

INVICTUS MINDS: A CRITICAL HEURISTIC CASE STUDY OF  
GIFTEDNESS IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES

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by  
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INVICTUS MINDS: A CRITICAL HEURISTIC CASE STUDY OF  
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University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2014

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this critical heuristic case study was to explore the phenomenon of “giftedness” as experienced by African American males in K-12 public schools through the analysis of their schooling experiences. A research goal of this study is to provide K-12 educators with more finite description of how this phenomenon is experienced in order to assist national educational systems in supporting the growth and development of African American males while also increasing their recruitment and retention in gifted programs. There is one central question that guided this study with three sub-questions. The research question to be answered was: What do the experiences of gifted African American males in public school systems suggest about strategies needed to promote their success, recruitment and retention in Gifted and Talented programs?

The case studies of six African American male students that were identified as “gifted” and attending a school in a K-12 public school system was utilized explore the

research questions. The specific data sources that were utilized for the study was (1) participant autobiographies; (2) official documents; (3) semi structured interviews; (4) theoretical focus group interviews; and (5) participant observations outside of the school setting. The primary method of data analysis was the six basic phases in the heuristic process of phenomenological analysis: (a) initial engagement, (b) immersion, (c) incubation, (d) illumination, (e) explication and (f) creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990).

Four themes were discovered as a result of the study: (1) Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships, (2) Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems, (3) Gifted Systems, and (4) The Student Success Course each working together to help shape the experience of giftedness. Final implications and suggestions for improvement are presented through the Jigsaw Framework for African American Male Support which is designed as a way to help all African American males to be successful in their schooling experiences---gifted, unidentified gifted, or non-gifted.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies have examined a dissertation titled “Invictus Minds: A Critical Heuristic Case Study of Giftedness in the African-American Male” presented by Jermaine A. Wilson, candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## PREFACE

### **My Journey as a Gifted African American Male**

#### **Invictus**

By William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

I learned the poem *Invictus* during my freshman year of college as I endeavored to become a member of a fraternal organization on my campus. Any time that it was recited, I reflected on a theme of perseverance and triumph that was seemingly ingrained within its figurative stanzas. Who would have thought some years later it would also cause me to reflect on the phenomenon of being “gifted” as an African-American male and how it related to my own experiences in public schools as well as others who shared this label? In the poem, British author William Ernest Henley describes his battle with tuberculosis as well as the amputation of a foot. He acknowledges his vigilance during these trials of adversity and ultimately realizes that he was in control of his destiny rather than his circumstances. After

much contemplation, I realized that for me there was a deeper meaning from this poem that was applicable to the African American male who had been broken in mind, body, and spirit for over four centuries while linked to a legacy of strife and defeat.

As an adolescent, I never considered my own personal experiences as a gifted African American male; however, while conducting research on this notion of *giftedness* and the history of African Americans, I came to the conclusion that the experience of giftedness for the African American male had to be a unique experience for this populace. I revisited this epiphany often and spent numerous hours discussing my thoughts with professors, friends, and critical research partners. My prevailing thought was how could a group of people that have experienced centuries of psychosocial degradation and devaluation have the same experience with this phenomenon of giftedness as non-African American students? It almost seemed oxymoronic when examining the educational and penal statistics regarding African American males in the United States. However, Bonner (2003) noted pillars of success experienced by gifted African American males in the higher education setting such as the importance of building healthy relationships with faculty, establishing peer relationships, creating supportive family networks, facilitating the development of a positive self-image, and having a conducive institutional environment for school.

Over time, one of my obstacles as an African American male was to avoid the canvas that was often painted for me with colors of negative or stereotypical societal perceptions and images. This becomes a predicament when there is a gifted African American male, who is seemingly non-existent in society while also experiencing this invisible phenomenon. Bonner (2003) expressed similar thoughts about being a gifted, African American male:

You're interested in studying academically gifted African American males? You know the greater academic community doesn't believe this being exists! Were the pundits within the academe ready to focus on students of a caramel, chocolate, ebony, or mocha hue, particularly if this focus cast the light in a direction away from the alabaster and ivory stalwarts who traditionally occupied center stage? (p. 26)

It was my personal experiences with giftedness that fueled my passion with the need for this study. Reflection on my own journey helped me to think about the times that I had been on the "stage" of my educational experiences, often wearing a costume of invisibility that would be the wardrobe of giftedness. At this point, I began to explore my own K-12 experiences more deeply as an African American male gifted student and this became my platform to begin examining this phenomenon of giftedness.

### **My Case of Invisible Giftedness**

As an African American male growing up in the urban core of Kansas City, Missouri, I never gave much thought to the phenomenon of giftedness or how I experienced this phenomenon during my schooling. Although, a student in one of the most impoverished areas of the city, I always believed that my success was attributed to having family members that expected me to do great things and a collection of very good teachers who affirmed my potential for success while building positive relationships with me. I could recall moments of invigoration when I was challenged by rigorous academic studies, given high expectations for achievement, and developed strong positive relationships with teachers that cared about my future beyond the four walls of the classroom.

To this date, I am grateful for the teachers that challenged me to excel and never allowed failure to be an option. This coupled with a strong familial relationship with my grandparents who always supported me and held high expectations that included being



academically successful in school, graduating from high school, and going to college.

Without these systems of support, I am certain that I would not be the man that I am today!

My educational pathway began in the parochial school from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. At Carver Christian Academy, the teachers believed in challenging all of the students with high expectations and rigorous academic standards. I was identified as a “gifted” student when I entered public school; but I cannot recall any different instructional practices for those students who were “gifted” and those non-gifted while in elementary school. I vividly remember my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Griffith telling me, “complacency is the quagmire of doom ... always continue to push forward and be great...never settle!” As I reflect on my elementary experience, all of my teachers [Mrs. Lawson, Mr. Hale, Mrs. Jordan, Mrs. Chaney, and Mrs. Griffith] had high expectations that were conveyed to us [predominantly African American students] daily and their support was unwavering. After fifth grade, I left Carver Christian and began attending public school in the Kansas City, Missouri School District.

This marked the beginning of my informal schooling about some of the perceptions and acceptable behaviors for African American males in the public school setting. To enjoy learning in school and having a desire to be academically challenged branded me as a social outcast and an object of daily ridicule. I began to dislike school and became resentful that I had been taken from my world of educational euphoria into a place that felt desolate, cruel, and dark. A memory that remains with me is the moment one of my sixth grade teachers that remarked I was “too smart” for his class. He then gave me the option to sleep during his class in the back corner of the room or read silently. He stated that he had to “control” the

rest of the kids and did not need anything else to do. I began a daily routine of reading comic books during his class rather than participating in the lessons. It was my growing love for reading comic books and fiction material fostered at that moment which saved my life. To date, I attribute the expansion of my vocabulary to the reading of comic books which extended from my experience in this sixth grade classroom, although, my teacher's actions were not purposefully intended to have a positive effect on my learning. During that year, there was a constant and substantial amount of pressure from my other male peers to prove myself to be "tough". The experience of school for me as a bastion of high expectations and academic euphoria came to an end. I was propelled into a jungle where survival of the fittest prevailed!

My reputation began to change from being the "overachieving student" to the constant "discipline problem". I began skipping classes to hang out with friends, participating in fight clubs in school, and even leaving school periodically. Consequently, the amount of time that I spent in afterschool detention and in-school suspension increased. I rebuked the image of being an "intelligent" student by any means necessary. The most important thing for me was to seek the approval of my peers and be accepted in the school. At the end of that school year, my grandparents transferred me to a different school and reinforced the high expectations that were acceptable to them while expressing their disappointment in the student that I had become. My next school for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade gave me the opportunity to start over with a clean slate and a renewed focus. It was a better school for me, closer to my home, and it provided me with the chance to redeem myself. I was offered the opportunity to transfer to the College Preparatory magnet school in our district

where I could receive more services for gifted education; however, because of my experiences in the sixth grade and being labeled negatively because of my urge to do well, I chose to go to my neighborhood magnet school which was Central Middle School. This school had a focus on foreign languages and computers which I was highly interested in and this fostered some excitement about changing schools.

My experiences were good for the most part at this school, besides my seventh grade counselor who insisted that “college” was not for “black boys”. She would often say that “students going to college should be at the college preparatory school...this magnet school was to teach skills for the workforce!” I utilized her comments to focus even more intensely on my academic studies and became involved in extracurricular activities. I was placed in the advanced track for reading and math. I had some of the best teachers in the school. Many of my peers were not able to share in this benefit. I was in an advanced cohort of students taking Algebra and an Honors English course during my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year. Although the pressure to engage in negative activities from male peers did not dissipate; the focus on my academics and the thought of disappointing my grandparents was enough to motivate me to not get off-track again. There was also a certain feeling of elitism being in classes that everyone could not be a part of and having access to different curriculum experiences than the rest of the school. As I can recall, there was only five African American males in the advanced courses which sometimes led to other issues such as our masculinity being questioned and the occasional term of “nerd” being affixed to us. I was fortunate to have some very strong support systems including teachers that developed deep authentic relationships with me and my classmates. My team teachers [Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Jones, and

Mr. Langholz] always encouraged us to be the best and provided us with daily positive affirmations about our skills and abilities which made my transition to high school much smoother. I began to feel my self-concept becoming stronger as it was when I was in elementary school, particularly being comfortable liking school and doing well in my classes.

I attended Central High School in the Kansas City, Missouri School District which had a reputation at that time for being one of the most violent schools in the city. However, it was a school that despite the reputation and negative student behaviors; held a plethora of great teachers that cultivated my passion for learning while being enrolled in challenge and dual credit courses. I was fortunate to have teachers that taught me in a rigorous manner and taught me the essential skills needed to be successful in college. There was no room for failure and the bar for achievement was high. It was like being in elementary school again, despite all of the negative media attention that my high school received, my teachers were excellent. I was fortunate to have a high school guidance counselor [Mrs. Chambers] who made it her duty to help me to be successful in all of my endeavors and a school principal [Mr. Bowie] that knew me by name and always encouraged me to do my best. There still remained a few teachers that I can recall who fostered negative beliefs about African American students and at one point challenged my ability to maintain academic success in advanced coursework.

During my freshman year, I was enrolled in both an Algebra and Geometry class, whereas most ninth grade students only took Algebra. There were some teachers that had an issue with me being a freshman student enrolled in two math courses. Geometry was the course reserved for sophomores and many of the students that were in my advanced math

cohort re-enrolled in Algebra to take it over again although they had passed the course. However, a mistake in scheduling caused me and one of my friends, who was also an African American male to be placed in the Geometry class. I was enrolled in both courses and a comment from one of the math teachers in the school was that it was not appropriate for a student to have two different math courses as a freshman, because it would “mess up” the math track when I would be an upperclassman. The copious dilemma of the moment for these adults was “what class will he take as a junior or senior?” The advanced math track had been saved traditionally for certain groups of students and African American males tended to be a rare case in those upper level courses. I desired to remain in my Algebra class because of my teacher [Mrs. Morrison] who maintained an excellent classroom climate, had positive relationships with us, and she always made sure to give me additional advanced work. My Geometry teacher [Mrs. Lisa Smith] always challenged me with her rigorous expectations and the advanced note-taking skills we were given as we learned advanced theorems, postulates, and the expectation that we could and would be successful after high school. She was a young African American woman who commanded respect and held us to rigorous standards at all times. I had her support in remaining in both math classes and loved the idea of being a freshman in a class with primarily sophomores and juniors.

Despite some of my teachers wanting me to take Algebra as my only math class, my counselor and grandparents fought for me to remain in both courses. Additionally, I had many great teachers and faculty members at my high school [Mrs. Sandifer, Mrs. Stewart, Mrs. Facklam, Mrs. Stuart, Mrs. Lowe, Mrs. Williams-Kubic, Mrs. Wharton, Mrs. McNeil, Mr. Driver, Mrs. Johnston, Mrs. Mudd, Mrs. Shand, Mrs. Gray, Mr. Papadakos, and Mr.

Tron] that helped me to hone my abilities and navigate the waters of negative perceptions and low expectations. My high school journey culminated with me graduating in the top ten of my class, being active in numerous extracurricular activities, accumulating college credit hours while in high school, and also receiving a full-scholarship to attend Missouri Western State College.

During my college years, I learned how important it was to have some unique variables: a strong level of self-concept, a high level of resiliency, and access to a strong support system. Until this point in my life, all of my schooling had been within institutions where the majority of my peers looked like me and/or living in the same urban core of the city as I did. In college, I was introduced to a vast world of diversity and at times I would feel like I had to run the race twice as fast as my Caucasian peers despite the fact that the level of work that I produced may have been higher quality. I believe the most dramatic change was the number of hidden supports that many of my African American peers were oblivious to. I joined a fraternity during my freshman year and it was a monumental experience that changed my life.

Through this awesome network of brothers, I acquired mentors who helped me to grow and further develop while also providing me with the opportunity to help others in need. One of my best friends and mentors in the fraternity [Mr. Lai-Monte Hunter] helped me to understand the importance of giving back to others and recognizing the need to build strong support groups. My fraternity advisor [Mr. Karl Bell] was also a beacon of light for me; we tended to be at odds about certain issues, but he helped me to foster a higher level of self-concept as an African American student on campus and always challenged my thinking

and growth. I was hired to lead our Student Success Programs mentoring initiative on the campus during my junior year. This program was designed to help first-year students to experience success on the college campus. Through this work, I realized that many of the students from urban school districts had been labeled negatively throughout their K-12 experiences which lowered their confidence levels in doing college work. Many of these students were African American males that feared they would not be able to “make it” because of their lack of educational preparation and the stereotypes fostered about them on the campus. I began comparing my own experiences to many of these young men and reflected on a portion of the text *Our Deepest Fear* (1992) by Marianne Williamson:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. (p. 190-191).

Working with these young students helped me to understand the power and need for mentoring. It was amazing how these young men in the program would look up to me as a role model when I was not much older than them. I came to understand that as much as I helped them, they also helped me to understand my life's calling as an educator and a servant-leader. After college, I began working in corporate America but realized that my life's calling was to be an educator and became a classroom teacher. To this day, becoming an educator [classroom teacher, guidance counselor, assistant principal, and principal] has been the most transformative experience of my life.

As a classroom teacher, I assisted many students that had been conditioned to believe in their hopelessness which usually resulted in a fear of new opportunities. These bright young men were frightened of their own potential due to the erroneous and indecorously flawed images that they had believed in which ultimately resulted in an unhealthy level of self-concept for them. Many of these students were African American males who had been socialized by low expectations and covert racial notions that had been cleverly woven into their K-12 educational experiences. Attempting to unravel the slavery of their minds was one of the most painful experiences for me. Another disturbing fact was that I shared another commonality with these young men and that was the phenomenon of being “gifted”, nevertheless still entangled in an institutional web that was seemingly designed for their failure and plight.

How much stronger would these young men be if they had the similar great teachers, high expectations, and support systems similar to my experience? What if they were able to build a healthy level of self-concept, understand the power of resiliency, and become acquainted with their identity as it is situated in a societal context during their K-12 years rather than collegiate years or in the world of work? How can these gifted African American males become the masters of their fate and captains of their soul...understanding that they also possessed an “Invictus Mind”? It is within this reflective journey that I found the need to conduct this research study to explore the phenomenon of giftedness as it is experienced by the African American male in our public school systems and allow me to act as a medium for the voice of those males that would otherwise go unheard.





To my grandmother, Mrs. Joyce Wilson...she is one of the greatest gifts that God has given me in this life. She is the one who always checked my homework, taught me life lessons, demanded that I have neat handwriting, helped me to know how to budget and finance, encouraged me to always do my best, taught me to never make myself feel less so that someone else can be more, to have pride in all that I do, to help others in need and never ask for anything in return, told me to always give my faith to God and trust in all that he does, expected me to be the first to attend college in my immediate family, listened to me vent about work and life, told me it was okay to be different...as long as I loved myself it was all that mattered, told me that there was nothing wrong with speaking good English, demanded that I never be ashamed to pick up a book and love reading, affirmed that I would be successful in this world and do great things, and so much more... Alzheimer's Disease has slowly diminished her memories of these things---but if it were not for her---I am sure that my life would not be what it is today--my deepest love that helped me to overcome my deepest fears at every juncture of my life!

