me.” This journal entry also embraced the theme of Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite of, which referred to the resilient nature of young African American male elementary students. Again, this entry was supported by the interpretive code of acceptable situations. In spite of the adversity that young Azi has faced in life, he found academic success through personal motivation and self-efficacious behaviors (Rubin, 1996). This assertion of a desire to rise above the expectations and to embrace academics, rebels against the perceived notion of masculinity as outlined in the study, Failing boys?: Issues in Gender and Achievement, researched and written by Epstein (1998), who argued that young African American males are naturally predisposed to not complete school work, as it was not in their natural state of being. However, Azi redefined natural predispositions in his assertion that he not only enjoyed school, but also enjoyed completing homework every night because it provided benefits to him personally. This internalized source of motivation was the foundation of the study, conducted by Howard (2002), who found that when a positive and effective teacher embraced a critical curriculum, they inspired engagement and created self-efficacious student behaviors.

During collection of Rashidi’s personal documents, he was often found to be disengaged in the writing process or the literacy experience as a whole. His inability to restate directions, concepts of lessons, or general knowledge of literacy center expectations furthered the complexity of the perception of his abilities within the classroom. For instance, during a particular writing center activity, the students were prompted to write about the qualities of a good friend and were warned that they would be sharing these stories aloud with their classmates. Rashidi’s story was as follows:
Boys bullied Lonnie and Jack. They were sad and got hit hard. And when they were walking in the woods and saw a Leprechaun under a tree and asked him for a wish and he said what. They asked him to stop the boys so that they could run at recess.

Initially, it would appear that Rashidi did not follow directions, and it was observed he was spoken to by the classroom teacher for not following the prompt. However, upon further examination, there is a higher order of thinking taking place in his response to the prompt which allows the reader to understand that a quality friend to him is one who does not hurt someone. Pajares (1996) calls this self-efficacious motivation, or a deeply rooted form of motivation founded in instruction that allows a student to actively make connections to themselves and the literacy activity. In this instance, the root of the connection was so deeply interwoven into Rashidi’s lived experiences as an African American male student that if one was not looking closely, the meaning was missed; and in this case, the assignment was dismissed as one in which he did not follow directions. Yet, Rashidi displayed a high level of motivation and engagement and challenged the perceived notions of masculinity by speaking against physical aggression towards other males.

Chike found Relevancy in Literacy in a lesson pertaining to a reader’s choice in silent reading material, as was found in his journal “shout out” which reflected critical literacy, defined as a literacy that was eye-opening, equitable, and created positive emotions towards expression of thought:

Mrs. B. really did a cool lesson with me. She read a book and didn’t even get mad when I interrupted her. I did that a lot. She just lets me talk and doesn’t look at me like my teacher does. We read this book about a black ball player. He had a real hard time playing ball. But cause of him we can watch Lebron play now against the Spurs. And that didn’t happen back then.

In the journal entry, Chike found connections to the natural call and response dialogue of our time together and the form of conversation used possibly at home and in his church. Au and
Kawakami (1994) found that when there is a lack of cultural congruence between the school culture and the home culture, there is a negative impact on the student’s academic experiences. However, in analyzing his journal entry, it was evident that not only was he engaged in the lesson through critical literacy but he was also able to draw on his metacognitive skills to form a connection from self to text as defined by engagement.

**Observation**

Observations served to enrich the themes found in the interviews and document collection pertaining to masculinity. They also served as enriching data sources to the understanding of the use of a critical culturally relevant pedagogy. I entered into the third grade classroom to gain further understanding of the social experiences of the six African American male student participants and to observe their education experiences during literacy instruction. Tin (2003) states that observations are often beneficial to a study when attempting to bring further insight to the relevance of the claimed evidence. Furthermore, Merriam (1998) notes that in qualitative research, “observation offers a firsthand account of the situation under study, and when combined with interviewing and document analysis, allows for holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated” (p. 111). Through my fieldwork notes of the classroom observations, I was able to gain understanding of the learning experiences and teaching practices in a third grade classroom that promoted a critical, culturally relevant pedagogy. The use of direct observation, allowed me to understand the continued level of monitoring that a teacher must employ in order to create a positive critical, cultural literacy experiences in the classroom. This information, in relationship to the interviews, provided a richer description of the relationship of social development and the literacy classroom.
During the observations, I looked for 13 pedagogical concepts that supported or defined the use of culturally relevant pedagogy. These concepts as identified by Milner (2010) were:

- Student choice invokes critical thinking
- Students learn through different modes, styles, and multiple intelligences
- Mental organizing of schemes for students to approach ideas are present
- Authentic context of learning
- Strong bond between the abstract and understanding
- Inquiry based learning experiences
- Themes represent student lives and interests
- Connect learning with key concepts
- Relevant instruction to connect to students’ lived experiences
- Frames themes as questions
- Presents information by pulling on students’ prior knowledge
- Creates rich links to other content areas
- Holds a strong sense of curriculum in relation to its role in the learning process.

Using these pedagogical concepts as a guide for my understanding of the culturally relevant literacy instruction in a classroom, I attempted to capture the instructional strategies that led to student engagement and motivation in the literacy classroom.

Both critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy were found in the observation report, as the classroom teacher prompted students to rely on their own lived experiences to inform their discussion during a mini-lesson. These interpretive codes were connected to the
theme Relevancy of Literacy. Milner (2010) notes that the common issue of being aware of effective culturally relevant pedagogy is the process of actually putting the curriculum into place in the classroom and knowing when the content is being accurately presented in a culturally relevant manner.

(T) Teacher: “Who has caught lightening bugs before?”

(S1) Student #1: “I have. I went outside with my friends at their house and caught them with her. It was real dark out.”

(S2) Student #2: “I can’t go outside after dark. My auntie says it’s not safe.”

(S3) Student #3: “Yeah, me too. We don’t have a yard to go to and my mom won’t let me play in the street.”

(T): “Well that’s a good lesson. Why is it not safe to play in the streets? What can’t you play after dark either?”

(S4): You can’t play after dark or in the street cause something bad might happen to you. (Teacher: Because) Because something bad might happen. Like you might get taken by a person you don’t know or you might get runned over by a car going too fast.

Milner (2010) states that the idea of a culturally relevant pedagogy is to “create a learning environment where students develop voice and perspective and are allowed to participate in the discourses available in a learning context,” (p. 68). Here, while the teacher was attempting to bring a connection from the assumed lived experiences of the students, the conversation was allowed to take the direction from the voices of the students, and with the exception of the one grammar correction, the conversation utilized the common call and response, or give and take, often employed in the African American culture. This form of discussion allows individuals to share common experiences without waiting for an adult to give permission to do so. This particular observation also supported critical literacy defined
as a literacy that is eye-opening, equitable, and create positive emotions towards expression of thought.

After one lesson that embraced a critical literacy pedagogy, Azi and Rashidi were observed as diligently engaged in writing. While Rashidi was unengaged and drawing pictures on his paper, further observation led me to understand that the class was working on a written response to a short story about what it meant to be a good reader. As a natural leader in the classroom, one who was often called upon in class for answers, Azi found no trouble in displaying this knowledge and being a leader in the classroom, a form of masculinity that he consistently embraced throughout the study. However, Rashidi was considered to be a struggling reader, one who read well below grade level and was aware that displaying weakness in reading would be perceived as masculine by his social group; therefore, his behavior was to revert to task avoidance. This one experience did not create a positive emotion towards the literacy experience and did not allow for Rashidi to feel empowered by his learning. The observation applied to the interpretation of need for critical literacy to support a positive learning experience for Rashidi in the literacy classroom.

Embodying the notion of helping others, nine-year-old Baruti sought to help those in his classroom to help create a positive learning experience in the literacy classroom. Displaying traits of engagement and motivation, Baruti embraced a masculinity that rebelled against the norm. He exhibited the theme of Gender Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite, which was interpreted through stories of strength and resilience. In the case of Baruti, his natural instinct to care for others was the driving force behind his interactions with his peers and experiences in the literacy classroom. Baruti took on the role of teacher in the classroom.
and delivered instruction, directions, and models of learning to his peers as reflected in the following observation:

Baruti, Azi, Rashidi, and Jabarl are sitting together on the floor during the literacy mini-lesson. Azi, Baruti, and Jabarl are engaged in a hand game of sorts: lots of pointing, dancing of fingers on the ground, etc.…The teacher has paused in her lesson delivery to ask a metacognition question to the class as a whole. They are think, pair, and sharing with a partner. Oh my, Baruti is lecturing his friends. He told the boys that they need to pay attention, they are hurting the teacher’s feelings, and it’s not going to help them to talk. He is going to tell Jabarl’s Big Brother. The group has become very solemn. Baruti has stood up and removed himself from the group. Azi follows him and they are discussing their connection to the Eric Carle books. This interaction is positive and embraces the call and response discourse.