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

**The Problem**

Throughout the nation, school districts continue to struggle with the issue of recruiting and retaining African-American males in gifted and talented programs. Much of this struggle is associated with the lack of understanding regarding how African American males experience the phenomenon of giftedness in public schools (Alvino, 1981; Bonner, 2003; Ford, 1995; Fries-Britt, 1997; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Milner, 2007). A limited understanding of giftedness further inhibits the recruitment and retention of African American males within these programs. The lack of solution-seeking for this problem may be caused by long standing societal perceptions about African American males in general, which creates additional barriers to success for these students identified as “gifted” in public schools as well as those who may potentially be gifted and not yet appropriately identified.

Research displays that some of the educational outcomes for schools with African American males today are disproportionate amounts of African American Males in special education programs, lower reading scores, higher suspension and expulsion rates, increasing dropout rates and general achievement deficits within the school environment (Baytops, Ford, & Harmon, 1997; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Ford, 1995; Ford, 1996; Holzman, 2006; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Martin, Martin, Gibson & Wilkins, 2007; Monroe, 2005, Noguera, 2003, Patton, 1992; Tatum, 2005; Townsend, 2000; Whiting, 2009).

Perceptions and beliefs are detrimental in understanding the impediments that may exist for these students. These obstacles then culminate in a drastic under-representation of African American males in Gifted and Talented programs. Ford (1995) reported that, “African Americans make up eight percent of students in gifted education programs across the nation and an increasing problem with the implementation of gifted education programs particularly in urban schools has been the recruitment and retention of these African American students” (p. 53). Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education reported in 1993 that African American male students were inexplicably placed in other special education programs for learning disabilities, behavior problems, and programs for mentally retarded students more than any other ethnicity (Ford, 1995; Patton, 1992). In a national report compiled by the Schott Foundation in 2006 on *Black Males in Public Education*, it was reported that:

In the country as a whole the proportion of African American students in Special Education classes is disproportionately high and those in Gifted/Talented programs are disproportionately low. The number of African-Americans, particularly African-American males, who receive out-of-school suspensions and are expelled, is also disproportionately high. (Holzman, 2006, p. 12)

The disproportionate placement of African American Males in programs categorized as mental retardation, behavior disorder or learning disabled suggests that there remains an inequity in gifted education programs within our nation. There is an urgent need for educators to develop policies and practices that will ensure that African American students, economically disadvantaged students, underachievers, and other nontraditional students receive the education to which they are entitled (Alamprese & Erlanger, 1988; Ford & Harris, 1991; Ford, 1995). Baytops, Ford, & Harmon (1997) go further to report the issue of under-

representation of racially diverse students in gifted education as one of the most disturbing issues in today's educational system. Regarding this disparity, Holzman (2006) reported that:

According to a January 2003 report of the National Research Council, nationwide 7.47% of White, non-Hispanic students, 9.9% of Asian, 3.04% of African-American, non-Hispanic students, 3.57% of Hispanic students are placed by school districts in Gifted/Talented programs. In most American districts, African-American non-Hispanic students are placed in Gifted/Talented programs at a rate half that as would be expected from their level of enrollment. In general, a higher percentage of African-American female students are placed in Gifted/Talented programs than African-American male students. (p. 12)

The Javits Act of 1988 has assisted in federal efforts to increase the number of underrepresented populations in gifted education by giving the "highest priority" of funding to students who are economically disadvantaged, possess limited English proficiency, or have disabilities or handicapped conditions (Sec. 3063 (a)(1)). While these efforts have changed the definition of gifted students, there has not been a significant increase of African American students in gifted educations (Baytops et al., 1997). Within our American system of education, the enrollment numbers of students in programs should reflect the racial composition of our schools. This quandary is observed in Holzman's (2006) statement, "if African-American students were in Gifted/Talented programs proportionate to their enrollments, there would be at least an additional 140,000 Black female students and 200,000 Black male students in those programs" (p. 12).

Disaggregated data for the state of Missouri revealed a 42.4% gap between Black and White male students enrolled in Gifted and Talented Programs; particularly, Black male students represented only 3.74% of the gifted population and White males accounted

for 46.15% of gifted students (Holzman, 2006, p. 60). This inequity is not only evident in the enrollment percentage of Gifted and Talented programs within our K-12 school systems but also in the research literature regarding the education of African American students and their teachers. Baytops et al. (1997) discovered that over a thirty year time span, only 36 of the 2,816 education articles published on gifted students focus on African Americans. This is about one percent of published literature and an even more disconcerting detail is that the percentage of articles that focused on male students is significantly lower.

Seemingly, this process of systematic invisibility for African American males in our school systems has been gradual in the evolution of time as the image of the African American male has been tainted by societal perceptions which have perpetuated the idea of the gifted African American male being a “mythological” figure. This issue may be connected to the prevailing lack of understanding about the phenomenon of giftedness and more importantly, an understanding of what it looks like when giftedness is combined with the unique cultural experiences of African Americans males. (Baytops et al., 1997; Ford, 1995; Kunjufu, 2005).

In many classrooms across the nation, diminished perceptions about African American male students are fostered through exposure to less rigorous curriculum programs, low expectations, overwhelming discipline issues, and covert issues of racism that undergird the educational environment. African American males are often viewed as disruptive components of the educational setting which hinders them from obtaining a quality education due to the amount of discipline consequences that are in tandem to their infractions. This perception may be rooted deep within the African American historical struggle for

educational opportunities in the United States. Author, bell hooks (2004) remarked, “In a post-slavery Jim Crow world, black folks had to struggle for the right to educate themselves...and even when that right was gained, the immediate need for material survival disrupted the efforts of black males to acquire education” (p. 34). Often in our classrooms, African American males are perceived to be less than adequate for the educational setting, labeled by teachers as discipline problems and/or students with insufficient intellectual ability (Kunjufu, 2005). Negative teacher perceptions may be an additional reason that the problem of AAM under-representation in gifted programs may exist in our schools.

The level of self-concept within the African American male is extremely vital in counteracting these negative perceptions of society and schools. Tatum (2005) reported, “Black males are increasingly skeptical that education can help them escape from their low economic strata...many of these young men believe that their fate has been determined and that failure is inevitable” (p. 15). Because of this stigmatism, many African American males are able to find safety and security in the prison system rather than experience failure in the world. According to the Justice Policy Institute (2003), “the impact of prison on young men with little schooling was even greater among African American men...in 1999, an astonishing 52% of African American male high school drop-outs had prison records by their early thirties” (p. 6). Some of these high school drop-outs may be a part of the invisible African American male gifted population that has been impaired by diminished perceptions and low levels of self-concept fostered regarding their educational abilities to be high achievers.

Other barriers that may impact the recruitment of African American males in gifted and talented programs could be erroneous placement procedures (Blanchett, 2006; Kunjufu, 2005; McIntyre & Pernell, 1985; Patton, 1998); biased testing procedures (Callahan, 2005; Ford, 1998; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Ford & Harris, 1991; Masten, 1985; Richert, 1987; Robinson, 2003); lack of support from educational policymakers, administrators, and teachers (Garibaldi, 1992; Strayhorn, 2008; Wimberly, 2002); low expectations in the classroom (Ford, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; McIntyre & Pernell, 2012; McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007); and prevention of access to rigorous courses within the school curriculum (Griffin & Allen, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Hodge, Harrison, Burden, & Dixson, 2008; Hopkins & Harris, 1997; Noguera, 2003; Silvernail, 2010). These impediments of progress are further examined in the review of the literature that undergirds this research study. It is evident that a better understanding of how the phenomenon of giftedness is experienced by the African American male in our K-12 schools is needed to solve this problem of under-representation and invisibility.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this critical, heuristic case study is to explore the phenomenon of giftedness as experienced by African American males through the exploration and analysis of their schooling experiences while also raising their level of awareness about what it means to be a gifted African American male as a result of interactions with the researcher and other participants. The pragmatic goal of this study is to provide educators with more acute knowledge about this phenomenon to assist national systems of education in supporting the



growth and development of African American males while increasing their recruitment and retention into gifted programs. For the purpose of this study, the definition of “*giftedness*” is taken from the Javits Act of 1988 used by the National Association of Gifted Children which defines the term as:

Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (p. 1)

There is one central question that guides this study with three sub-questions. The research question to be answered is: What do the experiences of gifted African American males in public school systems suggest about strategies needed to promote their success, recruitment and retention in Gifted and Talented programs? The three sub questions answered are (1) How do these gifted African American males describe their experiences with gifted programs in their schools? (2) How do gifted African American males describe their experiences with curriculum, teachers, and other students inside and outside of the classroom? and (3) What do the experiences of gifted African American males suggest about practices that public school educators can use to promote the success and development of African American males in general?

In order to substantiate the results of this research study, the research questions are useful in connecting the purpose, theoretical framework, and methodology for this qualitative study. The theoretical framework is vital to the study because it allowed me to specify and expand upon key concepts, theories, and assumptions that influence the phenomenon of

interest in the study, which for this qualitative study is the construct of *giftedness* as experienced by African American males.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research study draws from six bodies of knowledge to inform and support the information presented in this qualitative inquiry. Maxwell (2005) explains that the theoretical framework is “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research—a key part of your design” (p. 33). The beginning of this chapter discusses my personal experiences with public schooling and giftedness. As a coordinating platform for the study, there are two assumptions that I bring to this study. The first is that many African American male students that may be gifted in public schools remain invisible due to societal and systemic barriers linked with the lack of understanding in regards to the manifestation of their giftedness in school.

The second assumption is that gifted African American males are not aware of what their interactions with the phenomena of being “gifted” looks or feels like which further impede their access to the systems of support needed to help them to be high achievers. The framework of conceptual knowledge for this study is (1) my personal experiences, autobiography, and assumptions, (2) the background and context of the study which includes some historical Foundations of Gifted Education, (3) Historical Socio-Cultural Perceptions of the African-American Male, (4) The Discourse of Critical Theory, (5) Self-Concept and Racial Identity Development, and (6) African American Male Experiences in Public Schools.

## **Historical Socio-Cultural Perceptions of the African-American Male**

An element of the conceptual framework of this study is the examination of the historical social and cultural issues that have affected African American males. Christopher B. Booker begins his book, *I Will Wear No Chain* (2000) with a quote from W.E.B. Du Bois that eloquently frames this paradigm:

Though we ordinarily speak of the Negro problem as though it were one unchanged question, students must recognize the obvious facts that this problem, like others, has a long historical development, has changed with the growth and evolution of the nation; moreover, that it is not one problem, but rather a plexus of social problems, some new, some old, some simple, some complex; and these problems have their one bond of unity in the act that they group themselves about those Africans whom two centuries of slave trading brought into the land. (p. vii)

Remnants of these psychosocial processes that impede on the success of African American students may still exist in today's schools. It is imperative to understand that these issues not only affect the gifted male but African Americans males as a collective unit. The psychosocial oppression of the people can be traced back to the earliest notions of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. During the journey of the Middle Passage, the subjugation to the African American male was extensively brutal in nature to mind, body, and soul. The psychological imprint of slavery was monumental as an entire culture of people was stripped of their history, culture, and self-concept. Today, there is a myriad of issues that face African American students in both schools and society; however, there have not been any immense efforts to re-culture the people in tangent with understanding the magnitude of the processes that were used to break down the original culture for the African American. Current societal remedies are often "quick" fixes to the problem examined rather than working on the larger sustainable cultural rebuilding that must occur in order to restore the complete psyche from

the damage that has been done over time from a historical socio-cultural aspect. In order to comprehend the magnitude of this task it is imperative to visualize the intensity of the process that was utilized to break down the culture.

The African American male image has been distorted by media and historical stereotypes and perceptions that date back to the arrival of the slaves on the Eastern coast of the Americas (Black, 1997; Booker, 2000). African American males were trained to reject education and embrace physical labor to support the plantation owner's capitalist desires. Today, many young African American males are similarly consumed with the idea of making money and having a "flashy" lifestyle and less of a focus on the acquisition of higher educational statuses. According to hooks (2004), "In the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarch culture, most boys from poor and underprivileged classes are socialized via mass media and class-biased education to believe that all that is required for their survival is the ability to do physical labor" (p. 34).

It is important that this study is able to rest upon the broader context of literature and research about the social and cultural oppression and issues pertinent to that of the Black man in a historical perspective. Peffley, Shields, & Williams (1996) conducted an empirical study on the impact of a television news story on white viewers when the suspect was African American males. The findings of the study implied that the "participants in our experiment who endorsed negative stereotypes of African Americans viewed the suspect in the crime story as more guilty, more deserving of punishment, more likely to commit future violence, and with more fear and loathing than a similarly portrayed white suspect" (p. 309).

In order to completely understand the societal realm that gifted African American males operate within; the study outlines the historic journey of the African American male and his triumph and exploitation because these ideologies and facts have contributed to the shaping of various social contexts of the environments through which they exist as well as the needed lens to understand their current journey. Carter G. Woodson (1933) in his work *The Mis-Education of the Negro* discusses the issues of the historical and social oppression of the African American male in regards to education opportunities by stating:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, he depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (p. v.)

Furthermore, many authors have remarked that although slavery was ended...the psychological inhibition and social mistreatment of the culture has continued (Black, 1997; Booker, 2000; hooks, 2004; Mintz & Stauffer, 2007).

### **The Discourse of Critical Theory**

Critical Theory is one of the broad areas of knowledge that this research study utilizes within the conceptual framework. Gifted education is linked to tracking in the aspect that gifted programs often provide additional support, access to more rigorous curriculum and courses, as well as teachers that are trained in effectively providing differentiated instruction for students in these programs. Gifted programs have been viewed as being elitism systems of segregation in the United States school system. Additionally, some issues are associated with aspects of racial conflict, diminished power, class status, and psychosocial oppression. These issues are explored through the various methodological aspects of the study because

“critical theory holds that knowledge is socially constructed, contextual, and dependent on interpretation” (McLaren & Giarelli, 1995, p. 2).

According to McLaren & Giarelli (1995), critical theory can be utilized to “move us toward the dark and unexplored corners of our social processes, illuminating structures long hidden, forces unrecognized, and power struggles embedded in our discourses on schooling and democracy” (p. ix). Understanding the K-12 schooling experiences of African American males requires an understanding of the historical nature of the academic, social, and psychological processes that undergird the systematic institutions of education serving them. A heuristic component of this research study is that I as the researcher share the experience of being gifted, having attended public schools, as well as experiencing the societal adversities facing the African American male.

First, I bring to this study the notion that there is an ingrained hegemony in the existence of gifted education programs that places a system of intelligence as the predictor of success. This system being built upon historical racial inequities combined with an already inequitable system of education. For the purpose of this research study, *hegemony* is defined as a subtle, almost invisible process through which dominant groups in society exert social, cultural, ideological, or economic oppression over a subordinate group” (21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools, 2010).

Second, there is a restrictive aspect of equity and access in the realm of gifted education for the African American male that has been historically proscribed through marginalization and racial subjugation in our society. In order to confront the issues of power and struggle within the notion of gifted education, there must be an understanding of

its impact on the lives of African American students. Wallace and Brand (2012) conducted an empirical study using Critical Race Theory to examine the instructional practices of two educators who were categorized as being “culturally responsive” by their administrator. The study was aimed at examining whether or not there was an influence of the students’ racial identities on the beliefs and practices of the teachers. The researchers noted that:

The significance of the findings of this study is that race matters, in that these teachers were informed by an awareness of how society’s constructions on race could influence what their students thought about their teachers, themselves and their academic achievement. These factors existed as a part of the background information for the African American students, and these teachers used this information to construct their learning environments and plan their instruction. (p. 370)

McLaren & Giarelli (1995) further remarked that critical traditions “seek to reverse the historical amnesia by making the inscribed power relation as the problem of research” (p. xii). The authors offer two ways to accomplish this task: (1) a questioning of the invisible structures of power that are in place within society where the modes of inquiry are to understand how power hinders and controls the development of democratic conditions and (2) bringing to the forefront how the oppression of a group of people is created while acknowledging the ways that these structures of power help to keep the status quo. Critical Race Theory according to Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith (2008) “aims to reexamine the terms by which race and racism have been negotiated in American consciousness and to recover the radical tradition of race consciousness among African Americans...” (p. 87).

### **Self-Concept and Racial Identity Development**

Research has shown that two factors of success for African American males both gifted and non-gifted is higher levels of self-concept and a strong sense of racial identity

(Allen, 2000). The earliest research about self-concept emerged during the humanistic movement. Aanstoos, Serlin, and Greening (2000) reported that “[Carl] Rogers sought ways to facilitate clients' yearning for self-actualization and fully-functioning living...he was one of the first researchers to study psychotherapy process using tape-recordings and transcripts, and...made extensive use of Q-sorts to study self-concept and change” (p. 3). Self-concept is made up of two distinct components: the individual self and the collective self. The individual self refers to a person's complete knowledge of self; including their thoughts, self-knowledge, and evaluations of who and what they are (Bordens & Horowitz, 2002). The second component, the collective self, stems from membership within groups and social orders (Bordens & Horowitz, 2002).

African Americans tend to be more grounded within the collective culture of self; however, the quandary in this notion is that the societal and cultural norms that inform any group culture can be either positive or negative. Today's African American males are profoundly influenced by the images and role expectations that are transmitted via common forms of media and technology. This societal imagery conveys the acceptability and glorification of certain lifestyles (i.e. professional sports athletes or entertainers) or the role portrayal as criminal most often refuting the depiction of the African American man as being educated or a scholar (Oliver, 2003; Page, 1997; Polite & Davis, 1999; Rome, 2004; Tatum, 2005; Weatherspoon, 1994). This influence is critical in understanding the development of self-concept for the African American male. Belgrave and Allison (2006) reported “historically, Blacks in the United States have been described as having a negative self-concept and self-denigration as a result of inferior status in this country” (p. 208).



Additionally, Belgrave and Allison (2006) remarked that, “a central premise in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case, which outlawed school segregation, was that Blacks who attended Black schools not only suffered educationally but socially and psychologically from low self-concept” (p. 208). The outcome of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case propelled the advancement of African Americans in the pursuit of an equal education; however, the student’s level of self-concept and psychosocial aspects was sacrificed as a part of the process. There was much work done by legislators and policy educators to implement the needed structural changes for schools to be accepting of both races, nevertheless, the aspect of how to repair the affective components of the schooling process seemed to be overlooked. Neville, Tynes, and Utsey (2009) wrote that “when caught in this psychological and social-emotional battle, some African American students attempt to sabotage their achievement” (p. 499).

A speculation could be that this is due to the low levels of Racial Identity Development in the students. In Lisa Delpit’s (2003) article titled *Educators as ‘Seed People’ Growing a New Future*, she discusses the struggle for students of color within the educational system and the necessity to foster the development of Black Identity. She notes that if we are going to teach African American students in our educational systems “we must learn *who* the children are, and not focus on *what* we assume them to be...this means developing relationships with our students, and understanding their political, cultural, and intellectual legacy” (p. 18).

DeCuir-Gunby (2009) defined [Black] Racial Identity as “the attitudes and beliefs that an African American has about his or her belonging to the Black race individually, the

Black race collectively, and their perceptions of other racial groups” (p. 103). It is within this mirror of racial reflection and introspection that many gifted African American males struggle with the somewhat oxymoronic notion of being gifted as well as being a Black male. Racial attitudes and issues of identity begin taking shape during the early years of adolescent development. These notions and assumptions that are attributed to a person based on their race can be a detrimental impediment to the choices, opportunities, and role acceptance that is needed to promote success in a myriad of areas such as personal, school, and career. This early development of racial preference and beliefs can be seen in the Clark Doll Study a mixed-methodology experiment conducted in 1939. In this study, [Negro] children were asked a series of questions about racial preference and beliefs with respect to a set of dolls that were identical with the exception of skin color.

The findings exposed internalized racism in African-American children. The study revealed that 67% of the Black children preferred to play with White dolls, 59% chose the White doll as “the nice doll, and 59% chose the Black doll as being the one that “looks bad.” These finding implicated the issues of racial identity and development on children and were strong enough to be included in the Brown vs. Board of Education hearings. Based on the results of the study, the researchers concluded that some people are subjected to an inferior status in society, which drastically impacts the development of their personalities as well as deep levels of self-concept which can impact success or life choices made. Clark & Clark (1939) further noted that “the importance of these results for an understanding of the origin and development of racial concepts and attitudes in Negro children cannot be minimized” (p. 175).

In this research study of how African American males experience giftedness in the public school setting, I believe it is pertinent to examine how the frameworks of self-concept and racial identity development are critical to the illumination of how this distinctive group experiences the phenomenon of giftedness in a natural setting.

### **African American Males Experiences in K-12 Public Schools**

Analyzing the schooling experiences for African American males in public schools is a key area for this research study. Due to the impact of the environment of the school on students, it is appropriate to define this construct for the study. The Federal Register (2011) reported that the “school environment means the school setting relating to the physical plant, the fairness and adequacy of disciplinary procedures, the academic environment, and student health, including the available physical and mental health supports and services” (p. 1). This is the definition that is utilized for the term *school environment* within this study.

This becomes a more critical element when examining the amount of time that students spend within the school environment. The average of the minimum number of instructional hours required for students between the states of Kansas and Missouri was 1,072.50 (Bush, Ryan, & Rose, 2011). Dividing this amount by the average seven hour school day, it totals approximately 153 days which is 41% of the entire year that students spend within the school environment. This percentage could be slightly higher depending on the specific guidelines implemented by a given school district within these states.

Many of the issues that face gifted African American males in public schools could be grouped under the umbrella of underachievement theories. Thompson (2004) discusses ten underachievement theories that she found to be prevalent in the experiences of African

American students. An example of these types of theories would be the Theory of Low Expectations. This theory is observed when “administrators and teachers set low standards for students; they fail to equip them with the skills and knowledge that are needed to compete for high-paying jobs and admission to four-year colleges and universities” (Thompson, 2004, p. 29). Other facets of this theory are curriculum practices that are grounded in providing worksheets and rote memorization tasks rather than providing students with tasks and experiences that build levels of inquiry or critical thinking within students. In addition to these underachievement theories, it should be recognized that the environmental school experiences can also affect the learning and success of African American male students. Ferreira (1995) found that the attitudes of students are shaped to some extent by the structures (facilities) through which they are mediated. It should be noted that building conditions can directly affect the attitudes of students or the attitudes of teachers and parents which in turn affect student attitudes. Hawkins and Lilley (1992) remarked “the first impression of the school as it is approached should be positive...the building should look inviting to children as well as adults...the general inside appearance should be conducive to learning” (p. 45).

The school environment has tremendous effects on the learning outcomes of students. Taylor-Green et. al (1997) suggested some school environmental factors to consider is the development of a positive school climate, practical policies, well-defined physical spaces, and monitoring systems that reduce conditions that trigger problem behaviors among students. German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin devised a theoretical concept that has been coined the Heuristic Formula  $\{B=f(P, E)\}$  which means that our behavior is the

function of the person interacting with the environment. If this formula remains true, what would be the impact of the school environmental factors that characterize the experiences of African American males in our schools? Policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, and community members should understand that conceptually this formula would have most of its weight within the educational environment through which we can also examine who the students are spending time with. An additional Underachievement Theory discussed by Thompson (2004) is the Theory of Underprepared Teachers.

This theory examines the amount of interaction that many African American students spend during the day with inexperienced teachers and/or teachers with low beliefs about the abilities of African American males. According to Tyre (2008), “poor schools attract the least-experienced teachers, who almost by default end up teaching rigid ‘standards-based’ lessons—and almost nothing else” (p. 97). These actions are usually followed by non-effective classroom management situations where students’ especially African American males are subjected to punitive exploitation and covert methods of restraint towards progress.

The gifted African American male is not exempt from this educational adversity. Often a teacher may not understand that student frustrations are due to a lack of foundational skills, low levels of confidence, or possibly the desire to be challenged further. Additionally, low teacher expectations and negative beliefs about African American males can cause students to inhibit their passions for learning. Unwillingness to utilize differentiated instructional practices, limited exposure to culturally relevant and rigorous curriculums, and teacher’s limited pedagogical knowledge are some of the actions observed in today’s public

schools that can be harmful to student achievement and the success of African American males' success in school (Kunjufu, 1982; Noguero, 2008; Thompson, 2008).

Pollard (1993) conducted two mixed-methods empirical studies that were aimed at exploring how African-American male and female adolescents perceived and coped with their school experiences. As a result of the studies she found that “African-American boys ...reported less academic support from teachers than girls did... [and that] African-American boys may not realize that they are at risk for academic failure because of the type of academic support that they receive at school (p. 353).

Further examination of the theories and concepts regarding the schooling experiences of African American males presented in the theoretical framework are more closely examined in Chapter Two: The Literature Review. As summarized in the overview of the methodology, I will explore the experiences of gifted African American males within a natural setting. Their presence in public school settings may present additional obstacles to being supported and nurtured by administrators and teachers.

### **Overview of Methodology**

Qualitative research methodology seeks to thoroughly investigate specific and general ideas and information about an individual's everyday experiences. This approach supports a research design that is descriptive and paints a vivid picture of the lived experiences of gifted African American males. Creswell (2009) provides an explanation of qualitative research as being:

A means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis

inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. (p. 4)

In order to explore the phenomenon of giftedness for African American males in public schools, I utilized case studies as the major qualitative tradition and incorporated other traditions such as heuristic inquiry and critical race theory to further illuminate the participant's experiences. The case study format provides an opportunity for holistic inquiry to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its natural setting (Yin, 2002). The use of case studies, combined with other qualitative traditions, provides a deeper understanding about how African American males experience this phenomenon in public schools while giving a holistic picture of both the participant and phenomenon in context.

According to Patton (2002), "Heuristic Inquiry refers to a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to light the personal experiences and insights of the researcher" (p. 107). In this study, I share the experiences of being an African American man and a gifted and talented student; therefore igniting a unique interest in the phenomenon for me that allowed for a deeper level of understanding between myself and those students who also experience this phenomenon. Utilizing the heuristic lens gave me the opportunity to further investigate the student's understanding of their giftedness. The qualitative tradition of Critical Theory was pertinent to this study because it speaks to the contrast between social construction and race/equality in the reality of the world.

The participants of this study are ninth through twelfth grade, African American male students that have been identified as "gifted" in a K-12 public school system within a Midwestern city. There are seven public school districts that are in the surrounding area of

the urban municipality from which I attempted to recruit participants. From the target school districts, six participants, representing a single case, were identified with the use of a directed, mixed purposeful sampling approaches further described in Chapter 3: Methodology. There is a need for a variety of sampling strategies to give the robust and thick description of the phenomena being explored. I used the purposeful sampling methods of (a) criterion sampling and (b) maximum variation sampling. Morse (2007) found that [in qualitative research], “sampling schemes change dynamically with the development of the research” (p. 235). To initiate purposeful sampling, I administered a survey that gathered demographic data and preliminary perception data that included open-ended questions. The survey served as both a sampling strategy and a major data source. Furthermore, the sources of data collected from the participants were (1) participant autobiographies; (2) official documents; (3) semi structured interviews; (4) theoretical focus group interviews; and (5) participant observations.

Autobiographies and official documents are the two types of personal documents that were used for this qualitative study. Both documents utilized are classified as *personal* documents because the term “is used broadly to refer to any first-person narrative that describes an individual’s actions, experiences, and beliefs” (Bogden and Biklen, 2003, p. 124). The six case study participants were given a format for the autobiographies with some guiding questions to direct their temporal focus. Official documents collected include transcripts, attendance records, articles from school or community, etc. The narrative power of these personal documents assisted in the understanding of the phenomena interacting with



the human experience and added contextual value to the research (Bailey & Tilley, 2008; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

There are also two types of interviews that were utilized as data sources: (1) semi-structured one-on-one interviews and (2) theoretical focus group interviews. According to deMarrais (2004), “An interview is a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (p. 54). This was the foundation for the semi-structured interview format utilized with the participants. The theoretical focus group interviews allowed for the expansive discussion on issues that arose as commonalities in the experiences of the participants particularly around how they experience giftedness and schooling. According to Kitzinger (1995), the use of theoretical focus group interviews [as a ] “method is particularly useful for exploring people’s knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way” (p. 299). The preliminary survey data used at the sampling phase of the study, theoretical focus group interviews, and one-on-one interviews with participants collectively facilitated a deeper exploration into the student’s experiences as gifted African American males around broad conceptual findings. Merriam (2009) wrote that “interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them...it is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (p. 88).

The final category of data that was collected is unobtrusive participant observations. Drew, Hardman, and Hosp (2008) noted that “observations provide a direct method for

qualitative researchers to record human behavior and events as they occur—by watching” (p. 195). The observations that were conducted for this qualitative study are unobtrusive observations of the participants in their natural home, school, and community settings. As a participant observer (p. 197), I was not directly engaged in central behaviors and activities within the situation under study. As this study examined the phenomenon of giftedness as experienced by African American males, the research questions have direct connections with the school environment. Observing these students in natural environments assisted for substantiation purposes and also allowing us to build on the findings and results from the interview and document analyses.

The use of documents, interviews, and observations in this qualitative study on “gifted” African American males helped me to unravel the phenomenon of giftedness with this particular group of participants. After the data was collected from the sources they were analyzed for the completed research project. I also kept a reflective journal for capturing my own growth and development. Data analysis is one of the most important components to consider when conducting qualitative research. As the data is being collected for the study, it must be analyzed in order to discover any emergent findings. Miles and Huberman (1994) defined “*analysis* as consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification” (p. 10). However, Merriam (2009) expands on the definition by stating that, “data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation...data analysis is the process used to *answer your research question(s)*”(p. 176). The data that was gathered from the

sources were utilized to answer the specific research questions of this study by undergoing a process of coding to identify central themes and links within and across the cases. This process is discussed more expansively in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the existing research on giftedness while also providing educators that work with African American males an understanding of how giftedness is experienced in public school settings. In doing so, educators can develop strategies that can be utilized by schools to support this populace. Ford & Harris' (1996) further affirmed the need for understanding giftedness:

Much of our understanding of Black students is based on comparative research with White and other minority students. There are few studies that have examined within-group differences among Black students...more research is needed to explore diversity of attitudes, behaviors, and abilities that exist within the Black student population. (p.1150)

There is existing literature addressing the areas of recruitment, cultural identity, and program retention with less attention given to factors that are associated with the experiences of African American males in gifted programs (Baytops et al., 1997; Ford & Harris, 1992; Ford & Harris, 1996). As a result of this study, policymakers and practitioners will have a descriptive understanding of how the phenomenon of giftedness is experienced by African American males in the public school setting as well as have strategies that may assist in educating both gifted and non-gifted African American males.

### **Overview of Dissertation**

The remainder of this dissertation study is organized into four additional chapters. In Chapter 2, there is a review of the literature that comprises the conceptual framework

developed for this research study. The shared literature is comprised of research done by fellow researchers, field experts, authors, and theorists. Concepts in this chapter are organized based on the framework upon which the issues of this particular study is situated. Chapter 3 includes a rationale for the decision to take a qualitative research perspective as well as discussions regarding the setting, sampling of participants, data collection and analysis, and limitations, including validity, reliability, and ethical considerations. After the approval of the proposal and UMKC's Social Sciences Institutional Review (SSIRB) application, the data collection phase of the study began. Chapter 4 reports on the findings from the data that is collected and consists of a discussion around the themes, connections, and descriptive elements assembled from the data sources. In this chapter, I will also share the findings of the study and will organize the information under the research questions that guide the research study. The research study concludes with Chapter 5, which is the implications of the study as well as recommendations from the researcher. Within those recommendations, I discuss methods for educators to address the issues that have been raised through the research in an attempt to aid practitioners in further understanding the phenomenon of giftedness as it is experienced by African American males in public schools.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

The review of the literature for this dissertation study is based upon the developed theoretical framework for the study. This research study draws information from six bodies of knowledge to inform and support the information presented in this qualitative design; including the following: (1) my personal experiences, autobiography, and assumptions; (2) the background and context of the study which includes some Historical Foundations of Gifted Education; (3) Historical Socio-Cultural Perceptions of the African-American Male; (4) The Discourse of Critical Theory; (5) Self-Concept and Racial Identity Development; and (6) African American Male Experiences in Public Schools.

Maxwell (2005) explains that the theoretical framework is “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research—a key part of your design” (p. 33). Through these six components of this framework, I grounded the research questions that this study endeavors to answer while illuminating the issues surrounding “giftedness” in the African American male. Yin (1994) stated that the review of the literature helps “to determine the answers about what is known on a topic; in contrast, experienced investigators review previous research to develop sharper and more insightful *questions* about the topic” (p. 9).

The research provided in this chapter assisted in not only expanding the areas of conceptual knowledge upon which this study is situated, but also provide deeper insight into connections between the research at large while also illuminating gaps where possible. It is

utilized to not only begin making assumptions about the possible questions posed from the research but also to ponder about the conceptual thoughts or theories surrounding the topic at hand. Undeniably, there is a need for a more expansive understanding of how the phenomenon of giftedness is experienced by the African American male in K-12 public schools which is required to elucidate the problem of under-representation and invisibility in Gifted and Talented Programs, including recruitment and retention efforts.