The role of caregiver is a natural role as described by Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell (2005). This concept of masculinity states that in order to be a real man, one must be able to provide for themselves and their family. Here, Baruti found his family in the members of his classroom, seeking to protect them and provide for them in an academic manner. It was evident that Baruti found a balance among the intrinsic and extrinsic factors of his masculinity as he did not find incongruity in how he felt about doing well in the classroom versus what was expected of him in the classroom. This finding was significantly different from that of Alexander’s work (2006), which found that in the academic setting, there is often a conflict between young African American male students’ internal desires and external actions, thus causing a need to “switch personalities” at a young age. While it was my previous assertion that this is not a trait seen in many young African American males, Baruti’s teaching behaviors revealed that when the desire to succeed is strongly internalized and a contributing influence to the development of masculinity, the negative denotations of performing masculinity as outlined by Alexander (2006) can be surpassed with skill and determination.
At another literacy workstation, Jabarl was concerned with the young girl sitting in his station. As is typical of African American males with a strong sense of masculinity, Jabarl found himself in the role of provider (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012), as he supplied the wealth of information, took care of the girl’s needs (she did not have school supplies nor was she willing to ask the teacher for them), and was later observed physically completing the assignment for the girl.

The assignment at the work station asked the students to provide a description of the scene illustrated on the paper. The scene was a soccer field with a student huddled on the ground, grasping his knee, and his teammates off in the background looking solemn. Jabarl was able to write two separate descriptions, one for him and one for his female work partner. This was an example of motivation to complete an assignment as he was actively engaged in an assignment not once but twice, a topic he knew about and which allowed him to display his masculinity in taking care of his female partner. Similar to the findings of masculinity in Kimmel, Hearn and Connell (2005), masculinity finds meaning in the role of caregiver, as Jabarl was able to provide for himself and his peer. This moment of motivation as supported by the theme Evidence of Engagement and the interpretative code motivation was also closely related to the theme of Gender Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite, as supported by the interpretative code of acceptable situations. Jabarl found an acceptable situation within his academic experience that allowed for his masculinity to directly interact with his literacy experiences. The relationship between the two areas of masculinity and engagement in the literacy experiences are often in conflict with one another, yet because of the nature of masculinity in this instance, or the need to be a caregiver, Jabarl found an acceptable situation which allow him to use his masculinity to support literacy experiences. However,
this role of caregiver has academic implications for both males and females that the teacher must understand and address, an area for future research.

Unlike Jabarl, Rashidi found difficulty in his classroom interactions with his peers and was often isolated in the classroom. Upon my first visit to observe in the classroom prior to the arrival of students, a sole desk was placed in the back corner of the room, away from the rest of the student desks, across the entire room from the teacher’s desk, and blocked off by a long table covered in student work. As participants were selected for the study, this desk was discovered to belong to Rashidi. While naturally shy, Rashidi was street smart; he knew about the significance of social interactions with his peers that were necessary to promote his self-worth or to protect his social standing in the classroom. These social interactions may produce negative images of students who are considered to be overly attentive to their academic success, and unfortunately, this negative attention was often observed in Rashidi’s behaviors. The theme of Gender Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite was fully illuminated through analysis of my observation notes and reflective journal entries pertaining to the literacy classroom and the experiences of Rashidi.

Rashidi is the only student in the classroom who does not have a partner to sit with, or is not actively involved with his peers in any manner. During the mini-lesson, Daren ousted Rashidi twice for being annoying while the teacher was reading. I noticed that it was not the actual act of talking that was bothering Daren, rather it was the physical bullying: poking, pinching, and tapping of Daren’s back, that was annoying Daren. Rashidi is considerably larger in both height and overall weight than Daren. Could this be a social cue or understanding? Is this avoidance of appearing to be interested in a book that the teacher selected? She did say that she knew Rashidi was interested and that they picked out the book together….what role is this playing in his experience now? Appearing to be physically strong and/or aggressive as well as standoffish from feminine topics is deemed important among African American males.

As found in Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle (2012), Rashidi was displaying prevalent themes of masculinity: toughness, aggression, and being a tough guy. In addition,
the study found that many peers did not wish to be acknowledged or singled out by their teachers, especially if it made them appear interested in academics. The previous observation of Rashidi supports the findings of the study in that it was the acknowledgement of Rashidi’s interest in a book that sparked the manifestation of extreme masculine dominance in the literacy classroom, causing outward aggression to others and asserting himself as a dominant male among his peers. The above observation supports the interpretive code of limitations of gender, as it due to the perceptions of masculinity held by Rashidi that at certain times his literacy experiences are not as rich as they could be.

Continued observations of Rashidi found social interactions to be a strong influence in the development of Rashidi’s perceptions of masculinity. During one literacy class, the students were to place a thumbprint on a piece of paper on the teacher’s desk and then select a peer to go next in the process. While observing Rashidi, I found his initial anxiety about being selected by his peers was overwhelming and caused a severe level of disengagement. At the time of this side activity, the students were supposed to be reading from their book bins; however, Rashidi was obnoxiously making contact with anyone who was looking to select a peer to go place their thumbprint on the paper. At one point, a male in the classroom tapped another male student on the shoulder, and that student’s reaction was to call the young boy a “fag” and to tell him to go pick someone else. Upon seeing this, Rashidi’s demeanor changed. He was the next student to be chosen by the previously discussed male student. When the student came to touch him, Rashidi abruptly pushed back in his seat so the student could not touch him. He then made an excuse as to why he could not go up and told the boy to go pick his girlfriend. However, when a young female student came to select Rashidi to participate, he smiled and asked her questions about what she was writing. This switch in
demeanor and relevance to Rashidi’s perception of masculinity supports the interpretive codes: (a) limitations of gender, (b) me, my friends, and I, and (c) acceptable situations. These three codes brought to the forefront of the construction of masculinity the theme of Gender Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite. The social construction of masculinity was reinforced through observing peers behaviors and habits in the classroom and the mirroring of those behaviors in an attempt to appear uninterested in academics (Jackson & Moore, 2006).

The procedures of a single case study can provide a thorough analysis of a particular phenomenon (Yin, 1994). Whereas the analysis of interviews, documents, and observations provided a glimpse into the experiences of six, third-grade urban African American male elementary students and their meanings of masculinity and literacy in an elementary classroom, the next section provides a synthesis of the findings through answering the research questions that were pertinent to this study. Synthesis of data provides a holistic understanding of the meaning of masculinity in the literacy classroom for these third grade African American males.

Synthesis of Findings

The design of this research study addressed the central question: What are third grade urban African American male students’ literacy experiences like regarding their relationship with masculinity in an elementary classroom? As this study unfolded, several themes were illuminated: (a) Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite, (b) Evidence of Engagement and (c) Relevancy of Literacy. Each of these themes served to tell the story of the literacy experiences of the six African American male participants through the use of personal documents, interviews, and observations.
How do urban African American male elementary students define masculinity? This question was predominately answered through analysis of the theme Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite and the supporting interpretive codes limitations of gender; me, myself and I; and acceptable situations. Failure to uphold certain traits of masculinity at times led to the exclusion of a participant by peers and resulted in bullying-like behaviors from others (Archer, 2003; Benyon, 2002, Davies, 2003). Often the definition or perception of masculinity is then heavily influenced by their peer groups, in this instance a class of third grade male students, and/or social media (Biller, 1968; Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985). In the instance of Daren, who was called out during a literacy lesson for wearing glasses, that appeared to be girlish, Daren found that this reference to his sexuality or alignment to homosexual traits, called into question his masculinity. This offense caused Daren to begin to act out during literacy and to emotionally shut down during the reading workshop lesson where he was forced to wear his glasses in order to see the text.

The idea of gender expectations and their formation through societal influences were confirmed; however, what was not anticipated but readily accepted was the presence of resilience traits among these young males and an awareness of a need for a double consciousness connected to the theme Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite. Joseph (1994) and Bernard (1995) found that parents with resilient children usually have four shared characteristics:

(a) An ability to establish positive relationships with peers and adults

(b) The ability to recognize a problem and to actively find a probable solution

(c) A strong sense of self-identity and a high level of independence
(d) Motivation and purpose towards achieving goals, aspirations, or persistence to do better in the future.

It was through these traits of resiliency that the majority of the six African American male participants were able to find a higher level of independence and self-awareness in order for them to be academically successful. At certain times, Rashidi’s literacy experiences were not as rich as they could be.