The purpose of this critical, heuristic case study is to explore the phenomenon of giftedness as experienced by African American males through the exploration and analysis of their schooling experiences while also raising their level of awareness about being a gifted African American male as a result of interactions with the researcher and other participants. By conducting this study, I had the opportunity to help the world to hear the voices of these African American males amidst all of the noise. Their stories are often unheard during their matriculation as students in K-12 public schools. The results of this study can be utilized by educators and policy makers in order to provide more powerful approaches to assist in the recruitment and retention of more African American male students in Gifted and Talented Programs.

In researching the literature for this study, there were several elements that surfaced relative to the phenomenon of “giftedness” in African American males. The first surrounds a societal hegemony ingrained within the existence of gifted education programs that has created an inequitable system that uses intelligence as the sole predictor of academic success which is consequently built on racial inequities situated within an inequitable system of public education. Secondly, there is a restrictive aspect of equity and access to gifted

education programs for the African American male that is historically proscribed through the persistent marginalization and racial subjugation of this populace of students.

In the state of Missouri during the year, 2006, there was a gap of 42.4% gap between Black and White male students enrolled in Gifted and Talented Programs with Black male students representing only 3.74% of the gifted population (Holzman, 2006, p. 60). This inequity is not only limited to the number of students enrolled in gifted programs but also in the research literature. Baytops et al. (1997) discovered that over a thirty year time span, only 36 of the 2,816 education articles published on gifted students focused on African Americans. This is slightly over one percent of published literature and an even more disconcerting detail is that the percentage of articles that focused on male students is significantly lower. The frameworks of literature were selected to help contextualize this study from a historical and societal lens.

### **Context of the Study**

A unique and necessary component to the conceptual framework of this study is the context of the study which includes (1) some of the historical foundations and theories of gifted education because it provides enlightenment on the various aspects and beliefs about the phenomenon of giftedness; (2) information about gifted students in the classroom; and (3) elements that are particular to the participants of this study.

Gifted education has historically been grounded in the controversial debates of nature versus nurture or more essentially a “hereditary or environmentally situated” phenomenon (Eby & Smutny, 1990). The premise of gifted education could be traced back to Charles Darwin, one of the world’s most well-known geneticists. In his argument of “survival of the

fittest” Darwin held the notion that some individuals were on a higher plateau of genetic evolution than others. This belief system is the root of the assumption that giftedness is solely connected to the concept of intelligence.

Alfred Binet proposed one of the first contrasting arguments against Darwin’s philosophy by suggesting that intelligence was not a predetermined factor at birth, rather an element of the human genome that could be educated and taught (Eby & Smutny, 1990). “Despite Binet’s strongly held view that intelligence was a development of environmental influences, his intelligence scale became the basis for the most widely accepted theory of hereditary and fixed intelligence in the twentieth century” (Eby & Smutny, 1990, p. 7); this theory propelled the development of standardized testing that has been noted as a form of marginalization and inhibition for African American males in gifted education programs.

The standardized testing movement stemmed from the work of Lewis Terman, an educator who was interested in examining the differences between “bright” and “stupid or dull” students, inspired by Galton’s theory of “hereditary genius” (Eby & Smutny, 1990). After leaving the public school system he went to work for Stanford University and began translating Binet’s scales and tasks for American children and the scales were placed into the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test. This test quantified the “giftedness” of an individual with the use of Intelligence Quotients (IQ). A person with an IQ of 130 was classified as being “gifted” and 150 was the group labeled “genius” whom, Terman believed these classifications would become the “future leaders of our society” through their pre-destined



birthright of intelligence (Eby & Smutny, 1990). In regards to this study, Eby & Smutny (1990) reported:

Stein points out that the samples in the study were not randomly selected, but were all children of middle-class Caucasian families. This significant fact leads to a debate about whether the Stanford-Binet and other similar tests are biased against economically disadvantaged and culturally different children. (p. 8)

The movement of the Stanford-Binet IQ Testing was one of the monumental milestones in the progression of giftedness. Terman's beliefs about intelligence influenced the testing industry in the United States as "testing soon became a multi-million dollar industry; marketing companies dared not take a chance with tests not proven by their correlation with Terman's standard...thirty minutes and five tests might mark a child for life," (Gould, 1996, p. 207). Once individuals were quantified and labeled they could never leave their status. Many of the standardized tests given in our schools today are correlated with the Stanford-Binet examination in the aspect of verbal aggregate scores being employed as an indicator for intelligence. Gould (1996) pointed out the apparent racial biases grounded in the development of Terman's research, as indicated by his statement "we have only to compare the negro with the Eskimo or Indian...to be struck by an apparent kinship between general intellectual and inventive ability" (p. 205).

In 1967, psychologist J.P. Guilford followed the studies of L.L. Thurstone, who believed that the Intelligence Quotient was only useful in predicting success through verbal academic achievement (Eby & Smutny, 1990). Being one of the first to challenge the paramount Stanford-Binet IQ determination he developed the Structure of Intelligence theory which embodied the notion that an individual's intellect was constructed by varying factors.

Kunjufu (2005) wrote that “one of the major reasons why African American students have been disproportionately placed in special education is because of America’s over-reliance on IQ tests...” (p. 29).

Later, educational psychologist, Joseph Renzulli developed the Conceptual Three-Ring Theory of Giftedness which proposes that abilities of gifted individuals are on three varying domains: above-average abilities, task commitment, and creativity. Renzulli’s theory is conceptualized by a person being able to do something that most cannot, combined with a high level of task commitment, and frequent displays of creative expression of these abilities as heralding signal of giftedness. A person who utilizes their abilities to contribute significantly to the world or advancement of human performance was noted as being highly gifted (Eby & Smutny, 1990). Renzulli (2005) stated that:

The Achilles’ Heel of gifted education has been its inability to adequately include children who do not fall into the nice, neat stereotype of good test takers and lesson learners—ethnic minorities, underachievers, children who live in poverty, and young people who show their potential in nontraditional ways. (p. 80)

This brief quotation summarizes the critical importance of the historical foundations of gifted education to be included in this study’s conceptual framework. These past research studies as well as a qualitative examination of how students experience the phenomenon of giftedness are needed aspects to improve the practical implications of gifted education studies. Dai, Swanson, and Cheng (2011) surveyed the number of empirical studies on giftedness and gifted education to identify conceptual spaces in context and the nature of topics explored. The researchers utilized the PsycINFO database as a tool in this study and analyzed 1,234 studies published from 1998 through 2010. They concluded that “the field

needs more research that is use-inspired, based on current understandings of the nature and development of giftedness, developing innovative theories of practice through programming and intervention research situated in practical settings” (Dai, Swanson, & Cheng, 2011, p. 137).

### **Information Used to Identify Participants**

The criterion that was most likely used to nominate, identify and place the gifted students that are now in high school for the study were nominations for testing that could come from peers, parents, teachers and/or the actual student. Usually, teacher nominations were given for students with a GPA of 3.6 or higher. A form/questionnaire, containing about 20 questions (with a value range of 1-5), was to be completed by the nominator. Afterwards, the score was tallied. The actual score on the nomination form simply provided a snapshot of the candidate’s potential gifted characteristics.

After the completed nomination process, students were referred to a district’s Psychological Services Department for a formal evaluation. Three assessments that were used for gifted identification by Psych Services were either: WIAT, WIAT II, or the WISC-R. A composite score of 95% or higher qualified students for the gifted program. The Gifted Department also administered an informal creativity assessment to supplement the formal evaluation. A score of 95-100 points was ideal for the creativity assessment.

After the formal and informal assessments confirmed qualification, a consent form was sent home to parents. With parental consent, students were able to participate in a gifted resource program within the elementary school setting.

## **Historical Socio-Cultural Perceptions of the African-American Male**

Many researchers have studied the intense psychosocial processes that impede the success of African American students in today's schools. It is imperative to understand that these issues impact the collective unit of people known as African Americans and that many of the impediments evolved from historical, social, and cultural issues that have plagued the African American male. These concerns range from historical oppressive practices to stereotypes that have developed into dominant perceptions of the African American male. These perceptions have prodigious impacts on the development of the self-concept, the social identity, and the systems of interaction for males within schools and the larger society. Steele (2003) reported that "the social identity can elicit the devaluation in a setting that one wants to belong to and create what W.E.B. DuBois may have had in mind when he describes a "double consciousness" inherent in the African-American experience" (p. 124).

The inception of these practices can be traced back to the psychosocial oppression of the African American male during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The Transatlantic Slave Trade lasted for over 400 years and affected over 15 million men, women, and children. There were three stages or Triangular Trade routes that occurred during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The first stage was from the European continent to Africa and it involved the shipping of manufactured goods such as tobacco, cloth, metal fashioned items and guns. These items were exchanged with kingdoms on the western coast of the African continent in exchange for African slaves. The slaves were a desired commodity in the slave trade due to the aspect that they had experience with growing and tending to cattle, were resistant to high tropical temperatures, and were viewed as being "hard workers".

The second stage of the process was called the Middle Passage and it involved the transportation of the slaves from the African continent to the Americas. During the journey of the Middle Passage, the subjugation of the African American male was extensively brutal in nature with psychological, physically, and spiritually detriments meant to prepare him for slavery. During the Middle Passage journey there was an estimated death rate of about 13% and it was primarily as a result of disease, malnutrition, and environmental conditions of the ship. The third stage of the trade was the return of the ships from the American continent back to Europe with the items that were produced from American slave-labored plantations which included cotton, sugar, tobacco, and rum. The psychological imprint of slavery was monumental as an entire culture of people was stripped of their history, culture, and self-concept. According to Blassingame (1979), “antebellum Southern novelists, dramatists, and journalists were so influential in the creation and reflection of public attitudes toward slaves...the accuracy of the literary treatment of the plantation can only be determined, however, when several of the stereotypes of the slave are examined” (p. 133). There are three stereotypes that emerged from the portrait of the slave each named different and having a complex and contradictory element to their human existence: Sambo, Jack, and Nat (Blassingame, 1979).

“Sambo” was a stereotype for the slaves that would be characterized as being an “Uncle Tom” or “Jim Crow”. He was noted to be the most widespread stereotype. Sambo is depicted as having many comedic and musical talents and is usually docile in accordance to the will of the master. There is no thought of having freedom as long as life is smooth and easy for him. Blassingame (1979) discusses that the stereotype “must be viewed in the

context of the other slave stereotypes, and from the perspective of psychology and comparative studies of literature” (p. 135).

The second stereotype is known as “Jack”, (p. 133) the faithful and hard worker. He yearns for freedom and often has to repress his feelings of anger in an effort as to not bring upon harm to self or others from the master’s hands and weapons. The character is shown to be cooperative with other slaves to resist oppression and can be described as being proud, stubborn, and often conscious of his suffering. He attempts to maintain a façade of being peaceful and submissiveness, but sometimes fails which results in punishment.

The third stereotype is known as “Nat” (p. 134), the culmination of violence, brutality, savageness, and rage. He is depicted as the “incorrigible runaway, prisoner of white men, and ravager of white women” (Blassingame, 1979, p. 134). Nat is an image of the Black Brute or the Black Beast who is driven by his feelings and lack of ways to respond to them in healthy ways, thus, the actions are violent and primal in nature with acts of brutal, sexual, and physical assaults against others. He is resistant to the notions of social domestication and the dominant societal messages about what his conduct should be like. This brute caricature of the African American male can be seen in media propaganda throughout the years. According to Pilgrim (2012), the *brute caricature* is a portrayal of “black men as innately savage, animalistic, destructive, and criminal -- deserving punishment, maybe death... this brute is a fiend, a sociopath, an anti-social menace” (p. 1). Throughout this segment of the literature review, I attempted to connect these stereotypes to the historical perceptions of the African American male under study. Because of these

images, caricatures, and stereotypes the African American male confronts issues with identity and perceptions that appear to validate a self-fulfilling prophecy within their lives.

The image of the African American male has been distorted by media and historical stereotypes and perceptions that date back to the arrival of the slaves on the Eastern coast of the Americas (Black, 1997; Booker, 2000). Therefore, it is critically important to examine the development of these stereotypes and associated theoretical constructs that conflate together to shape the actions and perceptions of the African American male. In examining stereotypes, it is fundamental to explore a suitable definition of this construct. According to Seiter (1986),

Stereotypes are generalizations about social groups-characteristics that are attributed to all members of a given group, without regard to variations that must exist among members of that group. Stereotypes are not necessarily based on people's first-hand experiences with members of stereotyped groups. They may be learned from others or from the mass media... (p. 15)

These cognitive structures contain facets of a perceiver's knowledge, beliefs, and expectancies about a various social group. Structures for stereotypes can be examined through Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura. This theory posits that people learn through observations of others' behaviors and attitudes, and outcomes from emanating from both. Learning is shaped through the reciprocal interfaces of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences; transmitted via three main mediums: (1) parents and teachers, (2) peers/significant others, and (3) media images and stories (Bandura, 1977; Grusec, 1992; hooks, 2004; Park & Buriel, 1998; Ward, 2007).

Groups of people are stereotyped for three primary reasons associated with social categorization: (1) cognitive efficiency, (2) to understand and predict behavior, and (3) enhance our social identity over another. Once these groups have established stereotypes for their group, they soon become at-risk for stereotype threat. *Stereotype Threat* is a socially premised psychological experience usually resulting in anxiety or concern in a situation when the individual is at-risk of confirming a negative stereotype about their social group (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 2003; Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007). These stereotypes and the stereotype threat that occur as a result of historical and social images may influence personal decisions and self-concepts of African American males, particularly salient in their role expectations.

The *Theory of Reasoned Action* implies that individuals make personal decisions to engage in particular behaviors that are primarily based on the reaction or attitudes that result toward them accomplishing the act; decisions are also molded by subjective norms that emanate from the perceptions and expectations of significant others (peers, family, community networks, etc.) in regards to the performance of the act (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). According to Charng, Piliavin, and Callero (1988), “repeated behaviors often are part of an identifiable role and may become incorporated into the self-concept as part of our picture of who we are...thus the self-image and the behaviors associated with it---become important to us” (p. 304). These roles and the actions connected with them become an essential part of individuals’ lives and role identity, defined as a component of the self-concept and “a set of characteristics or expectations that simultaneously is defined by a social position in the community and becomes a dimension of...self” (Charng, 1988, p. 304).



According to Hogg, Terry, and White (1995), *Role Identity Theory* is primarily “a micro sociological theory that sets out to explain individuals' role-related behaviors” (p. 255). The theory seeks to elucidate an individual’s social behavior in terms of the reciprocal relations between self and society. As previously discussed, the societal views of an individual are influenced by the perceptions of family, significant others and peers, as well as media imagery. Accordingly, I explore four role identity orientations for the African American male: (1) physicality, (2) sexuality, (3) criminality, and (4) fame vs. school.

### **Black Male Orientation to Physicality**

For the purpose of this research the term, *physicality* is defined as an affinity to the physical nature of the body sometimes at the expense of the mental, spiritual, or social aspects of the being. The black male’s orientation to physicality could be traced back as far as the Transatlantic Slave Trade when the first slaves were chosen because of their orientation to being hard workers and their physical prowess. Once in the Americas, the male was broken from any aspect of educational enlightenment and conditioned to believe that the singular way to be successful and survive, was to be a faithful and hardworking slave on the plantations. Over time, this has seemingly become an ingrained historical notion as young black males are more closely drawn to activities and professions that are physical in nature (i.e. sports, manufacturing, etc.). hooks (2004) expounds on this phenomenon:

They have been taught that ‘thinking’ is not valuable labor, that ‘thinking’ will not help them to survive. Tragically many black males have not resisted this socialization. It is no accident that many brilliant thinking black males end up in prison, for even as boys, they were deemed threatening, bad, and dangerous. (p. 34)

Due to the increasing number of African American males that are highlighted by the media because of their athletic prowess, many young males are able to connect this image with success. Certainly, there are superior Black athletes; and while participation in athletic activities is seen as a pipeline to success, this creates a false sense of reality and places many athletes at the whims of this type of victimization (Anderson, 1990; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Edwards, 1983). The media propaganda also contributes to two other orientations discussed in this section of the literature, the orientation to sexuality and fame. Often times, young African American males see the image of the Black athlete as one that has high levels of envy within the sexual realm and as being extremely wealthy, thus creating the distorted lived reality of identity and role association.

### **Black Male Orientation to Sexuality**

In this literature review, the term *sexuality* is defined as the state of being sexual; engaging in sexual activity; and the “partnership, activity, behavior, attitudes, and function” (Lindau et al., 2007, p. 762) of sexual expression. This orientation for the role of the African American male is entrenched in the “Nat” stereotype. In this perception, African American males are depicted as sexual beings, interwoven with a characteristic of being violent to satisfy his lust and desires. Pilgrim (2012) suggests that “at the beginning of the twentieth century, much of the virulent, anti-black propaganda that found its way into scientific journals, local newspapers, and best-selling novels focused on the stereotype of the black rapist” (p. 1). Cose (2002) in his book *The Envy of the World* stated:

Why are so many pimps black? Because sex is one area where (whether merit or not) we have been granted dominance, one area (and you can add certain sports to this) where countless white men envy us (or at least the myth of us) and fear we may

outshine them. Pimping is easier than proving ourselves--than winning acceptance--- in arenas, such as the classroom, where we have been told we do not belong. We can draw comfort from the cold fact that whatever else they may think of us, whatever they may make us think of ourselves, they can never take away the awesome power of our physical gifts. (pp. 3-4)

This orientation to sexuality is one of the primary dysfunctional images of manhood that the African American male embraces as a result of role identity and societal perceptions. Oliver (1989) believed that “these problems are products of a cultural context in which the Black community has allowed too many of its males to make passage from boyhood to manhood by internalizing and acting out definitions of themselves ‘as users of women’” (p. 23).

The orientation to sexuality not only affects identity structures but also shapes for adolescent youth, the construction of masculine identity. Specifically, when examining the construction of African American masculine identity, sex has been a primary method to achieve it (Kimmel, 1992) and not only through the act of sex, but upholding the image of being extraordinary at it. The young man is viewed as being more attractive and masculine if they are able to attain the conquest of multiple partners with the ability to satisfy them according to peers and significant others (Haffejee, 2003; Khunwane, 2009; Staples, 2004). Those African American male youth who are not prescribing to this orientation may be at-risk for being labeled as being a “sissy”, “weak”, or “homosexual” (Kimmel, 1994) and thus must dually be sexual and tough at the same time. This notion of toughness and the proving of oneself to be accepted by peers is a persona that is embraced by some and leads to the orientation to criminality and violence.

## **Black Male Orientation to Criminality and Violence**

Dating back as far as “the Radical Reconstruction period (1867-1877), many white writers argued that without slavery -- which supposedly suppressed their animalistic tendencies -- blacks were reverting to criminal savagery” (Pilgrim, 2012, p. 1). The term *criminality* in this study is used to describe the state of being a criminal or engaging in criminal behaviors. For the African-American male this is usually a by-product of the development of a “tough guy” image which has been noted as being a major factor that contributes to the increasingly high numbers of violence among black communities and families (Oliver, 1989). Similar to the processes that occur with the identity orientation to sexuality, this notion of the orientation to violence is rooted within the construction of masculine identity for African American male. Author bell hooks (2004) noted that if you “read any article or book on black masculinity...it will convey the message that black men are violent” (p. 47).

The notion of criminality and violence is interwoven in two of the stereotypical perceptions of the African American male, Jack and Nat. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Jack and Nat are both plantation stereotypes. Jack, the stereotype of the hard worker who attempts to be submissive to the will of the dominating master, however, occasionally fails at displaying deference in his role. Nat, is the objectification of the defiant slave who utilizes fear and brutality to overcome the pressures of slavery and his feelings of helplessness. Oliver (1989) discusses that in the 1980s wife-beating was 400% more common in Black families than White families and that this consequently, aided the process of polarization within the black community as well as society at large due to “their disproportionate

involvement in lifestyles centered around idleness, alcohol and drug abuse, drug trafficking, and other acts of criminality as a major source of this fear” (p. 22).

An aspect that occurs for many young males is the “lure of the street” which occurs when they are attracted to lifestyles around drug trafficking, hustling, and making quick money. This appeal to the African American male was found to be great because it is an acceptable and glorified image in the urban community and often provides recompenses to those that without it may have little to show for it (Cose, 2002; hooks, 2004). Oliver (2003) conducted a quantitative study on the media influences of black men as being “dangerous and criminal”, she found that:

First, media images of race and crime (and particularly in news and reality programming) systematically over-represent African Americans as criminal; portray black men as particularly dangerous, and present information about black suspects that assumes their guilt. Second, even when crime featuring black and white criminal suspects is presented in equitable ways in the media, viewers’ existing stereotypes can result in biased interpretations that may serve to maintain racial stereotypes. (p. 15)

These stereotypes help to shape the actions and behaviors of many African American males and their orientation to criminality and violence can become the antecedent to consequences such as prison. A quandary in this aspect is that “given the reality of such neighborhoods, prison can seem like a reasonably good alternative, especially when so many people are either headed in or coming out that there is no longer any shame or stigma attached” (Cose, 2002, pp. 104-105). Therefore, we must work hard to ensure that African American male adolescents have the opportunity to see and interact with other role models who demonstrate the acceptability of alternative orientations such as the school or the educated pathway. However, the media also becomes an impediment to this orientation as well.

## **Black Male Orientation to Entertainment- Fame vs. School Success**

In our current society, forms of “mass media (televisions, newspapers, radio, and magazines) are clearly the most influential purveyors of information” (Allen, 2000, p. 142) and additionally for youth, social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The socialization that occurs for African American adolescents via mass media is increasingly significant with the shaping of their orientation to entertainment fame. Most youth spend at least 3-5 hours per day interacting with some type of media on average (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 2000) and these media forms work to “create and foster the objectivity of the autonomous, independent self that is realized by the acquisition of things” (Allen, 2000, p. 142).

As African American adolescents view images on television that are oriented with wealth and fame, they are most frequently observing the African American male portrait of success as celebrity entertainers, athletes, musicians, and comedians; they are often not seeing images of role models who are corporate leaders, investors, professors, business men, or professionals (i.e. lawyers, doctors, or principals). This orientation is indoctrinated within some aspects of the Sambo stereotypical image. Sambo was talented with the gifts of comedic interpretation, musical improvisation, and saw that pathway as the access to an “invisible” freedom. His freedom being invisible because he never truly had any aspirations to escape from that lifestyle. Ferguson (2001) in her essay on *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* shares her experiences with African American males in the school setting and their dreams. She found that “while a few had mentioned other options such as becoming a stand-up comedian, a Supreme Court justice, or a rap musician, almost

all expressed the desire to plan on an NBA or NFL team” (p. 582). She continues to delve deeper into the slim to none chances that these dreams will become a reality, although many students will choose this path over the educational pathway as it does not call for detachment from other identity factors that may lower their reputation or masculinity appeal to peers and significant others.

It is important that this study is able to rest upon the broader context of literature and research about the social and cultural oppression and issues pertinent to that of the Black man in a historical perspective. Carter G. Woodson (1933) in his work *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, discusses the issues of the historical and social oppression of the African American male in regards to education opportunities by stating:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, he depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (p. v.)

In order to completely understand the societal realm within which gifted African American males operate, I have outlined key aspects of the historic journey of African American males with an emphasis on their exploitation in the larger society. I acknowledge that less has been said about their triumphs (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Cuyjet, 2006; Garibaldi, 1992; Hrabowski III, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Shaun, 2012) as a way to broaden the discourse about the countless confront a vast majority of African American males. The ideologies discussed, coupled with the statistics on education and prison populations as they relate to the African American male come together to form a lens through which we can further understand their societal journey. Furthermore, many authors -remarked that although slavery was

ended...the psychological inhibition and social mistreatment of the culture has continued (Black, 1997; Booker, 2000; hooks, 2004; Mintz & Stauffer, 2007). A discussion of critical theory is pertinent to understanding the challenges facing gifted African American males in schools.

### **The Discourse of Critical Theory**

Critical Theory is used in this study to understand the social-cultural context of schooling that shapes the experiences of gifted African American males. The study of “giftedness” as a construct relates to a covert system of tracking in our nation that not only provides support and differentiated curricula for these students as well as being a system of elitism and segregation. When giftedness is combined with the myriad of experiences held by the African American male in public schools, it becomes a coalescence of issues comprised of racial conflict, diminished power and class status, as well as psychosocial oppression.

These issues are explored through critical theory as a methodological aspect of the study because its discourse questions how knowledge is used to maintain hegemonic schooling structures. “Critical theory holds that knowledge is socially constructed, contextual, and dependent on interpretation” (McLaren & Giarelli, 1995, p. 2). Linked to the broader discourse of critical theory, the extensions of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Pedagogy (CritPed) are used to examine policies, practices, leadership, curriculum, and teacher preparation for promoting revolutionary consensus, as articulated by Jennings and Lynn (2005). Revolutionary Consensus is a dramatic and intellectual movement that allows the subordinate group to recognize an oppressive issue which had been previously



obscured in an effort to create policy as well as countering the specific hegemonic structure that had been the protective dwelling for the oppressed.

McLaren and Giarelli (1995) note that critical theory is thus utilized to “move us toward the dark and unexplored corners of our social processes, illuminating structures long hidden, forces unrecognized, and power struggles embedded in our discourses on schooling and democracy” (p. ix). In their expression of the intent of critical theory, the necessity of a framework to explore the power struggle and hierarchical systems of control that exist within school systems as well as gifted and talented programs is articulated. As an overarching framework for this study, critical theory allowed me to interrogate systems that constrain the identification of gifted African American males. Jennings & Lynn (2005) remarked that “critical theory is not simply a critique of social structures it is an analysis of power relations that asks questions regarding: what constitutes power; who holds power; and in what ways power utilized to benefit those already in power” (p. 16).

As the contrasting disparity between African American males in gifted programs and other special education programs can be observed in our country, an undeniable question must be asked “who holds the key?” Who is responsible for ensuring that all students receive an equitable and fair chance of fostering their giftedness in public school systems? Philosopher Jurgen Habermas suggested that one of the primary ways that our society has encouraged and maintained inequality is through the specific restrictive practices on information and by controlling who has access to the knowledge bases to provide the information (LeCompte & Bennett deMarrias, 1999). Gifted programs have a myriad of criteria for admittance that may fluctuate depending on state and school district requirements

(Banks, 2005). The structures of these programs historically have been linked to biological factors of intelligence and standardized tests which have been deemed biased through historical educational practices as being ingrained with racial notions of inferiority for non-White members of society. Therefore, it is crucial that this framework aid in the illumination of the entity that would serve as the gatekeeper(s) of gifted programs in an effort to promote social justice.

As the hegemony of gifted programs exists to create a separatist and elitist structure in the larger educational aspect of society, it is important to understand that the concept of hegemony is questioned within the theoretical structure of critical theory. Jennings & Lynn (2005) report that “Gramsci coined the term ‘hegemony’ to describe the complex process that allows dominant groups to establish and maintain control of subordinates by using specific ideologies and particular forms of authority that are reproduced via social and institutional practices” (p. 16). The social and institutional practices that exist to keep African American males as a subordinate group within gifted education maybe linked to long standing societal perceptions of the group as being inferior and incapable of high scholastic achievement. Jennings & Lynn (2005) remarked that revolutionary consensus of the subordinate classes is one of the methods that societal hegemonic structures can be contested. Kim & Taylor (2008) discuss the importance of critical theory in looking for revolutionary consensus. They build on the work of Giroux by stating that “critical theory stresses the importance of critical thinking by providing an argument that is an indispensable feature of the struggle for self-emancipation and social change” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 208). In an effort to promote revolutionary consensus, the history, implications, and theoretical underpinnings of two

additional extensions to critical theory, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Pedagogy (CRP), are essential to the foundation knowledge of the inquiry.

### **Critical Race Theory**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, prolific educators and philosophers like W.E.B. DuBois pronounced that the rising problem of society would be segregation and issues surrounding race relations. However, as time progressed, the color line in education seemed to slowly dissipate with landmark cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, and yet problems of a racial nature continued to exist in more obscured manners. The civil rights era had been turbulent; nevertheless progress in the field of education and society had been made by African American people. The law continued to be administered in ways that appeared to be racially biased and inequitable through the 1970s which then compelled a group of law professors who had invested in the framework of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) to begin considering a new area of study to assist in their endeavors.

In 1987, a group of law professors, discontent with the field of CLS and its inability to move quickly and forcefully in addressing societal and racial inequities and inequalities, created a theoretical and analytical framework called Critical Race Theory (CRT). DeCuir & Dixson (2004) remarked that “CRT was created as a response to the failure of Critical Legal Studies to adequately address the effects of race and racism in U.S. jurisprudence” (p. 26). The pioneers credited with the conception of CRT were Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Mari Matsuda, Richard Delgado, Angela Harris, and Kimberle Crenshaw (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Lynn & Parker, 2006). A notable aspect of Critical Race Theory is that it differs from

Critical Legal Studies in that it has an activist aspect and the end goal is to bring about change that will ultimately further a social justice perspective (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

CRT refers to a broad collection of historical and contemporary theories that have actively engaged the prevailing racial theories of various times and/or social contexts. Some defining characteristics of CRT are (1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism as they work with and through gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and/or the nation as systems of power; (2) challenges to dominant ideologies of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy; (3) the advancement of a social justice framework; (4) the centrality of the experiential knowledge of people of color and their communities; and (5) a focus on core questions that reach into several disciplines mainly social sciences and humanities (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Solorzano, 1997). Over the succeeding 20 years, CRT evolved to address all instances of inequities and inequalities in society.

In tandem with the study of giftedness, it should be noted that it was not until the 1990s that the concept of race as a biologically fixed trait was decisively challenged and largely rejected (Winant, 2007). Scholars have argued that race is socially constructed, and that there is no biological basis or inherent differences in the abilities of people based on race. It is evident that racism (and other “isms”) were real and could be seen through the individual acts of violence occurring during that time as well as in societal and institutional structures. According to DeCuir & Dixson (2004), “CRT focuses directly on the effects of race and racism while simultaneously addressing the hegemonic system of white supremacy on the meritocratic system” (p. 27).

CRT's primary focus maintains that racism is endemic to society. CRT specifically involves the following five tenets: (a) counter storytelling, (b) the permanence of racism, (c) whiteness as property, (d) interest convergence, and (e) the critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). It has also expanded its reach to include other issues such as intersectionality, however, it is most concerned with the fact that society and its institutions continue to be both unfair and unequal.

Critical Race Theory as a methodology in educational research has been considered valuable because it can provide the necessary impetus for significant changes in the ways that communities of color are studied and written about (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). According to Ladson-Billings (2000):

The gift of CRT is that it unapologetically challenges the scholarship that would dehumanize and depersonalize us...In CRT the researcher makes a deliberate appearance in his or her work...the deeply personal rendering of social science that CRT scholars bring to their work helps break open the mythical hold that traditional work has on knowledge...CRT helps us to raise some important questions about the control and production of knowledge...particularly knowledge about people and communities of color. (p. 272).

Critical Race Theory strives to help others understand the world from the perspective of the oppressed in regards to race (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Parker & Lynn, 2002). The methods that seem to display the most impact have been through the use of narratives and storytelling as a way of conveying the need 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).

DeCuir and Dixson (2004) utilized Critical Race Theory in a study to analyze the impact of racism on the lives of Black students at a predominantly white private school. The importance of their study remains in the power of CRT as a tool to uncover the various ways in which racism works against Black students in elite school settings and poses larger questions about how counter-narratives can provide evidence of the effects of racism in schools. The study found that the African-American students at the school often felt as though their voices were silenced within the school community and they were afforded few opportunities to be heard about issues of importance particularly around their experiences (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Critical Race Theory has emerged as a powerful theoretical and analytical framework within educational research (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) and can be utilized to explore educational systems particularly those involving African Americans (Tate, 1997; Parker, 1998; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Howard, 2008). Since the intent of this research is to critically examine the way that “giftedness” is experienced by African American males in the K-12 educational system; it is pertinent to understand the nexus of curriculum, instruction, teaching, and learning or in a summative word, the pedagogy and how the critical nature of a teacher’s praxis can impact student lives.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

The roots of critical pedagogy can be found in Paulo Freire’s work on the oppression of the marginalized. The theories of Critical Pedagogy comprises the work of critical educators such as John Dewey, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, and Peter McLaren, all researchers that have focused on how oppression can be facilitated and continued through institutions

and social structures, Henry Giroux is responsible for coining the term *critical pedagogy* which was utilized to convey the merging of the critical theory framework into the practices of instruction specifically in the process of teaching and learning in 1983 (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). This topic is essential to this study, due to the aspect that one of the critical elements of oppression for the African American male in schools rests within the role of teacher pedagogy as it contributes to the marginalization of students.