An awareness of a need for a double consciousness also linked to the theme Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite was mostly apparent in Azi’s story, where socialized in a female household he possessed characteristics generally associated with females and expectations for academic success. Azi was keenly aware that he had to learn to negotiate in two different worlds, one of his peer group and the other his mostly female household. He was also aware of what he needed to be successful in the dominant white culture, but was heavily influenced by the star quality of the hip-hop culture reflected in media images. In forming a double consciousness, African American males are able to remain true to themselves and their masculinity as a strong, independent African American male, yet live and function in the dominant culture (Peters, 2002).

Most of the six African American male participants possessed a level of cognitive reasoning that allowed them to successfully identify with their own culture of masculinity, but also adapt to the requirements of a successful academic identity. With the exception of a few minor negative views related to masculinity and their literacy experiences, the participants of this study were able to assimilate their views about what it meant to be a strong African American male and what it meant to be strong academically. This finding was in stark contrast to the findings of aforementioned studies of adolescent African American
males in the classroom, who were found to act out, disengage, or avoid academic success in order to maintain a strong perception of masculinity (Alexander, 2006; Archer, 2002; Nichols, 2006; Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boyle, 2012). This finding suggests that teachers must intervene early in the education of African American males to help them form strong academic behaviors.

The following two sub-questions were supported by several themes and interpretive codes in the data:

- *What traits of engagement, motivation, and metacognition are evident during literacy instruction in African American male students?*

- *How does the use of critical cultural literacy practices in the classroom develop deeper engagement in literacy instruction among urban African American male elementary students?*

Both were supported by the themes of *Relevance of Literacy* and *Evidence of Engagement*. These two themes were so closely interwoven throughout the study that it was often difficult to differentiate; nonetheless, each was interpreted with different concepts connected to the lived experiences of the participants which contributed to the unique meanings of the themes.

*Relevance of Literacy* included the interpretive codes of *culturally relevant pedagogy*, *critical literacy*, and *the need for critical literacy and/or culturally relevant pedagogy*. *Evidence of Engagement* involved the interpretive codes of *engagement* and *motivation*. A cohesive and effective curriculum promotes all of the aforementioned traits in the literacy classroom. The opportunities for the six African American male participants to have meaningful involvement in their literacy experiences was evident for the majority of the participants throughout the study. When observing in the classroom, I found cases of
authentic contexts of learning, themes that represent the students’ lived experiences, as well as a pull on students’ schema. However, the depth of pedagogical structures, as described by Milner (2010) was often difficult to assess due to a dominant use of literacy centers, mini-lessons, and independent seatwork. By using writing prompts or whole group literacy center directions, the teacher built within each mini-lesson a component of critical cultural literacy that “supported the brain’s natural learning process [through] helping students identify patterns and relationships in their thinking as well as in textual material” (Jackson & Cooper, 2007, p. 251).

Often students were placed in cooperative learning groups, which allowed student-led instruction to take root in their academic experiences (Allington, 2007). In one observation, the students were working independently at their seats while the teacher conducted reading assessments at her desk. They were given the academic freedom to choose whether or not they wished to write to a given prompt on what they would like to be when they grew up, to write about an experience they had during the weekend, or to write about an experience that inspired their career choices. Thus, the data through indepth interviews, personal documents, and observations supported the themes Relevance of Literacy and Evidence of Engagement.

Gutherie and Wigfield (2000) studied the influence of teacher directions on students’ levels of engagement in a classroom. The teacher of the classroom tended to take an active interest in the students’ personal experiences and sought to develop a curriculum that allowed the students to grow their knowledge of the world around them, thus becoming critical thinkers in our global society. Hall et al. (2002) found that when teachers seek to connect learning directly to the students’ lived experiences; it allows students to become aware of their thought processes and to reflect upon their belief systems. In the stories of the six
participants, connections to self, as well as a significant connection to the importance of school and how it will influence their abilities to be successful in future endeavors are evident.

The participants’ unique engagement strategies, linked to their cultural socialization, served a greater purpose for helping them navigate the social space of the third grade classroom. Their open forum of discussion, reflection, and questioning of the status quo through their stories appeared to empower these students; their spirits were not broken. Oldfather (2002) found that in order to properly find culturally relevant literacy in the classroom, the student must be seen as the priority in the development of a lesson and that free thought should be allowed in the classroom in order to encourage self-efficacy and motivation among a diverse body of students. On one hand the instructional techniques employed by this particular third grade classroom teacher at Delight Elementary School, may not be considered superior to others; on the other hand, she had taken into consideration the cultural dynamics of the students in her room and developed a curriculum that embraced those dynamics.

Romano (2007) found that when students use language as a tool of application and not solely as a tool for communication, the root of their learning is extended far beyond expectation, and leads to “meaning, connections, associations, ideas and refinements of idea” (p.170). Actively taking the role as peer teacher, Baruti was more than just another student in the classroom. He was indeed a deeply involved member of the literacy instruction team, providing peer coaching and deepening his own personal understanding of concepts through the reiteration of information, modeling of learning, and application of knowledge (Noddings, 2006). Thus, in allowing the students of the class to embrace their
perceptions of what it meant to be strong African American male students in a third grade classroom, the teacher enabled them to form relationships between their academic experience and lived experiences. This upholds the belief that in order to effectively employ a critical, culturally relevant pedagogy, one must set out to bridge the gap between the lived experiences and social construction of masculinity and the academic experiences found in the literacy classroom for young African American male students.

In my personal journal, maintained to support crystallization and authenticity of data, I wrote:

I think the biggest conflict with literacy in the urban cores is that it simply doesn’t reflect them, the urban African American male, so they cannot make connections, synthesize, and ask questions. Good readers, successful writers, engaged learners all use these strategies, but how can they if they have nothing to connect with. This classroom experience is a bit of an anomaly. She truly cares and puts a great deal of time and thought into the classroom. The principal cares too, and is constantly popping in the room, or coming in to the room to watch and ending up pulling a student aside to re-teach a concept. The context of literacy is still the focus called into question; however, this classroom, this experience, and this curriculum drive the thought that a critical, cultural literacy curriculum is the key to creating a positive literacy experience for young African American males.

**Conclusion**

The implications of providing critical literacy through culturally relevant pedagogy were obvious throughout the phases of data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings. The amount of resiliency among these young African American male students was a surprising finding. The resilience found in all six of the African American male participants propelled their internal drive for success and dissuaded them from seeking to avoid success, as it was no longer an option. Engaging, monitoring one’s thoughts, and being true to self were all common characteristics held by these six unique and diverse African American male third grade participants. Acknowledgement of the full scope of influences on the masculinity
of African American males and their experiences in the literacy classroom will serve as a foundational tool with which to develop literacy instruction that promotes creativity in thoughts, critical analysis of information, and awareness of how one learns.

Chapter 5 presents the implications of findings and future research for embracing a critical, cultural relevant pedagogy for an increasingly diverse American school system.
CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

This narratological, social constructivist, case study that is critical in perspective was undertaken to gain understanding of notions of masculinity among urban African American male third graders in regard to their literacy experiences. The focus of this final chapter is to iterate key conceptual findings, discuss implications of findings, and put forth a number of recommendations for future research. The voices of Asi, Rashidi, Baruti, Daren, Chike, and Jabarl resonated with strong notions about masculinity as a result of family socializations, peer influences, and messages and media images from the larger society connected to racial stereotypes about African American males. Their stories were the centerpiece of this study.

As a young white female who lived with a white male in an urban Midwestern city, I witnessed the levels of education privy to my brother and myself, which called into question the education of African American students. During our education there was support from our teachers, and I would even go as far as to say psychological and emotional guidance; whereas, these factors were not as evident in the interactions between my African American peers and educators. Here, as often supported and stated in works of critical race theorists, the act of being white as well as knowing how to act white served our benefit (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); however, with the same work ethics and application of skills and knowledge areas a gap between my white brother and his African American male peers began to develop and was inevitably never closed. From this moment in my life, my desire to give credence to the struggles endured by African American boys became a point of interest and was pursued throughout my career in education.
I found that regardless of government efforts to advocate reform to close the gender and race gaps, these issues remained present and glaring in my urban classroom. Through embracing and reflecting on my own experiences in an urban school, I was able to develop a critical, culturally relevant curriculum that allowed me to reach the young African American boys found within the four walls of my classroom. From this experience, the foundation of the study was developed and a focus on the experiences of African American boys in the literacy classroom was created and explored.

My own experience as a white female led to my hesitancy to insert my voice into this study. Cautious of my preconceptions and beliefs, I was hesitant to speak about race; especially a race that was not a true reflection of my own. Despite my upbringing and being embraced by families within the African American culture, I did not feel that I was able to properly examine race within the scope of this study. However, I placed my fears aside and sought to give justice to the study through becoming aware of the vast amount of literature related to race, using African American colleagues and dissertation committee members as critical friends, and analyzing the data so that the stories of the participants would remain true to their world views.