The work of Dewey (1916) emphasizes that the foundations of Critical Pedagogy (CritPed) are ingrained within the cornerstones of democratic schooling. He emphasizes that there are three main theoretical junctures that should be recognized with democracy and schooling: (1) education and schooling are fundamental to creating social change and reform; (2) the purpose of education should be to help the individuals within to reach their greatest potential in society not only in the school setting; and (3) schools are social institutions where teachers should act as facilitators of knowledge and broaden student experiences to interact with the curriculum in conjunction with their personal backgrounds and realities with the intent to awaken the social consciousness within (Dewey, 1916).

One of the central elements in this area of research is that “voice” is emancipatory in the critical pedagogy continuum within education (McLaren, 1989). Guenther and Dees (2000) found that popular culture is a way to help students find their “voice” in the school setting and begin understanding the societal power structures that are present. Researchers must understand the role of “voice” in critical pedagogy. In using critical pedagogy to examine the voices of participants it is crucial to understand that the conversations about inequality and schooling constitute three theoretical underpinnings that include: (a) *social*

*reproduction* which maintains that existing social and economic relations are constant and that it is the work of schools to maintain the status quo; (b) *cultural reproduction* which refers to the methods that school institutions and teachers perpetuate various social inequities via the promotion of class-specific cultural knowledge; and (c) *resistance theory* which suggests that the social, economic, and political structure does not act alone; rather it is supported by the actions of people who work to maintain it or destroy it by resisting domination in a myriad of ways (Jennings & Lynn, 2005).

Allen (2005) noted that “critical pedagogy...has been normalized around a discourse that sees class as the principle determinant of social and political life, while assigning race to a subordinate position” (p. 53). It is clear that race, through the integration of critical race theory, should be incorporated in the analysis of schooling. As the African American male has been studied within the school environment, Holzman (2006) found that “the number of African-Americans, particularly African-American males, who receive out-of-school suspensions and are expelled, is also disproportionately high” (p. 12). One of the philosophies rooted in the branch of Critical Pedagogy is the divide and conquer of the oppressed. This philosophy was noted by Paulo Freire and he suggests that:

Oppressors use divide and conquer strategies to weaken the collective resolve of the oppressed...internalized racism is a tool that whites deploy to keep those within a racial group at odds with each other and distracted from organizing against white supremacy...it is a condition that causes people of color to aspire to whiteness, measure success and human worth relative to white standards, and put down the capabilities of their own race. (Allen, 2005, p. 60)

It is in this ideal that the high incidents of violence with African American males in school settings may be rooted.



Axelman (2006) brings to the fore the issues that confront African American youth and result in “the basis of survival strategies, ways of coping, and forms of resistance to racial and gender stereotypes that confront African Americans in American society” (p. 38). It is within this aspect that the importance of understanding the ways that critical theory is interwoven within our educational system could be a vital element to assisting with African American males in general. According to Jennings and Lynn (2005), “it has been suggested that critical pedagogy has sought to emphasize the study of class dynamics at the expense of examining issues of race and gender” (p. 24).

### **Critical Race Pedagogy in Education**

The philosophy of critical race pedagogy, (CRP) in Education emphasizes the importance of the teaching and learning process, teacher praxis, and the intersection with race and social justice. In an effort to understand the importance of critical race pedagogy, Parker & Lynn (2002) emphasized:

Traditionally, educational research has (a) ignored historically marginalized groups by simply not addressing their concerns, (b) relied heavily on genetic or biological determinists perspectives to explain complex social educational problems, or (c) epiphenomenized or de-emphasized race by arguing that the problems minority students experience in schools can be understood via class or gender analysis that do not fully take race, culture, language, and immigrant status into account. (p. 13)

The convergence the CRT and CritPed frameworks create a hybrid theoretical construct through which the experiences of the African American male can be explored. Solórzano (1997) was one of the first scholars to publish an article in an education journal that used CRT as a framework for exploring teacher education. Lynn (1999) noted that Critical Race Theory could be used as a framework to explore the beliefs of “progressive” African

American teachers and found that teacher's beliefs about race, class, and gender affected their use of the classroom as a place to help children appreciate their culture. Subsequently, Lopez (2003) explored how CRT could be utilized to help us re-think traditional models of educational leadership by focusing on how race is "silenced" in schools. Many researchers discuss that the basis of Critical Race Pedagogy is in using CRT as a means to explore the experiences of teachers and students of color. In this aspect, the two frameworks (CRT and CritPed) merge together to form a more powerful conceptual framework in the notion of critical race pedagogy.

Foster (1997) defined critical race pedagogy" in her work on *Black Teachers in Teaching* as a way to describe the nature of pedagogical practice that is grounded in the struggle to end racism and other forms of subordination. Lynn (2006) defined critical race pedagogy specifically as "the work in CRT that focuses on the practices of Black social justice educators". In her research, she notes that there are three founding notions of critical race pedagogy: (1) the scholarship of Black teachers; (2) culturally relevant pedagogy; and (3) critical pedagogy as it relates to the works of Freire, Giroux, McLaren, and Kanpol. According to Jennings and Lynn (2005), the framework that creates critical race pedagogy is focused on the "intersection of race, identity and pedagogy primarily outside the bounds of formal schooling" (p. 25). The concept of CRP focuses on the mechanism of race within schools and society. It is a new way of thinking and a growing theoretical framework in educational research. CRP is defined as an approach to understanding the problems in education through the lens of communities of color (Lynn, 2006).

Understanding the K-12 schooling experiences of African American males in particular requires the understanding of the historical nature of the academic, social, and psychological processes that has undergirded American institutions of education. Duncan (2002) conducted a qualitative study using Critical Race Ethnography as a way to explore the social conditions for Black males in “integrated” supposedly successful schools. He discusses in the study, the subtle micro-aggressions that lead to feelings of inadequacy and eventually decreased levels of performance in school for Black males and other marginalized groups of students in schools. Research conducted by Solorzano and Yosso (1998) proposed that schooling makes allowances for hegemony to exist in our society, however, it is also the same construct that can be used to deconstruct the divide.

Storytelling is one of the most powerful ways that we exchange our experiences with one another in society, resulting in deconstructing the divide. Tardiff (2002) wrote in her research “by listening to story we find in ourselves what is universal—a connection to each other and the realization that we share many of the same experiences even though we may live miles apart...” (p. 21). Within the critical theory framework this notion remains true. It should be understood that “in order to integrate critical race theory with critical pedagogy we use a technique that has a long tradition in the social sciences, humanities and the law--- storytelling” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2005, p. 72).

Educational psychologist, Jerome Bruner (1990) emphasizes that, storytelling as a tradition is a part of how we translate our individual private experiences of understanding into a public culturally negotiated form with one another. It would seem that if we can organize knowledge by storytelling with one another, then the use of oral histories in the

classroom becomes a very important tool of change. Solorzano and Yosso (2005) state that the tradition is illuminated by adding the “lives of critical educators who may at times be at the margins of higher education” (p. 72). One of the methodological tools utilized in critical research are the writing of counter stories. The technique of counter storytelling has been promoted by critical theorist, Richard Delgado. These counter stories strive to tell the “story of those experiences that have not been told (i.e. those on the margins of society) and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2005, p. 72). Within the critical pedagogy field of research the counter stories serve five pedagogical functions:

they build community among those at the margins of society; (2) they challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center; (3) they open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and that they are not alone in their position; (4) they teach others that, by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone; and (5) they provide a context to understand and transform established belief systems. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2005, p. 72)

In order to rethink critical race pedagogy, Jennings and Lynn (2005) point to the negotiation of power, the ability to analyze and critique self, and the work needed to counteract hegemonic structures. The negotiation of power is a critical element to consider in the field of education. Delpit (1988) discusses a theme called “the culture of power” through which she describes the silencing of students via an unequal power distribution that may be prevalent within the system (see Figure 1). Delpit (1988) identifies five ways that the culture of power manifests within the schooling environment: (1) issues of power are enacted in classrooms; (2) there are codes or rules for participating in the power; (3) the rules of the

culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who hold the power; (4) if you are not a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier; and (5) those with power are frequently least aware or least willing to acknowledge its existence and those with less power are more aware of its existence.

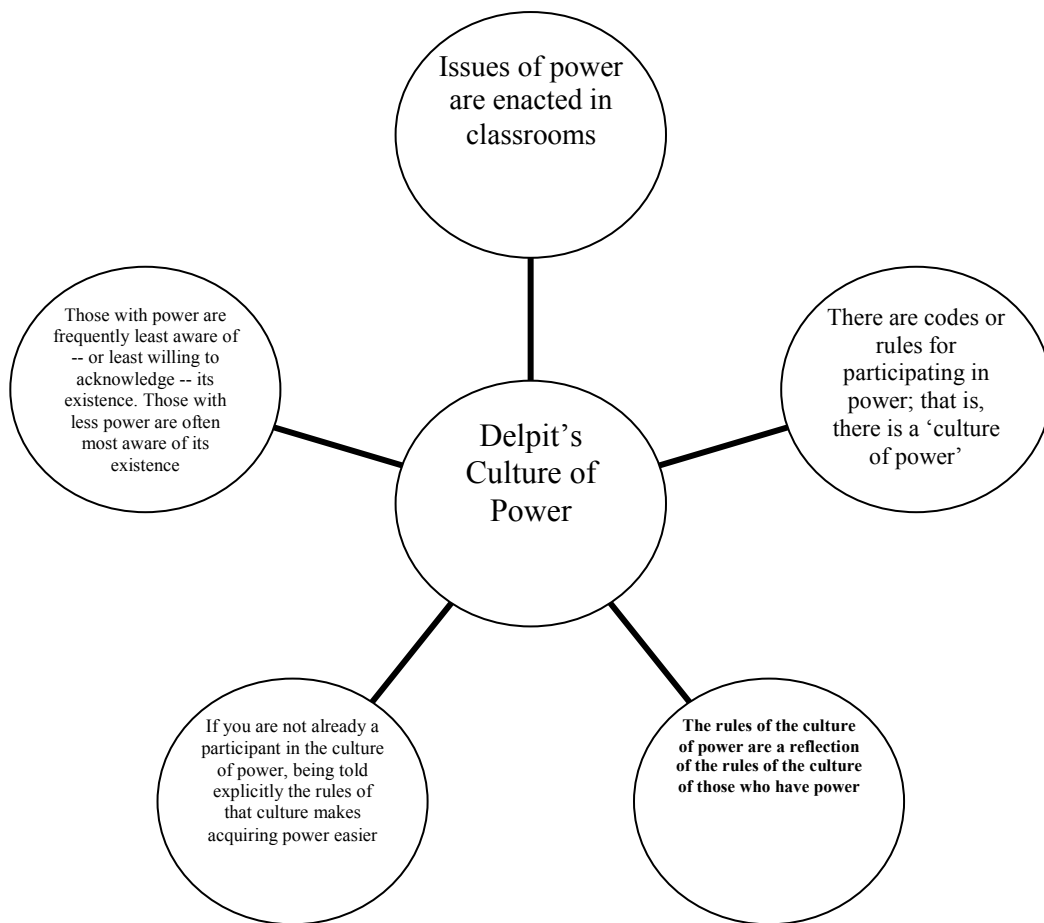


Figure 1. Diagram of the Culture of Power

As this dissertation examines critical race theory and critical race pedagogy under the discourse of critical theory as undergirding frameworks for examining the inequities within gifted education programs, this is a critical element to understand as the experience of the gifted African American Male is explored. Ford (1996) provided the insight that:

No group has a monopoly on gifted. It is illogical and statistically impossible for giftedness to be the prerogative of one racial, gender, or socioeconomic group. Nonetheless, gifted programs represent the most segregated programs in public schools; they are disproportionately white and middle class. (pp. ix-x)

Self-concept formed through identity development is influenced by race; hence understanding the experience of gifted African American males must include the dynamics of race.

### **Self-Concept and Racial Identity Development**

One of the foremost factors of success that has been found in research on African American male success in schools in general is the impact of high levels of self-concept and a healthy identity development (Allen, 2000). For the purpose of this study *self-concept* is defined as a person's perceptions of self; including their self-knowledge, ideas, and beliefs/attitudes about their personality traits, physical characteristics, abilities, values, goals, and roles (Hughes-Hassell, Koehler, & Cox, 2011; Krishnakar & Chengti, 2012; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). Renowned psychologist Carl Rogers began his studies on self-concept in the 1950s with the progression of the humanistic psychology movement. During this movement, Rogers's main focus was the development of the self-concept and the progression from an undifferentiated self to being fully differentiated (Aanstoos et al., 2000). He viewed the self-concept as a dynamic relationship between the precepts of "I or me" to others in

various aspects of our lives. Rogers believed that the process was a fluid and constantly changing process, but at any given moment it remains a specific entity (Rogers, 1959).

The process of becoming is continuously changing because an individual's self-concept is formed through their experiences with their environment as well as the evaluations, reinforcements, and attributions of their behavior from significant others and groups of interest (Hattie, 1992; Krishnaker & Chengti, 2012; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). Thus, the importance of the two self-concepts becomes evident: the individual and collective self. The individual self refers to the perceptions of self while the collective self, develops from the evaluations and appraisals of peers and significant others within groups and social orders in which the individual holds membership (Bordens & Horowitz, 2002). This concept becomes particularly important when thinking about the African American male as an adolescent developing their own self-concept. When looking at this development for youth, Hattie (1992) remarked that:

Our self-concepts are cognitive appraisals, expressed in terms of expectations, descriptions, and prescription, integrated across various dimensions that we attribute to ourselves. The integration is primarily via self-verification, self-consistency, self-complexity, and self-enhancement. These attributes may be consistent or inconsistent depending on the type and amount of confirmation or disconfirmation our appraisals receive from others and ourselves. (p. 37)

In his research on self-concept, Rogers found that both conditional and unconditional positive regard was an essential key to healthy developmental of an individual's self-concept. Those individuals raised in an environment of unconditional positive regard had the opportunity to fully actualize themselves; while those raised in an environment of conditional positive regard only felt worthy if their personal appraisal was congruent to the conditions

that were laid down for them by others (Rogers, 1959). As the environmental conditions and appraisals of African American males are further examined, the difficulty in the negotiation of self-concept can be observed. Belgrave and Allison (2006) reported that “historically, Blacks in the United States have been described as having a negative self-concept and self-denigration as a result of inferior status in this country” (p. 208).

Many of the roles, images, and appraisals for acceptance are communicated by varying forms of mass media, technology, and the collective culture. Some of those appraisals include the acceptability and glorification of certain media extreme lifestyles (i.e. professional sports athletes or entertainers) or the promotion of the criminal role which often refutes the depiction of the African American man as being able to be educated or a scholar (Oliver, 2003; Page, 1997; Polite & Davis, 1999; Rome, 2004; Tatum, 2005; & Weatherspoon, 1994). This paradox of influence is critical in understanding the development of self-concept for the African American male, especially that of the gifted male adolescent. A unique challenge that exists for gifted African American males is integrating into their self-concept their racial identification and their exploration of what it means to have been identified as "gifted" (Cooley, Cornell, & Lee, 1991). Understanding the arena through which this development occurs is an indispensable attribute of the research study.

There are four dynamic components of an individual's self-concept that is developed over time: (1) Identity, (2) Body Image/Physical Characteristics, (3) Self-Esteem/Beliefs, and (4) Role. Erik Erikson was a known psychologist that conducted extensive research on adolescent development and the psychosocial development of individuals. In his developmental stages, he noted that the development of self-concept begins as early as a



newborn based on the feelings and attitudes shown to the infant from the parents. Of the four components, the component of identity development for the African American male is one of the most detrimental, particularly in regards to the development of giftedness. According to Hughes-Hassell et al. (2011), “by the time they are three years old, children start to categorize people by other noticed physical differences, including hair texture and shape of facial features, and they develop attitudes about people of different races and ethnic groups” (p. 36).

This not only becomes an issue for identity development, but more so the aspect of racial identity development which is further explored in this section of the literature. The development of the constructs of self-concept and identity can potentially span from birth to adulthood, however, for the purpose of this literature review, the span of school age development and adolescence is the focus. The schooling experience has a major influence on a child’s development of self-concept. During this time, identity development and changes to body image, self-esteem, and role are dynamically occurring in reaction to the individual’s perceptions and the acceptance of those changes by others around them. Parents, teachers, and peers have a direct influence on the child’s developing feelings, views, and sense of self. Adolescents begin to compare their physical appearance, academic and athletic abilities, and social status to those of their peers and seek approval and acceptance from this group. A critical aspect of this relates to the collective self and the importance of peer appraisal for African American males.