The influence of gender perceptions in the literacy classroom, called into question the experiences of young urban African American males during literacy instruction. Several scholars have researched the implications gender has on the levels of achievement for African American males in urban schools (Davies, 2003; Dionne, 2010; Gray & McLellan, 2006; Holzman, 2006; Noguera, 2003; Tatum, 2005). Nonetheless, the focus on issues of masculinity in the African American culture was often analyzed and looked at through a lens that illuminated deficits (Graer, 2007; Louis, 2008; Salisbury, 1999).
As noted in the literature review, researchers have sought to determine the many contributing factors that lead to the underachievement of African American males in the classroom, with specific focus on language arts. Differences in verbal intelligence and learning styles, interest in language arts, motivation and attitude were all found to be contributing factors to the disparities in achievement between African American male students and white male students (Gaer, 2007). Additional studies found that the quality of life of African American males plays a role in their experiences in the classroom (Jackson & Moore, 2006; Noguera, 2003). This particular assertion of empirical evidence from scholarly research led to my interest in the exploration of gender perceptions among elementary aged African American males; specifically, how their socialization within the school, family, peer group, and the larger society through media images shape their notions of masculinity.

The use of qualitative inquiry was appropriate for this study and allowed me to become intimate with the phenomena of the study, embracing the data collection process through a reflective lens of critical inquiry. For this purpose, critical race theory, narratological, and social constructivism perspectives supported the telling of their stories within the natural school environments of these third grade students. I listened to the lived experiences of these males, honoring their realities and cautious of not being consumed by the influences of others’ perspectives. However, I was mindful of the research related to this area, as examined in the literature review, and used to construct meanings of the findings.

Several prominent themes were illuminated in this study using an analysis of interviews, personal documents, and observations which served as data to highlight the experiences of African American males in an elementary literacy classroom in relationship to their perceptions of masculinity. The themes were labeled: *Gender and Expectations:*
Despite Versus in Spite, (b) Evidence of Engagement and (c) Relevancy of Literacy. The first theme, Gender and Expectations: Despite Versus in Spite, illuminated the definitions of masculinity that the six African American male participants held and the systems that affected their beliefs. Gender perceptions are heavily influenced by family and community socialization, peers, media images and messages from the larger society. The beliefs about masculinity were strong and typically cogent in the academic behaviors of the study participants; however, in spite of outside messages and images that were often conflated with racial stereotypes, violence and aggression, these six young students found pride in their masculinity and academic success and expectations for themselves as learners. This theme also illustrated the resilient nature of the African American male participants found within the study. The term despite holds a negative denotation, while the phrase in spite provides a progressive outlook on the success of African American male students in our society. While the intention of the study was not to investigate the resilience of African American male students, an unintentional finding was the resilient nature and embodiment of African American culture and pride in racial identity that promoted the academic success of these young students.

The theme of Evidence of Engagement provided insight into the use of a critical cultural pedagogy that led to the engagement, motivation, and metacognitive awareness of the six participants. Recurring acts of engagement were found in the experiences of the participants as they recounted stories of learning about African Americans during Black History Month, activities that allowed them to socially engage with one another in a give-and-take model of dialogue, and lessons that embodied their needs to explore and understand the greater world around them.
Relevancy of Literacy led to an understanding of the significance of the use of a critical, culturally responsive curriculum in the literacy classroom. As reflected in the data, several interviews and journal entries revealed that when the curriculum did not reflect the lived experiences of the young African American male participants, there were increased levels of disengagement and feelings of dislike for literacy in general. However, in this particular classroom, the teacher had already developed and implemented a curriculum that embraced the culture of the student body, through some elements of culturally relevant pedagogy. When lessons embraced the greater diversity in the classroom and encouraged critical literacy, efforts to promote literacy were eye-opening, equitable, and created positive emotions towards expression of thought; the six participants were able to draw critical conclusions between the content and their lived experiences or those experiences of persons within their culture. They valued black history month but wanted to hear about the contributions and culture of African Americans throughout the year.

The underpinnings of critical, culturally responsive education were found in previous studies conducted by Gay (2000), Ladson-Billings (1995a; 1995b), Tan (2006) and other theorists in the field. The concept of culturally relevant pedagogy is a requirement for critical literacy that allows teachers and students to challenge the truths accepted by society. hooks (1994) claims that in order for students to learn, they must first challenge the undiscussables of race by acknowledging their presence through the process of self-actualization. A teacher, who embraces the use of a curriculum that calls into open discussion the differences among students, the diversity of the lived experiences from one student to another, and the importance of developing respect for others, is likely to equip their students with the tools to critically analyze and self-reflect on the world around them. The belief that a critical
culturally responsive education leads to increased levels of engagement, motivation, and metacognitive awareness was further supported by the findings of this study; depicted in interviews, personal documents, and observations. As the students engaged in information that was either of significant interest to them or held them to a higher level of thinking, they were increasingly more engaged and able to vocalize their thoughts both orally and in written form. Regardless of my perceived notion that African American boys were heavily influenced by their beliefs about masculinity and would find difficulty connecting to literacy activities, when presented with critical, culturally responsive education experiences, the young African American males were able to bridge the gap between their perception of masculinity and the expectations in the classroom.

The perceptions of masculinity are indeed grounded in the lived experiences of these students and the experiences of those surrounding them. While strong in nature and bold, masculinity was perceived by these students as a trait adaptable to change. This study differs slightly from the examined studies, which embraced cultural influences as deficits. Research pertaining to the African American culture often incorporates negative thinking or deficit models to explain the underachievement of African American children. Deficit models negatively assume certain traits, beliefs, or characteristics are inherent within the African American home and culture that hinder the achievement and motivation of African American children. However, this study found a sense of resilience among the six African American participants and pride in their identity even in situations of adversity. These two areas, resiliency and racial identity, are tightly interwoven and involve narratives that are contradictory to the deficit approaches of research surrounding the academic achievement of young urban African American males (Harry & Klinger, 2006, 2007; Sleeter, 2006; Stinson,
2006, Thompson, 2004); communicating deficits that reside in the cultural of the child rather than examining policies, practices, and behaviors of administrators within the context of the school.

While there were instances of displays of masculinity that led to acts of defiant behavior (Benyon, 2002), disengagement (Alexander, 2006; Archer, 2003), and/or verbal aggression towards others (Nichols, 2006); this was not the case in the majority of the data that flowed from interviews, personal documents, and observations. I concluded that appositive, resilient forms of masculinity may indeed be evident in the youth of the African American culture as they become more and more academically successful. Acknowledging the resiliency in the participants and their desires to achieve academic success caused me to believe that even the most negative influences of masculinity could be overcome if the student had the determination needed to transform their thinking. Moments of disengagement, physical and verbal aggression towards one another did not keep students from self-regulating their behaviors in the literacy classroom when required to do so. The understanding of masculinity among African American males in the literacy classroom can assist teachers of elementary age African American youth in helping them address the broader negative messages and racial stereotypes that they are likely to confront from the larger society.

**Implications of Findings**

The relationship between the perceptions of masculinity held by the participants of this study and their experiences in the literacy classroom were analyzed through the collection of observation notes, interviews, and personal documents. An initial implication of the findings is related to the need for scholars to review and rethink the resilience of
African American youth. Changed belief systems may pave the way for the voices of this generation of African American boys to be heard through a positive lens. Previous studies referenced in the review of literature communicated the limitations of the African American community, specifically African American males, as devoid of the ability to overcome and to achieve greatness due to their surroundings, cultural influences, or societal factors; however, within the realm of this study, even in the most dire of surroundings there was a strong desire to achieve among this African American community of young boys. As noted in the findings of the study, the six African American boys of this study were able to recognize the social expectations placed upon them regarding masculinity; however, they were also able to navigate the social expectations within the academic setting to create positive learning experiences for themselves within the literacy classroom. DuBois (1903) claimed that African Americans are faced with a double consciousness or two separate identities that help them meet the social and cultural expectations from the larger society, yet keep their feet planted in the African American community. Instances of this double consciousness were found throughout the study as the participants continued to display strong masculinity traits during literacy lessons when surrounded by their peers, but were able to voice a desire to engage in reading and writing during interview sessions with me.

A second implication of this study is the need for a critical, culturally relevant education system. While I have presented a broader definition of critical culturally relevant pedagogy, critical literacy is this classroom was viewed as instruction that supported readers as active participants in the reading process and invited them to move beyond passively accepting the messages of texts to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors. Critical literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes
reflection, transformation, and action (Tan, 2006). The use of a critical literacy pedagogy is significant to create higher order thinking skills in students, as well as to prepare them to question societal norms and the status quo. I believe that when critical literacy is interwoven with a culturally responsive pedagogy that students are able to find deeper connections to self and texts through shared lived experiences and a forum that allows for questioning and constructive reasoning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tan, 2006).

Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) has communicated the relevance of a culturally responsive education in order to anchor the curriculum in the everyday lives of students. Curriculum, anchored in the everyday experiences of a diverse student body, enables students to positively find ways to grow as resilient, successful, and aware members of the community. As data were analyzed and phenomena pieced together to construct meanings of masculinity for these students and their lives in the literacy classroom, it was evident that engagement and motivation were due to the skills of the teacher in delivering content that connected to their lives. In the classroom of the six African American male participants, a curriculum had already been developed that allowed for the six participants to experience academic success and curriculum relevancy through the sharing of thoughts and analysis of ideas about the global community. In this environment, participants found freedom to defy the cultural norms of masculinity, as outlined in Chapter Two, and reach for greatness in the literacy classroom.

A final implication of the findings suggests that being valued and reaching for greatness and excellence requires feeling positive about one’s racial identity. As noted in Chapter 2, racial socialization and the development of racial identity begins at an early age for African American children and continues through the transition into adolescence and
young adulthood. This is a salient process for African American children and youth as racial socialization and identity formations help African American children and youth to cope with unique challenges stemming from their status in society, as well as the overt and covert forms of injustices and inequalities in their daily lives (Spencer & Markstrom, 1990). By the time an African American child reaches adolescence, they begin the process of integrating their own experiences, both positive and negative. As cognitive reasoning begins to develop among African American adolescents, racial identity and self-identity become more clearly defined. Racial identity is often viewed as a component of self-concept that relates to an individual’s membership within a race and the socialization experiences associated with that membership (Spencer & Markstrom, 1990).

Little is known about the role racial identity plays in young children versus that of adolescent age children in their academic experiences (Hughes et al., 2006; Spencer & Markstrom, 1990). The examination of the perspectives of elementary age children on their own racial socialization and racial identity is critical to further understand their academic experiences, particularly in the literacy classroom. Among the elementary participants of the study, there was a positive emphasis on cultural membership and academic experiences; however, Spencer and Markstrom determined that not all racial socialization continues to yield positive psychological outcomes for ethnically diverse youth as psychological understandings of experiences begin to yield a broader understanding of the injustices that are associated with being African American in a white society.

While this study found that the participants, for the most part, assumed a proactive role in engaging in academics and maintaining positive associations required for healthy racial identities, it is significant to consider that as these same participants approach
adolescence the internalization of negative images and messages surrounding being an African American in our society may begin to negatively impact their academic experiences; thus influencing their racial identities. Examining the evolution of racial identity in elementary aged African American males is important in understanding how children and youth encounter and navigate diversity in their lived and academic experiences. As a result of this study, several recommendations for future research that will add to the findings of this study are in order.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

I began this study believing that the gender perceptions of African American males would negatively influence their literacy experiences in the classroom. Through the process of assessing, reflecting, and embracing the data, I found that the review of literature on gender perceptions of African American males did not embody the findings of the study. I believe that future studies on the perception and development of gender perceptions among African American boys could further extend the understanding of evolution of masculinity among urban males as well as promote cultural understanding of the next generation of African American men in our society. Future research could explore the experiences of adult men regarding their notions of masculinity including the development of masculinity over time and how these meanings influenced their lives.

This single case study took place in a single classroom with an individual teacher who had already implemented a critical, culturally relevant pedagogy. The concept of observing the differences between the experiences of students in a classroom where such a curriculum was delivered versus their experiences when a critical, culturally responsive pedagogy was not present is significant. Secondly, future studies may benefit from the
analysis of classrooms with different pedagogical approaches and the experiences of African American male students in these classrooms. This focus on instruction may further illuminate the levels of engagement, motivation, and metacognitive traits among African American males in classrooms where a critical, culturally responsive education is in place.

The findings of this study may also serve as providing the foundation for student advocacy in the area of creating a literacy that is critical and culturally relevant to the African American male population of our nation’s schools. Within the confines of this single case study, the concept of resiliency and determination in spite of negative influences or less than equitable experiences were persistent. While the young African American male participants of this study were outspoken individuals with a contagious love for their academics, the focus of this study gave them the forum to tell their story. Future research should involve investigating the extent to which teachers are prepared to have difficult conversations about race and ethnicity which could lead to colleges of education better preparing teachers to implement critical literacy in schools.

While I stand firm in the findings of this research study and their groundings in relevant literature, as well as the methodology chosen to illuminate the literacy experiences of African American males, a difference in methodology may produce different findings. Thus, of significance, is the possibility of reconstructing this particular study using a quantitative approach to measure experiences through a statistical test of increased levels of engagement and success on classroom assessments of students, as a result of implementing critical, culturally responsive literacy lessons?

Finally, this qualitative case study could be duplicated with African American female students to explore their notions of gender in the literacy classroom. Similar arguments can
be made that African American females bring to the school different notions of what it means to be feminine and how racism and sexism have affected their lives. Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2012) contend that African American females’ experiences in schools are influenced by racial discrimination and inequities from the larger society; however, how they cope and excel in school have not been widely studied.

**Conclusion**

Through the stories of Asi, Rashidi, Baruti, Daren, Chike, and Jabarl, I found hope in the future of our African American children. I fully acknowledge that not only was the understanding of race of importance to the conception of this study regarding the experiences of African American boys in the literacy classroom, race was also a salient construct in the interpretation of data, as it took considerable guidance and reflexivity to determine whether my own upbringing as a white female cast a white perspective on the findings; thus, further perpetuating the social racism found in our society, intentional or not. Moreover, I must disclose my innate ability to code-switch, or to embrace the dialect of my upbringing as a tool of comfort when placed in environments where I feel more comfortable in being true to self. As a young white woman raised in an urban setting, I acquired and embraced language of my surroundings, unaware of the perceptions that speaking in one way versus another was contrary to my white culture. As a junior in a suburban school, I was told of the difference in the choice of my dialect versus that of my white peers. It was here that my own double consciousness was formed and has thus been employed from that time forth. As the researcher in this study, the use of code-switching on my part could have potentially created an environment where more information was shared by participants due to a higher level of
perceived comfort or because of the ability to converse in a natural manner with an adult that
did not condemn the use of home dialect.

Despite and spite of recent violence again young African American youth by the
police in communities such as Ferguson, Missouri (Sells, 2014), at the time of this study,
their voices are on the verge of becoming a powerful presence in our society; breaking the
silence of marginalized voices of African Americans about the continuing saga of race in
America. I sought to use of critical race theory to communicate injustices for the oppressed
children within our nation’s academic settings, using counter storytelling that reveals the
persistence of race. According to the findings and analysis of this study through the lens of
critical race theory, educators must commit to developing a curriculum that acknowledges
the multiple strengths that African American children bring with them to the classroom, and
to embrace both race and culture as vital components to the education of African American
students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These findings can be used to advocate for a
curriculum that leads to increased self-efficacious behaviors, motivation to be an engaged
learner, and a strong presence of the African American male population amongst the most
successful of students within our nation’s elementary, middle, and high school student
populations.
APPENDIX A
CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY
DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT CONSENT FORM

Gender Perceptions: A Narratological, Social Constructivist, Case Study of the Literacy Experiences of Urban African American Male Elementary Students

Introduction

I, Crystal Bandy, am requesting permission to conduct a research study in your district. I am the researcher in charge of conducting the study. I am a graduate student in the Department of Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. I would like to conduct the study in an elementary school within your district during March 17th-April 11th, 2014. I will be interviewing, meeting, and conducting classroom observations of third grade male students to learn more about gender perceptions in African American boys.

Background

I am requesting permission to conduct a research project in your district. The project will examine the literacy experiences of urban African American males elementary students enrolled in a Midwest urban school district. The research project, Gender Perceptions: A Narratological, Social Constructivist, Case Study of the Literacy Experiences of Urban African American Male Elementary Students, is a qualitative study designed to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of literacy experiences and the implementation of a critical cultural competency. Critical culturally relevant literacy entails the experiences that students have within the classroom that allow for the concepts of reading, writing, questioning, and reflecting to extend beyond the immediate text to make connections to the outside world. A critical culturally relevant literacy provides students with the skill set to participate as critically responsive citizens.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the literacy experiences of a selected population of urban African American male elementary students in order to identify techniques and strategies that integrate their lived experiences in a positive manner within the literacy classroom. It is the hope of the study to contribute to the development of critically reflective thinkers.