The collective aspect of self-concept is unique for African American males and additionally difficult for those that are negotiating acceptable roles in their collective

membership groups or peer groups. Many impediments to this healthy aspect of the youth's psychosocial development are prevailing in public school settings. According to Lee (1996), "Black males encounter formidable challenges to their educational development and many of them experience a serious stifling of achievement, aspiration, and pride in school systems throughout the country" (p. 5). These challenges and barriers can become a problematic hurdle for the development of self-concept within African-American males as they seek appraisals and positive unconditional regard in the school environment. At this time of their development, African American students that are gifted also experience more psychological and emotional problems than those not identified as gifted in school (Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993). This occurs because they are attempting to contend with developing a healthy self-concept and identity levels while also coping with social issues as African American youths in their neighborhoods and society at large.

In the school setting, staff member's assumptions about African American students can hinder their self-conceptual development and lead to feelings of rage, frustration, powerlessness, and hopelessness themes in their developmental dynamics (Bailey & Lee, 1998). It is when the development of their self-concept as individuals are not fostered, that they begin seeking additional appraisals from collective self-concept domain. Berry (1993) discussed various forms of research and literature that discussed the correlation between the psychosocial development of self-concept and school reform issues in the educational system. His findings noted that school professionals limit the development of the self-concept of students through classroom climates that negatively affect students' self-esteem, marginalized their cultural and ethnic heritages, and reduced their sense of self-efficacy and

social competence. Additionally, many students must work through issues of social perception, racism, unique educational challenges, and perpetual obstructions to resources (Bradley, 2001; Berry, 1993; Steward et al., 1998).

Some of these unique educational challenges may be due to inexperienced teachers who lack the skills to implement the curriculum effectively, often display insensitivity to students, and promote a curriculum and classroom culture that excludes responsive measures to celebrate the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of students; thus creating negative barriers to the psychosocial development of the students (Berry, 1993; Bradley, 2001). When examining aspects of insensitivity and the fostering of culturally responsive environments, school administrators and other staff members can also equally impede student development. Bernak and Cornely (2002) designated the absence of adult role models and family members as inherently resilient barriers to the psychosocial development of an individual's self-concept and identity. For the African American male, there is a natural difficulty for balance of the cognitive and emotional domains at this age.

As a result of this absence of role models, students typically move closer to their peer groups for acceptance. Intriguingly, it has been noted that there are many African Americans in school that have found their academic abilities and successes have caused them to move further away from peer groups and home community environments (Bonner II, Jennings, Marbley, & Brown, 2008), most often due to the fact that these aspects are not viewed as acceptable attributes of the cultural group norms fostered by socio-historical beliefs and perceptions, especially for African American males. Students in elementary and middle schools tend to experience the greatest decline in self-concept due to the limitation of the

students being able to evaluate their own abilities; how others praise them impacts development more substantially (Manning, 2007). As Rogers noted, conditional and unconditional positive regard are key to moving individuals towards self-actualization and in order to accomplish this students must be members of classroom communities that are caring, positive, and that fosters the psychosocial development of their self-concept (Battistich et al., 1995).

Belgrave and Allison (2006) remarked that, “a central premise in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case, which outlawed school segregation, was that Blacks who attended Black schools not only suffered educationally but socially and psychologically from low self-concept” (p. 208). Caring classroom and school communities are important elements to consider in the shaping of the African American development of self-concept. As discussed, the school environment provides a nesting structure that is critical for the development of a healthy self-concept for all African American males. Burke’s (1980) research found that as sub-units of the self-concept, identities were “meanings a person attributes to the self as an object in a social situation or social role” (p. 18). The dynamics of racial identity development within this structure should be explored in regards to the gifted African American male experience in schools. Grantham & Ford (2003) found that:

Racial identities are formed at home, by the media, and in day cares, in preschools, and during the kindergarten through 12th grade educational process. Thus, school personnel, teachers and counselors must aggressively seek to understand the powerful influence that self-perception has on students' achievement and motivation. When the student is a person of color, the focus must necessarily be on students' racial identity. (pp. 27-28)

This conscious description of who we are is also evolving and changing based on our levels of self-awareness and our interactions with the role that we fulfill in certain situations. For the purpose of this study, the exploration of Black *Racial Identity* (BRI) is noteworthy. BRI is defined as the attitudes and beliefs that an African American has about their belonging to the Black race as an individual and how they are socialized to think of themselves as a racial group, collective identity, based on the perceptions of others (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Helms & Cook, 1999). The concept of racial identity has been expansively studied among African Americans (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990); yet the effects of racial identity for gifted African Americans still remain to be an area that is under-researched (Ford et al, 1993). A myriad of issues can impact an individual's racial identity development, resulting in psychological and social impediments especially during the adolescent age. According to Rowley and Moore (2002):

The role of race in the lives of gifted African American students is an understudied phenomenon. The discourse in the literature regarding the influence of racial identity on academic achievement has been relatively narrow, often ignoring such important conceptual issues as the fact that racial identity is dynamic across situations; that race is not important to all African Americans; that the individual's assessment of what is African American is most important; and that racial identity cannot be understood without examining the social context. (p. 63)

The inception of studies around racial identity development date as far back as the 1930s with the Horowitz studies that sought to examine the racial aspects of self-identification in pre-school children. Ruth Horowitz, one of the pioneering researchers in the field of racial identity, wanted to know if African American preschool children would misidentify themselves (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). However, the notion of Black Racial Identity more closely evolved from the Clark doll study experiments (1939), conducted by Clark and

Clark, who utilized Black and White dolls to explore the extent to which African American children affiliated and felt about being categorized as Black (Branch & Newcombe, 1986; Cross, 1985; DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Nicol, 1992; Quintana, 2007). The Clark Doll Study was a mixed-methodology experiment that sought to further understand racial preference and beliefs with respect to a set of dolls that were identical with the exception of skin color. The children in the study were asked a set of questions that illuminated feelings of acceptance, rejection, preference, and status. The findings of the study exposed internalized racism that was beset in African-American children.

The study revealed that 67% of the Black children preferred to play with the White dolls, 59% chose the White doll as “the nice doll and 59% chose the Black doll as being the one that “looks bad” (Clark & Clark, 1939). These finding further implicated the issues of racial identity and development on children and were overwhelming enough to be considered admissible documentation in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* hearings. On a more intricate level, the researchers concluded that people of certain collective memberships are subjected to an inferior status in society, which drastically impacts the development of their personalities as well as deep levels of self-concept which, in turn, may impact their successes and choices. Clark and Clark (1939) further noted that “the importance of these results for an understanding of the origin and development of racial concepts and attitudes in Negro children cannot be minimized” (p. 175). Racial attitudes and issues of identity begin taking shape during the early years of adolescent development. These notions and assumptions that are attributed to a person based on their race can be a detrimental impediment to the choices, opportunities, and role acceptance required to promote success in a myriad of areas such as

personal, school, and career. These factors become critically important in the development of the identity within the African American male.

Gifted students are a unique case in our educational system and particularly gifted African American males have additional burdens that may correlate with their success or failure in school. For gifted students, the struggle for social identity and psychological self-actualization are prevailing issues that are evident in the research. For the gifted African American male, the process of identity development is a complex process. It consists of creating an intelligible and strong sense of who they are, setting goals for achievement and roles, and trying to achieve collective acceptance from peers and society (Bonner et al., 2008); this process is dependent upon their levels of self-concept through which their gender, race, and ethnicity become essential components of their identity development (Hughes & Bonner, 2006; Majors & Billson, 1992). According to Bonner et al. (2009) “at no one time are these students solely gifted, African American, and male, but they are collectively all of these identities at the same time. Thus, to bifurcate or artificially separate out their various identities is at best shortsighted and at worst woefully inappropriate” (p. 196).

Multiple identities may limit the opportunity for the African American male to wholly experience the phenomenon of giftedness in the school setting since “most programs for the gifted inadequately address the needs of gifted Blacks because they almost never focus on the meaning of the Black experience” (Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993, p. 415). As these adolescents are contending with the development of their self-concept and identity, they are also grappling with their understanding of the phenomenon of giftedness as they encounter it in the school setting. Research has shown that African Americans have been deprived in the

areas of identity development and self-concept due to a matter of neglect of theories to address the impact of racial identity on those two developmental constructs (Ford, 1996; Grantham & Ford, 2003).

The development of racial identity is an important construct for any student of color in the school setting due to the fact that there are so many varying levels of impact. Lisa Delpit (2003) posited that as we educate African American children, “we must learn who the children are, and not focus on what we assume them to be... [and this includes]...developing relationships with our students, and understanding their political, cultural, and intellectual legacy” (p. 18). According to DeCuir-Gunby (2009), “the educational system serves as an important means to understanding Black Racial Identity” (p. 103); and within these systems many researchers have found the constructs of school achievement, personal motivation, attitudes about school, and personal/social development to be byproducts of racial identity development for African American youth (Chavous et al., 2003; Colangelo & Exum, 1979; Exum & Colangelo, 1980; Exum, 1979; Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993; Grantham & Ford, 1998; Smith, 1989). Furthermore, Bonner et al. (2009) reports that “understanding the implications of racial identity development among gifted African American males is critically important in efforts to enhance how these students interface with schools and gifted education programming” (p. 183).

Some of the prevalent issues that impact the racial identity development of these students in the educational environment are (1) the recruitment and retention of Black teachers (Ford et al., 1997; Ford & Trotman, 2001; Ford, 2010; Grantham & Ford, 1998) due to the importance for the students to see role models in the setting that look like them and



may have similar connections in their lived experiences; (2) issues of cultural responsiveness to Black students (Ford et al., 2001; Gay, 1999; Gay, 2010; Irvine, 2002; Nieto, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) as this provides an affective component to the teaching, learning, and lived experiences not only in their role as students but moreover as African American students; and (3) a lack of Black representation in the curriculum of the schools (Asante, 1991; Baldwin, 1987; George & Dei, 1996; Hughes-Hassell, Koehler, & Cox, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Culturally responsive curricula, teachers, and environments are critical elements in facilitating the racial identity development of students of color through settings, role models, and lessons that are culturally relevant and connected to their lived and historical experiences. This includes characters with similar physical characteristics, settings that resemble that of their environments, and opportunities to observe positive affirmations that convey the “acceptability” of students being engaged with school processes. These are all issues that have been noted to impact the progression of healthy BRI development within the school setting “both directly and indirectly, as well as their peer relationships” (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009, p. 115).

African American adolescents begin to search for acceptance through peer appraisals during their identity development stages. This acceptance by the collective identity group becomes a dominant influence on the student’s choices, actions, attitudes, and personality traits. Students in this time of development most likely associate with other members of their racial group because of the consolation and security of interacting with peers who share similar experiences and physical characteristics; this type of association for support can have

either positive and negative effects that can motivate or discourage (DeCuir & Gunby, 2009; Chavous et al., 2002; Chavous et al., 2008) student attitudes on schooling.

Ogbu (2004) found that “the collective identity of an oppressed minority group is created and maintained by two sets of factors: status problems and minority response to status problems” (p. 3-4). These problems and responses thus can easily lead to stereotypes and stereotype threat which can drastically change aspects of their personalities and activity selections. African American children who are exposed to misinformation or stereotypes about themselves are at risk for internalizing these images, for males, this may be the image of the thug, rapper, or gangsta identity, and as a result their actual racial identities become reactive which places them at risk for lower academic achievement in the school setting and possible academic disidentification (Cokley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2011; Hughes-Hassell, Koehler, & Cox, 2011; Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009). Displays of interests beyond sports or physical activity for young boys are likely seen to be “weak” and unacceptable by peers (Harris 1995; hooks, 2004). The research literature also suggests that there are few domains where African American males tend to find their identities, especially in a socially acceptable collective environment where these domains are in the field of music, athletics, and acting/comedians (Hebert, 2002; Sailes, 2004, Whiting, 2009).

Another element that affects the racial identity development of the African American male is the congruency between the home and school environment. Bonner et al. (2009) reported that:

This student finds himself at the intersection of racial, cultural, and academic identity development. As far as racial identity is concerned, negotiating what it means to be African American in the school context presents a unique set of challenges, while at the same time this very same school context can potentially provide a cultural setting

that is diametrically opposed to the home or community cultures from which this student emerges. (p. 184)

The student is consistently fighting a war between dual messages of what is “acceptable” behavior that may be congruent, but most often are incongruent. Particularly, when looking at the gifted African American student, they are “expected to achieve and perform at levels commensurate with their gifted and talented designation [and] at home, students are expected to act in manner that conforms to their environment and social climate” (Bonner, 2001, p. 651). For this reason, more racially and culturally diverse teachers can assist with the transition between the home environment and school for students of color students by serving as cultural translators that can build upon the communication and behavioral styles of the students, especially, if they are able to share similar experiences and backgrounds (Au, 1980; Boykin, 1994). Additionally, these teachers or “bridges” for their identity development can also help students to feel comfortable with being successful in school and prevent underachievement which occurs for many gifted students.

Within the school contexts, especially in situations where there are few African American males labeled as being “gifted”, there is a stigma that is attached to these students which can lead to “masking” their abilities in order to be accepted (i.e. being the class clown or being a disruption to the teacher) which ultimately inhibits them from fully exploring the phenomenon of giftedness (Bonner et al, 2009; Ford et al., 2002). Academic underachievement is one of the explored symptoms of many gifted students. The literature on the underachievement of African Americans is particularly vast displaying cases of students who characterize this anti-achievement attitude and discourse ,deliberate in nature,

possibly to avoid peer pressures and accusations of “acting white” or as a method to be socially accepted by peers when the school and community environments are not places with high valuations for academic achievement (Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993; Fordham, 1988, 1991; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2003; Ogbu, 2004; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998).

This label of “acting white” is applied to students most often by their peers either in the school setting or the home/community environment. It is derived from the notion that academic achievement is not a characteristic of African American students and is sometimes deemed unacceptable by homogeneous peer groups that do not share in the experience of being a high academic achiever (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Farkas, Lleras, & Maczuga, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986); when the community/home values imply that it is a “weakness” (Harper, 2004; hooks, 2004); or in settings where there is an overrepresentation of whites and the opposite for gifted African American students (Bonner et al., 2009; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005).

As these issues are a sampling of the myriad of areas that can be explored when examining the development of Black Racial Identity for gifted African American males, they provide the springboard to begin understanding a few pivotal points to consider. The first is the understanding of the interactions between African American students and white educators in predominantly white schools (Rowley & Moore, 2002). It has been found that within the school context, White teachers may treat African-American students differently with varying levels of expectations (Good & Nichols, 2001) although often without malicious intent or intent to harm.

A second issue to examine is the level of culturally responsiveness relationships with teachers and the responsive aspects of the school environment including appreciation/encouragement for high academics and an appreciation for the cultural background of the student body (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Ford et al., 2000) and an examination of healthy peer relationships at school. The school environment and educators must understand the need to create social contexts and culturally responsive environments that support the building of a strong sense of self-concept and facilitates the transition through the stages of Black Racial Identity development in order to impel the achievement of gifted and non-gifted African American males (Bonner II et al, 2008; DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Ford et al., 2000). Researcher DeCuir-Gunby (2009) found that:

More Black identity research that is contextualized in the school context is needed. African American students do not leave their identity issues at the schoolhouse door. This means the issues that were not reconciled outside of the school context will be manifested inside the school context. Because this is the case, it is imperative for researchers, psychologists, and educators to further realize the impact that the educational context can have on the subjective experiences of African American students and how this impacts their racial identity. (p. 119)

In an effort to explore how the African American male experiences the phenomenon of giftedness in public schools, is it imperative that educators and researchers understand that by developing high levels of self-concept and healthy racial identities, these students become susceptible to embrace high academic achievement orientation and become more resilient against negative peer pressures (Bailey & Lee, 1998; Grantham & Ford, 2003). Their identity must be both school oriented and socially conscious with consideration to the development of their racial identity development. According to Nasir et al., (2009), “understanding the nuances of individuals constructing racial/ethnic identities in the contexts

of schools (a process informed by broader media-informed images and stereotypes) can support both better teaching practices and program development in the context of schools” (p. 108). In order to nurture this aspect of proactive racial identity, the institutions of education must be willing to create programming, policies, and environments that will allow the racial identity process to develop (Bonner et al., 2008; Bonner et al., 2009; Cokley et al., 2011) in a holistic and culturally responsive manner.