The research questions for this study are: (a) What are urban African American males’ literacy experiences like in an elementary classroom? (b) What traits of engagement,
motivation, and metacognition are displayed by African American male students during literacy instruction? (c) How do urban African American male students define masculinity? (d) How does the use of critical cultural literacy practices engage these students in literacy instruction? The findings will be shared through the final submission of the dissertation as completion of the doctoral program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

There will be about 6 third grade African American male elementary subjects in the study at the designated elementary school. In addition there will be one to six classroom teachers who will be asked to participate, as classroom observations are a crucial component of the study protocol. The student participants should be currently enrolled in the classrooms of individual teachers who agree to participate.

**Study Procedures and Treatments**

If the district agrees to take part in this study, the district and agreed upon elementary school will be involved in this study for a total of fourteen two hour long sessions as well as, five 10 minute interview sessions with each individual student participants during March 17th-April 11th, 2014. Each interview will be scheduled prior to the start of the school day or after dismissal in a designated room within the school building to help maintain student privacy and confidentiality during the interview process.

Study observations will take place in the classroom of those teachers who have agreed to participate in the study who have student participants currently enrolled in their classroom. Each student will be observed for a minimum of two times; however, it should be noted that in the event that all student participants are enrolled in one classroom that the total of fourteen two hour long observations will take place in one classroom for the duration of the study.

**The following study visits and procedures will occur:**

I will ask participants to compose their story encompassing their literacy experiences and their lived experiences. Student participants will be encouraged to spend no more than 10 minutes of their time to complete individual interview sessions. Interview sessions will take place before or after school in an agreed upon room to ensure continued privacy and confidentiality for those students who have agreed to participate in the study. Students will also be observed. Observations are expected to take approximately twenty-eight hours; or as previously states fourteen two hour-long sessions. Observations will be conducted at the school site. Classroom observations will take place in an effort to capture descriptions of the pedagogical practices and interaction exchanges within the classroom setting.

**Possible Risks or Side Effects of Taking Part in this Study**

No physical or psychological/emotional risks are associated with this study.
Possible Benefits for Taking Part in this Study

There are no known benefits to taking part in this study. However, potential personal benefits from this study for the participants may include the personal reflections and/or connections made from the sharing of the lived and academic experiences in the literacy classroom. This study will benefit school administrators and teachers through conclusions about literacy practices that are most effective and impactful for student learning and the development of critically reflective thinkers.

Costs for Taking Part in this Study

There are no monetary costs to the district.

Payment for Taking Part in this Study

There will not be compensation for participation in this study.

Alternatives to Study Participation

The alternative is to not take part in the study.

Confidentiality and Access to your Records

While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information completed and shared by individual participants, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.

The district will not be named in any reports of the results. The research study may be shown to the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (IRB) and/or other governing agencies. This is to prove which study procedures were completed and to check the data reported about the participants. The researcher will keep all information about the participants confidential as provided by law, but complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

If a participant leaves the study or is removed from the study, the study data collected before the participant left may still be used along with other data collected as part of the study. For purposes of follow-up studies and if any unexpected events happen, subject identification will be filed at University of Missouri Kansas City Education and Urban-Leadership Office under appropriate security and with access limited to the primary researcher and the co-investigator Dr. Dianne Smith of the University of Missouri- Kansas City.

Data collected will include interview transcripts and classroom observations. These interviews and observational data will be confidential and anonymity will be maintained. Every effort will be made to keep all information confidential. Individuals from the University of Missouri Kansas City Institutional Review Board Research Protections
Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.

Original interview transcripts and observation notes will be archived by the principal investigator for a minimum of seven years in a locked filing cabinet.

**Contacts for Questions about the Study**

You should contact the IRB Administrator of UMKC’s Institutional Review Board at 816-235-5927 if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the district’s rights or selected participants’ rights as research subjects. You may call the researcher Crystal Bandy at 816-372-4002 if you have any questions about this study. You may also call her if any problems come up.

**Voluntary Participation**

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. If consent is given to allow the district to participate in the study, you are free to stop participating at any time and for any reason. If the district should choose not to be in the study or decide to stop participating, the decision will not negatively affect any individuals selected for participation. The researchers may stop the study if it is decided that it is in the best interest of the district to do so.

You have read this Consent Form or it has been read to you. You have been told why this research is being done and what will happen if the district agrees to take part in the study, including the risks and benefits. You have had the chance to ask questions, and you may ask questions at any time in the future by calling Crystal Bandy at 816-372-4002. By signing this consent form, you volunteer and consent to allow the district to take part in this research study. I will give you a copy of this consent form.

___________________________________
Signature (Authorized Consenting Party)  Date

___________________________________
Printed Name (Authorized Consenting Party)

___________________________________
Researchers Name  Date
Introduction

I, Crystal Bandy, am requesting permission to conduct a research study in your school. I am the researcher in charge of conducting the study. I am a graduate student in the Department of Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. I would like to conduct the study in the elementary school during March 17th-April 11th, 2014. I will be interviewing, meeting, and conducting classroom observations of third grade male students to learn more about gender perceptions in African American boys.

Background

I am requesting permission to conduct a research project in your building. The project will examine the literacy experiences of urban African American males elementary students enrolled in a Midwest urban school district. The research project, Gender Perceptions: A Narratological, Social Constructivist, Case Study of the Literacy Experiences of Urban African American Male Elementary Students, is a qualitative study designed to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of literacy experiences and the implementation of a critical cultural competency. Critical culturally relevant literacy entails the experiences that students have within the classroom that allow for the concepts of reading, writing, questioning, and reflecting to extend beyond the immediate text to make connections to the outside world. A critical culturally relevant literacy provides students with the skill set to participate as critically responsive citizens.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the literacy experiences of a selected population of urban African American male elementary students in order to identify techniques and strategies that integrate their lived experiences in a positive manner within the literacy classroom. It is the hope of the study to contribute to the development of critically reflective thinkers.

The research questions for this study are: (a) What are urban African American males’ literacy experiences like in an elementary classroom? (b) What traits of engagement, motivation, and metacognition are displayed by African American male students during literacy instruction? (c) How do urban African American male students define
masculinity? (d) How does the use of critical cultural literacy practices engage these students in literacy instruction? The findings will be shared through the final submission of the dissertation as completion of the doctoral program at the University of Missouri- Kansas City.

There will be about 6 third grade African American male elementary subjects in the study at the elementary school. In addition there will be one to six classroom teachers who will be asked to participate, as classroom observations are a crucial component of the study protocol. The student participants should be currently enrolled in the classrooms of individual teachers who agree to participate.

**Study Procedures and Treatments**

If you, the building administrator, agrees to allow the elementary school to take part in this study, the elementary school will be involved in this study for a total of fourteen two hour long sessions as well as, five 10 minute interview sessions with each individual student participants during March 17th-April 11th, 2014. Each interview will be scheduled prior to the start of the school day or after dismissal in a designated room within the school building to help maintain student privacy and confidentiality during the interview process.

Study observations will take place in the classroom of those teachers who have agreed to participate in the study who have student participants currently enrolled in their classroom. Each student will be observed for a minimum of two times; however, it should be noted that in the event that all student participants are enrolled in one classroom that the total of fourteen two hour long observations will take place in one classroom for the duration of the study.

**The following study visits and procedures will occur:**

I will ask participants to compose their story encompassing their literacy experiences and their lived experiences. Student participants will be encouraged to spend no more than 10 minutes of their time to complete individual interview sessions. Interview sessions will take place before or after school in an agreed upon room to ensure continued privacy and confidentiality for those students who have agreed to participate in the study. Students will also be observed. Observations are expected to take approximately twenty-eight hours; or as previously states fourteen two hour-long sessions. Observations will be conducted at the school site. Classroom observations will take place in an effort to capture descriptions of the pedagogical practices and interaction exchanges within the classroom setting.

**Possible Risks or Side Effects of Taking Part in this Study**

No physical or psychological/emotional risks are associated with this study.

**Possible Benefits for Taking Part in this Study**
There are no known benefits to taking part in this study. However, potential personal benefits from this study for the participants may include the personal reflections and/or connections made from the sharing of the lived and academic experiences in the literacy classroom. This study will benefit school administrators and teachers through conclusions about literacy practices that are most effective and impactful for student learning and the development of critically reflective thinkers.

Costs for Taking Part in this Study

There are no monetary costs to the building.

Payment for Taking Part in this Study

There will not be compensation for participation in this study.

Alternatives to Study Participation

The alternative is to not take part in the study.

Confidentiality and Access to your Records

While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information completed and shared by individual participants, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.

The district and school will not be named in any reports of the results. The research study may be shown to the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (IRB) and/ or other governing agencies. This is to prove which study procedures were completed and to check the data reported about the participants. The researcher will keep all information about the participants confidential as provided by law, but complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

If a participant leaves the study or is removed from the study, the study data collected before the participant left may still be used along with other data collected as part of the study. For purposes of follow-up studies and if any unexpected events happen, subject identification will be filed at University of Missouri Kansas City Education and Urban-Leadership Office under appropriate security and with access limited to the primary researcher and the co-investigator Dr. Dianne Smith of the University of Missouri- Kansas City.

Data collected will include interview transcripts and classroom observations. These interviews and observational data will be confidential and anonymity will be maintained. Every effort will be made to keep all information confidential. Individuals from the University of Missouri Kansas City Institutional Review Board Research Protections
Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.

Original interview transcripts and observation notes will be archived by the principal investigator for a minimum of seven years in a locked filing cabinet.

**Contacts for Questions about the Study**

You should contact the IRB Administrator of UMKC’s Institutional Review Board at 816-235-5927 if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the buildings rights or selected participants’ rights as research subjects. You may call the researcher Crystal Bandy at 816-372-4002 if you have any questions about this study. You may also call her if any problems come up.

**Voluntary Participation**

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. If consent is given to allow the selected elementary school to participate in the study, the school administrator is free to stop participating at any time and for any reason. If the school should choose not to be in the study or decide to stop participating, the decision will not negatively affect any individuals selected for participation. The researchers may stop the study if it is decided that it is in the best interest of the district to do so.

You have read this Consent Form or it has been read to you. You have been told why this research is being done and what will happen if the district agrees to take part in the study, including the risks and benefits. You have had the chance to ask questions, and you may ask questions at any time in the future by calling Crystal Bandy at **816-372-4002**. By signing this consent form, you volunteer and consent to allow your school building to take part in this research study. I will give you a copy of this consent form.

__________________________
Signature (Authorized Consenting Party)

__________________________
Date

__________________________
Printed Name (Authorized Consenting Party)
Researchers Name

Date
Appendix C

CHILD ASSENT

Gender perceptions: A narratological, social constructivist, case study of the literacy experiences of urban African American male elementary students.

My name is Crystal Bandy. I am a student in the Department of Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. A research study is a special way to find out about something. I am trying to learn more about what you like to learn about in reading class.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to meet with me privately and you will be asked to answer questions about what type of books you like to read and how you feel about reading. You will also be asked to listen to short stories, write responses, and keep a journal. Some of the questions will be personal and you can stop at any time. The questions will take about 10 minutes to answer. During our 10 minutes I may read a short story to you and ask that you write a response or write in your journal. I will keep your responses and journals in a safe place that is locked when you are finished with your 10 minutes with me. You will not have any work to complete at home if you are in the study.

I will watch your classroom 2-14 times, but I will not say anything that will give away that you are in my study. When I am in your classroom observing, you do not need to worry about me giving you away; your friends will not know you are in my study.

We don’t know if being in this research study will help you. But you may be helping us to understand children and reading or what children like to read about.

If you agree to help us, your teacher and classmates will not know what you have said and your classmates will not know that you are participating in the study. You and I will meet before or after school in a room before your friends come to school. If you decide to be in the study or if you decide to say “no” your choice will not affect your grades or whether people like you.

When we are done with the study, I will write a report about what I found out. I won’t use your name in the report.

Anything you and I talk about or you write will stay in a locked cabinet. It is important for you to know that if I am worried about you or your safety that I may have to tell your school counselor or school principal that I am worried and share with them why I am worried about...
you or your safety. I will only talk about you with another adult in your school if I feel that it will help you be safer.

Please talk this over with your parents before you decide if you want to be in my study. I will also ask your parents to give their permission for you to be in this study. But even if your parents say yes you can still say no and decide not to be in the study.

If you don’t want to be in this study, you don’t have to be in it. Remember, being in a study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don’t want to be in it. If you decide to stop after we begin that is okay too. Remember that no one else, not even your parents will know what you have told me.

You can ask any question that you have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn’t think of now, you can call me or ask your parents, teacher or a friend to call me at 816-372-4002.

Signing here means that you have read this paper or someone read it to you and that you are willing to be in this study. If you don’t want to be in this study, don’t sign.

___________________________________  _________________
Printed Name of Participant         Date

_________________________________
Signature of Participant

___________________________________  _________________
Printed Name of Investigator         Date

_________________________________
Signature of Investigator
Appendix D

Parental Permission Letter

*Gender perceptions: A narratological, social constructivist, case study of the literacy experiences of urban African American male elementary students.*

Dear Parents,

My name is Crystal Bandy. I am a graduate student in the Department of Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. I would like your child to take part in my research. During the weeks of March 17th - April 11th, I will be interviewing, meeting, and observing third grade male students and teachers to learn about gender perceptions in African American boys. If you and your child agree that your child may participate in the study I will ask your child to participate in 5 interviews that will take place before or after school, listen to short stories, write responses, keep a journal, and to be observed in the classroom. There will be a total of 14 two-hour long observations conducted during this study. Your child will be observed for a minimum of 2 of the total 14 observations; meaning your child may potentially be observed a minimum of 2 times based upon the number of study participants enrolled in your child’s current class. Your child’s teachers will also be asked to participate in the study, so that I may observe your child during their language arts class.

Completion of the interviews is estimated to take no more than ten minutes for each interview. During the interviews, I may read a short story to your child and ask that he write a response or write in his journal. All of the study expectations will be conducted on school grounds, and there will not be any expectations for you or your child to complete on your personal family time. It is important to consider that you as the parent are responsible for the transportation of your child to the 5 interviews that will take place before or after school.

All of the information I obtain from your child will be kept confidential. Your child’s name will not be used on any of the forms they complete, and no information about your child will ever leave school premises with a name attached. The interviews, journals, and responses that your child completes will be marked with an alias I select but no one who works in the school will ever know this alias or the responses of your child. All information regarding your child and their participation will be maintained in a locked filing cabinet on the campus of the University of Missouri-Kansas City in a locked office of the School of Education Educational Leadership division.

The information collected from this study will be compiled into a report that will be available for my professors at the University of Missouri Kansas City to review. The report will not contain any INDIVIDUAL information about children. It will describe what students said.
For example, I might describe what “3rd graders said” but I will NOT report what an individual student disclosed without using their assigned alias and making sure that all unique characteristics or traits of your child have been removed so their identity is protected. I will also use the information from this study to publish articles in professional publications, so that teachers can learn more about books to use when teaching reading to young African American boys. Once again, I will never report individual information.

The school principal and the school board have approved the study. However, your child does not have to participate in the study and participation or non-participation will not affect your child’s grades. If your child does not want to do the study, or wants to quit after starting, no consequences will be given for doing so. Teachers must be present in the classroom during the observation because of district policy. However, they will not be involved in the student observation process and will not be told who does and does not participate. In the event that the classroom teacher does not agree to participate in the study, or withdrawals their participation from the study, you will be notified of the need to discontinue your child’s participation in the study.

There are no direct benefits to you or your child for participating in this study. The information from the study should help us learn more about the types of books and lessons African American boys enjoy during language arts lessons. There are no known risks associated with participation in this study, and most students enjoy the opportunity to express their opinions. However, if your child becomes upset, he/she will be able to stop participating in the study and may choose to talk to one of the school counseling staff.

While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information you complete and share, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions. As a certified instructor of Ohio, Kansas, and Missouri, I am considered to be a mandated reporter. In the event of information that may cause concern for the general safety of the child is learned or told to the researcher by the child and warrants reporting to the proper authorities, there will be a necessary breach of confidentiality and privacy to ensure the safety of the student participant.

The University of Missouri-Kansas City appreciates the participation of people who help it carry out its function of developing knowledge through research. If you have any questions about the study that you are participating in you are encouraged to call Crystal Bandy, the investigator, at 816-372-4002.
If you and your child agree that your child may take part in the research please return a signed copy of this form to me in the enclosed envelope. You may keep the other copy for future reference.

You have read this permission form and agree to have your child take part in the research.

________________________________________
Name of Student

________________________________________
Printed Name of Parent

________________________________________          _________________
Signature of Parent                      Date
APPENDIX E

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY
TEACHER CONSENT FORM

Gender Perceptions: A Narratological, Social Constructivist, Case Study of the Literacy Experiences of Urban African American Male Elementary Students

Introduction

I, Crystal Bandy, am requesting permission to conduct a research study in your classroom. I am the researcher in charge of conducting the study. I am a graduate student in the Department of Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. I would like to conduct the study in the classroom school during March 17th-April 11th, 2014. I will be interviewing, meeting, and conducting classroom observations of third grade male students to learn more about gender perceptions in African American boys.

Background

I am requesting permission to conduct a research project in your classroom. The project will examine the literacy experiences of urban African American males elementary students enrolled in a Midwest urban school district. The research project, Gender Perceptions: A Narratological, Social Constructivist, Case Study of the Literacy Experiences of Urban African American Male Elementary Students, is a qualitative study designed to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of literacy experiences and the implementation of a critical cultural competency. Critical culturally relevant literacy entails the experiences that students have within the classroom that allow for the concepts of reading, writing, questioning, and reflecting to extend beyond the immediate text to make connections to the outside world. A critical culturally relevant literacy provides students with the skill set to participate as critically responsive citizens.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the literacy experiences of a selected population of urban African American male elementary students in order to identify techniques and strategies that integrate their lived experiences in a positive manner within the literacy classroom. It is the hope of the study to contribute to the development of critically reflective thinkers.
The research questions for this study are: (a) What are urban African American males’ literacy experiences like in an elementary classroom? (b) What traits of engagement, motivation, and metacognition are displayed by African American male students during literacy instruction? (c) How do urban African American male students define masculinity? (d) How does the use of critical cultural literacy practices engage these students in literacy instruction? The findings will be shared through the final submission of the dissertation as completion of the doctoral program at the University of Missouri- Kansas City.

There will be about 6 third grade African American male elementary subjects in the study at the elementary school. In addition there will be one to six classroom teachers who will be asked to participate, as classroom observations are a crucial component of the study protocol. The student participants should be currently enrolled in the classrooms of individual teachers who agree to participate. The classroom teacher’s instructional practices will not be considered to be a portion of the researcher. Those teachers agreeing to participate are solely agreeing to allow for the researcher to observe the student participants during their classroom language arts lessons.

**Study Procedures and Treatments**

If you, the classroom teacher, agree to take part in this study, the observations will involve a total of fourteen two hour long sessions as well as, five 10 minute interview sessions with each individual student participants during March 17th-April 11th, 2014. These times will be pre-determined and agreed upon between yourself and the researcher. It is during these classroom observations that the student participants will be observed during the language arts lessons. Study observations will take place in the classroom of those teachers who have agreed to participate in the study who have student participants currently enrolled in their classroom. Each student will be observed for a minimum of two times; however, it should be noted that in the event that all student participants are enrolled in one classroom that the total of fourteen two hour long observations will take place in one classroom for the duration of the study.

**The following study visits and procedures will occur:**

Student participants will also be observed in their classroom teacher’s homeroom. Observations are expected to take approximately twenty-eight hours, or as previously states fourteen two hour-long sessions. Each participant will be observed for a minimum of two times. If student participants are dispersed throughout several classrooms it is likely that classroom observations will vary in time commitments per classroom. In the event, that one classroom contains all required student participants, and then all fourteen-observation sessions will take place in the one classroom teacher’s literacy classroom. However, if student participants are found in multiple classrooms then the researcher will divide the observation times as is deemed appropriate and will contact the classroom teacher with those times immediately.
Observations will be conducted at the school site. Classroom observations will take place in an effort to capture descriptions of the pedagogical practices and interaction exchanges within the classroom setting. The classroom observations will focus on the behaviors and efforts of the student participant and not on the pedagogical practices, classroom management, or any other instructional traits of the teacher participants. Classroom observations will be scheduled with the researcher through email communication. The researcher will propose a schedule time for each visit and will ask for the teacher to verify that the proposed time works with the literacy schedule of the proposed dates, or the classroom teacher will offer alternative times and dates for the researcher to make the observations. All observations will be scheduled in advance, so to allow for the teacher to maintain as much continuity in their daily routine as possible.

**Possible Risks or Side Effects of Taking Part in this Study**

No physical or psychological/emotional risks are associated with this study.

**Possible Benefits for Taking Part in this Study**

There are no known benefits to taking part in this study. However, potential personal benefits from this study for the participants may include the personal reflections and/or connections made from the sharing of the lived and academic experiences in the literacy classroom. This study will benefit school administrators and teachers through conclusions about literacy practices that are most effective and impactful for student learning and the development of critically reflective thinkers.

**Costs for Taking Part in this Study**

There are no monetary costs to the building.

**Payment for Taking Part in this Study**

There will not be compensation for participation in this study.

**Alternatives to Study Participation**

The alternative is to not take part in the study.

**Confidentiality and Access to your Records**

While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information completed and shared by individual participants, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.
You, the classroom teacher, will not be named in any reports of the results. The research study may be shown to the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (IRB) and/or other governing agencies. This is to prove which study procedures were completed and to check the data reported about the participants. The researcher will keep all information about the participants confidential as provided by law, but complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

If a participant leaves the study or is removed from the study, the study data collected before the participant left may still be used along with other data collected as part of the study. For purposes of follow-up studies and if any unexpected events happen, subject identification will be filed at University of Missouri Kansas City Education and Urban-Leadership Office under appropriate security and with access limited to the primary researcher and the co-investigator Dr. Dianne Smith of the University of Missouri- Kansas City.

Data collected will include classroom observations. The observational data will be confidential and anonymity will be maintained. Every effort will be made to keep all information confidential. Individuals from the University of Missouri Kansas City Institutional Review Board Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.

Original observation notes will be archived by the principal investigator for a minimum of seven years in a locked filing cabinet.

**Contacts for Questions about the Study**

You should contact the IRB Administrator of UMKC’s Institutional Review Board at 816-235-5927 if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the or your rights as a participant in a research study. You may call the researcher Crystal Bandy at 816-372-4002 if you have any questions about this study. You may also call her if any problems come up.

**Voluntary Participation**

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. If consent is given to participate in the study, you, the classroom teacher, is free to stop participating at any time and for any reason. If you should choose not to be in the study or decide to stop participating, the decision will not negatively affect any individuals selected for participation. In addition, if you should withdrawal your participation, the student participants in your classroom will be excused from the study. The researchers may stop the study if it is decided that it is in the best interest of the student or teacher participant to do so.

You have read this Consent Form or it has been read to you. You have been told why this research is being done and what will happen if the district agrees to take part in the study, including the risks and benefits. You have had the chance to ask questions, and you may ask questions at any time in the future by calling Crystal Bandy at 816-372-4002. By signing this consent form, you volunteer and consent to allow your classroom to take part in this research study. I will give you a copy of this consent form.
Signature (Authorized Consenting Party)  Date

Printed Name (Authorized Consenting Party)

Researchers Name  Date
APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

*Gender Perceptions: A Narratological, Social Constructivist, Case Study of the Literacy Experiences of Urban African American Male Elementary Students*

Principal Investigator:
Crystal M. Bandy: University of Missouri, Kansas City School of Education
Department of Urban Leadership and Policy Studies

1. How do you feel when you read a book on a rainy Saturday?
2. How do you feel when you read a book in school during free time?
3. How would you feel about getting a book for a present?
4. How do you feel about reading instead of playing?
5. How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?
6. How do you feel when a teacher asks you questions about what you read?
7. How do you feel about reading in school? Home?

Section 2

1. Do you like to read?
2. How much time do you spend reading?
3. What are some books you would like to own?
4. Put a check mark next to the kind of reading you like best and topics you might like to read about.

a. ___ History  b. ___ Sports  c. ___ Science Fiction

d. ___ Travel  e. ___ Adventure  f. ___ Romance

g. ___ Plays  h. ___ Detective Stories  i. ___ War Stories

j. ___ Poetry  k. ___ Car Stories  m. ___ Novels
Section 3

1. What do you like about reading?
2. Do you have a favorite series that you read?
3. What topics would you like to learn more about this year?
4. How do you feel when it’s time for reading in class?
5. How do you feel about stories you read in reading class?
6. How do you feel when you read out loud in class?
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VITA

Crystal Marie Bandy was born in Kansas City, Missouri. After completing her schoolwork in the Hickman Mills and Independence School District in 2001, Crystal entered the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. She received a Bachelor of Science with emphasis in Political Science, History, and Education in May 2005. Crystal entered the Masters in Curriculum and Instruction program at the University of Missouri-Columbia the following fall and received her degree with an emphasis in literacy instruction in May of 2008. During the following three years Crystal was employed as a fifth grade teacher at Cottonwood Elementary in Overland Park, Kansas. She resigned from the position at Cottonwood in the spring of 2011 to accept a fifth grade teaching position at Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology in Kansas City, Missouri. In January of 2012, she entered the doctoral program in the School of Education at the University of Missouri in Kansas City, Missouri. Crystal now resides in Pacific Northwest region and is working on an education start-up company for a private equity firm.