### **Experiences of African American Males in Public Schools**

Throughout the country, our educational system is not progressively addressing the issue of helping African-American males in our K-12 schools to be successful (Noguera, 2003; Noguera, 2008). There are a myriad of issues that face our schools and the apathy and negative perceptions of African American males is one of the most disturbing issues for me. As an African American male who matriculated through and worked in the public school setting, I am able to recognize that there is a certain display of apathy towards the efforts needed to assist this unique group which may be caused by long standing societal perceptions about African American males in general.

There is a code of “acceptable” character traits for the African American male in society that are byproducts of negative actions and culture (Davis, 2003). I am urged to reflect on a former student named “Rayshawn”, who made the choice to sell drugs utilizing his gifted mind to perpetuate negative actions. He was a mathematical genius. He could be given any group of random numbers and he was able to calculate them to exact accuracy in a matter of seconds. At first, I believed his ability was limited to computation skills; however, I discovered that he could solve abstract algebraic equations with identical ease. I began

talking with him about the option of attending college and exploring career fields where he could use this ability. His response was “ain’t no place in society for a black nigga in math! I gotta make it work for me where I can...I got needs and they gotta be met by any means necessary...college ain’t it!” The disturbing aspect about our conversation was and will always be that this talented young man believed his statement with every fiber of his soul.

Similar students are often invisible to educators because of the negative stereotypes and societal perceptions that prevent them from being successful while having experiencing school. It was clear to me that Rayshawn was gifted; however, many of these students are placed in such special education categories as mentally retarded and behavior disorder and less are placed in gifted programs. In a national report compiled by the Schott Foundation in 2006 on *Black Males in Public Education*, it was reported that:

In the country as a whole the proportion of African-American students in Special Education classes is disproportionately high and those in Gifted/Talented programs are disproportionately low. The number of African-Americans, particularly African-American males, who receive out-of-school suspensions and are expelled, is also disproportionately high. (Holzman, 2006, p. 12)

This disproportionate placement of African American males into other special education programs has been the premise of much research suggesting that schools are some of the most segregated locations in our nation, and that there must be unyielding efforts to ensure that students of color, economically disadvantaged students, underachievers, and other nontraditional students receive the education to which they are entitled (Alamprese & Erlanger, 1988; Ford & Harris, 1991; Ford, 1995). Within our American system of education, the enrollment numbers should reflect the racial composition of our country. This quandary can be observed in the notion that in 2003, “If African-American students were in

Gifted/Talented programs proportionate to their enrollments, there would be at least an additional 140,000 Black female students and 200,000 Black male students in those programs” (Holzman, 2006, p. 12).

Holzman (2006) presented research showing an “over-classification as Mentally Retarded, under-classification as Gifted/Talented, under-representation in Advanced Placement classes, disproportionate out-of-school Suspensions and Expulsions combine to limit educational opportunities and reduce achievement levels for African-American students, particularly male African-American students” (p. 14). The fact that so many African American male students are under-represented in gifted programs and over-represented in other special education programs assists in the painting of a clear picture of the problem in our schools. Tatum (2005) provides insights into this problem of under-representation in his book *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap*:

Feelings of alienation and ambivalence towards formal education have progressed with young African American men: What schools often provide for boys of African descent is a slowly nurtured understanding that being somebody is more directly attached to the peer culture than to the classroom. Our potential and ability are robbed by the climate in schools thoughtlessness...poorly equipped schools, school environments preoccupied with behavior problems, mismatches between acquired, marketable skills and career opportunities, and the resulting awareness of our increasing marginality as young adults—all contribute to the way society makes African American men invisible and undermines their interests in learning. Many young boys of African descent fight a loss of faith, feeling that the outcome of education is not worth the humiliation. (p. 94)

These issues among others are some of the reasons why the failure rate of many African American male students is steadily increasing. This process of systematic invisibility has been gradual in the evolution of time as the image of the African American male has been



tainted by desolate societal perceptions which have perpetuated the ideal of the successful African American male as being a mythological figure in our reality.

As discussed earlier in this dissertation study, Tatum (2005) suggests five barriers in today's school environments that may impede on the achievement of African American males, "(1) micro-aggression, (2) psychometric warfare, (3) misguided educational placements, (4) barriers to learning, and (5) expulsion and suspension" (pp. 32-33). These impediments can result in erroneous placement procedures within special education programs, a lack of academic and socio-emotional support, and low expectations that can prevent African American Males from developing into their greatness within the school setting. In addition to the aforementioned issues facing African American males, there is a diminutive amount of information that is provided to educators on this population of students and this further perpetuates the problem of our youth being subjected to discrimination and a lack of the resources that they need to be successful in our schools

While I have highlighted the contextual background of schooling outcomes for African American males, a better understanding of how these students experience schooling can aid educators is addressing disparities and apathy apparent among this population. I begin with a discussion of theories of underachievement that have been used to explain their lack of success in public schools which range from deficit approaches to low teacher expectations as well as explanations connected to socio-cultural perspectives. An emphasis on the psychosocial development related to African American males in school settings addresses how negative perceptions influence academic and social behaviors including suspension and expulsion. This discussion is followed by curriculum and instructional

practices that have been successful with African American males. I conclude this section with a review of literature associated with classroom management issues confronting many teachers and present successful strategies for working with African American males. Kurt Lewin developed the Heuristic Formula  $\{B=f(P, E)\}$  which means that behaviors are the function of the person interacting with the environment. Students spend the majority of their time in our schools and it is in these environments that they learn to make choices that will impact them for their lives. Conceptually, this formula has most of its weight in the educational environment. The school setting is a critical site where African American male students begin making the choices of who they will be and how others perceive them in the broad areas of society (Davis, 2003).

### **Theories of Underachievement**

A major issue that faces African American male students in schools is the notion of underachievement. Rimm (1997) defined underachievement as “a discrepancy between a child’s school performance and some index of the child’s ability” (p. 18). The work of Thompson (2004) is utilized as a framework of the African American underachievement theories for this study. The ten theories that are discussed are (1) the deficit-deprivation theory, (2) the theory of structural inequality, (3) tracking, (4) the theory of cultural discontinuity, (5) Fourth grade failure syndrome, (6) the acting white theory, (7) the peer-pressure and the-lure-of-the-street-life theory, (8) parents are at fault theory, (9) underprepared teachers, and (10) low teacher expectations (p. 13). The ultimate premise that undergirds these theories is that the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of the teacher and school environment are essential in the shaping of outcomes for their students. Ford (1995)

conducted a study with gifted African American students and found that “of the 48...students she surveyed, 38 reported exerting low levels of effort in school, and all 38 had been identified as underachievers” (p. 56). In order to understand how these theories help to impact the achievement of African American male students it is necessary to explore their conceptual underpinnings.

**Deficit-deprivation theory.** According to Thompson (2004), “the basic premise of this theory is that there is a hierarchy of intelligence that starts with whites and Asians at the top and ends with blacks at the bottom” (p. 14). The deficit-deprivation theory is built upon the notion that intelligence and social stratification emanate from societal systems and injected into educational systems through which they manifest in the rules, curriculum, and overall school experiences that help to maintain the status quo. It is propelled by the idea that African Americans are genetically inferior in intellectual ability and capacity (Comer, 2002; Gould, 1996; Herrnstein & Murray, 2010; Kevles, 1985; Loewen, 1995) which consequently becomes a catalyst for the stratification of knowledge via school curriculum.

Within my personal recounts of schooling as an African American male, I can recall my middle school counselor telling me that college was not for black boys. I asked her “why” and she responded that about ninety-eight percent of black boys would not be able to go to college and afford it, or not be successful with the academic work. She implied and that I should not be depressed about it, rather understand that it was a matter of genetics. At this time, I had developed a love for X-Men comic books which had ingrained storylines of discrimination and stratification based upon genetic abilities and powers. Although a fictional story, I was able to reflect on the social issues and experiences that the comic books

provided regarding differences rooted in genetic ability and the fear of the unknown.

Because I became an avid reader of the stories, I was familiar with the terms she utilized and was cognizant of the messages of discrimination being conveyed. My middle school counselor urged me to consider vocational school after high school which consociates with the theory of tracking discussed later in this chapter. These notions of genetic ability have existed for centuries and were ingrained within the historical threads of slavery. Loewen (1995) in his chapter *Gone with the Wind: The Invisibility of Racism in American History*

*Textbooks* noted:

The very essence of what we have inherited from slavery is the idea that it is appropriate, even, 'natural,' for Whites to be on top, blacks on the bottom. In its core, our culture...tells all of us...that Europe's domination of the world came about because Europeans were smarter. In their core, many Whites and some people of color believe this. (p. 137)

**The theory of structural inequality.** “This theory maintains that schools are designed to perpetuate class differences that exist in the larger society” (Thompson, 2004, p. 14). Structural inequality has as an underpinning the foundation of capitalistic and class society divisions with resulting inequitable measures of curriculum, assessments, facilities, resources, and physical facilities that are designed to keep students from a given demographic confined to those similar conditions in the school setting (Entwisle, 1997; Kozol, 2012; Mehan, 1992; Oakes, 2005; Roscigno, 2000; Thompson, 2004). Structural inequality is rooted in the beliefs from deep political systems that foster and nurture overt or covertly that school environments should reflect the community conditions and socioeconomic divisions that are present in society. It is in the schools that many students learn the fundamental lessons to confine them to lower socioeconomic systems. This is

rooted into the notion of *Social Reproduction Theory*, which was discussed earlier in this chapter. The theory of Social Reproduction, maintains that schools in working-class neighborhoods are highly focused on rules, routines, and regiments while suburban schools are more open, favor student participation, and values of internalized control levels, which is a mechanism utilized for conditioning the minds to reproduce the social class values that are inherent in their socioeconomic status. Many of these students often are not familiar with the resources and benefits afforded to the middle class counterparts in suburban schools and sometimes within the same school district. This can be observed in school districts where a certain populace or school may have more access to technology, extracurricular activities, and other various opportunities to aid student's academic, physical, and social needs. Usually, the contrast is with other schools that may have larger populations of students from lower socioeconomic incomes and impoverished neighborhoods.

Peer cognizance of class structures become evident when friends that live in different areas discuss the things that they are doing in school, that equity principles are not congruent. "The racial separation we see in schools might also be seen as an element of the 'hidden curriculum,' an unspoken set of rules that 'teaches' certain students what they can and cannot do because of who they are. There are aspects of this hidden curriculum that are not being taught by the adults. It may also be that the students are the ones teaching it to each other" (Noguera, 2008, pp. 12-13). Connelly and Clandinin (1988) stated that "the idea of the 'hidden' curriculum for radical educators is that society 'reproduces' a hierarchical social structure that benefits some at the expense of others" (p. 155). Additionally, not only is the

hidden curriculum a factor in this theory but also the induction of middle-class norms that become the face of curriculum, standardized tests, and teaching structures.

**Tracking.** Tracking is one of the most prevalent systems in our schools that can hinder the success of African American students. The term *tracking* can be defined as a system of homogenous grouping of students based on achievement level where their classes and interaction is primarily with students of a similar academic achievement level (Gamoran, 1992). There has been much research conducted on the inequity and negative effects of this type of system on school environments and particularly, students of color (Gordon, Piana, & Keleher, 2000; Kershaw, 1992; Oakes, 1995; Wells & Serna, 1996).

According to Thompson (2004), “Students who are identified as ‘gifted’ are usually ‘tracked’ for college and higher paying jobs...those who are identified as special education students are usually tracked for less prestigious and lower paying jobs...African American students are disproportionately represented among the students in special education classes” (p. 15). I have had the opportunity to work in schools that utilized tracking for students and the intentions were to utilize it as a support system for students, however, students that needed the most support were always placed with teachers who needed the most support and assistance. Wells and Serna (1996) noted that tracking is maintained by elitist notions and perpetuated by political and cultural capital.

Unfortunately, this lends itself to the “dark side” of tracking which is the typical outcome of systems utilizing these philosophies. The realization is that the students who are most susceptible for school failure are often tracked with teachers who have low expectations, beliefs about the students, and establish labels such as being stupid or dumb.

Fine (2003) responds to this outcome by saying that the “perverse consequences of tracking, the limits of a ‘space’ designed to interrupt hierarchy” (p. 131). Regrettably, this is the predominant picture of the situation and the outcome of tracking in our public schools. Nel Noddings captures this picture eloquently in *The Aims of Education*, “a bad situation is made worse when we refer to the students in the top track as the ‘good kids’...we add insult to injury when we assign the least competent teachers to work with students in the ‘lower’ tracks” (Flinders & Thornton, 2009, p. 433). Even in situations where districts looked at de-tracking, the freedom to choose ‘tracks’---which mainly consist of primarily African Americans and Latinos in the low and middle tracks seldom moved into higher tracks due to track hierarchy and identity development (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002).

**The theory of cultural discontinuity.** This theory maintains that there is a lack of congruency between the home culture and values of African American students and the school culture including values, behaviors, and expectations, and consequently this becomes an antecedent to underachievement (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Gay, 2000; Howard, 20012; Mandara, 2006; Ogbu, 1982; Thompson, 2004; Tyler et al., 2008). Out of this theory arises the need for culturally relevant teaching proposed by Geneva Gay. She states that “culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Thompson, 2004).

Eisner endorses this type of construction of curriculum in his essay *Educational Objectives—Help or Hindrance* where he states “curriculum theory needs to allow for a variety of processes to be employed in the construction of curriculums” (Flinders &

Thornton, 2009, p. 112). This becomes critically important when the student is exposed to conflicting messages that shape their perceptions, ideals, and images of what is “acceptable” in the school setting. Ladson-Billings (2001) remarks that “the clash between school culture and home culture becomes evident in judgments and labels that teachers place on students with non-mainstream speech and styles of discourse, and through the teachers’ use of instructional practices and classroom management strategies that are at odds with community norms” (p. 167).

**Fourth grade failure syndrome.** This theory proposes that African American “boys may exhibit high achievement and show strong potential for academic success in kindergarten, by fourth grade many have been relegated to special education or labeled as ‘underachievers’” (p. 16). It was named by Jawanza Kunjufu, one of the leading authors on helping African American males in education. In his book, he defines this theory as being the “poor transition boys make between the primary and intermediate division” of elementary grades.

He discusses the success in reading scores and enjoyment of school in the primary grades K-3 and then by the time they are in the fourth grade they have been identified for special education, scores have declined, and they no longer are excited about school; accordingly, these are by-products of the school environment conditioning the African American male to become accustomed to systems of failure, punitive measures, and these systems are ingrained in the daily messages that school processes and procedures send during primary elementary years (Burchinal et al., 2008; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993; Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Ferguson, 2001; Kunjufu, 1982).



**The acting white theory.** This theory of “acting white” discobs that African American students are not successful in school because to be successful in school equates with acting white and is opposed to the cook persona that is acceptable in their communities (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004; Thompson, 2004). Much research has been conducted on identity as one of the psychosocial issues that impedes the success of African American males. This theory particularly looks at the diametrically opposed issues of societal perceptions about school success and being accepted by peers. They do not see being successful in school as a component of acceptable behavior for African American males and thus move away from embracing it.

These behaviors lead to the formation of dominant racial stereotypes about African American males not being able to become high achievers in school. This label still remains in educational systems for many African American students who are oriented towards school success, and there is a growing bank of counterarguments that refute the “acting white” theory. Sohn (2011) discussed five counterarguments for Ogbu & Fordham’s proposed theory: (1) a monolithic collective identity; (2) inferior school resources for Black students; (3) disadvantageous reward structures against Black Americans; (4) an oppositional culture towards education among Black students; (5) a negative relationship between popularity and academic achievement. These issues were discussed as possible impediments to why African American students are not embracing the role of high achiever within schools as well as possible issues for the existence of the testing/achievement gap.

**The peer pressure and the lure of the street life theory.** This theory is characterized by students giving up on school because there is not anything to keep them

engaged while making money on the streets seems to be the best way to remove themselves from the economic situations that many of them experience in their daily lives (hooks, 2004; Thompson, 2004). A parent is quoted as stating that “he dropped out of school during the eleventh grade because of a boring curriculum and unqualified teachers, harassment by school security, and the lure of the street life....some of the teachers knew about as much as I did...that’s probably one reason why I left, because I felt like I was not learning anything” (Thompson, 2004, p. 19).

There are many students that succumb to this pressure of either not being in school because of friends or the lure to make quick money via the streets. Tatum (2005) reported, “Black males are increasingly skeptical that education can help them escape from their low economic strata...many of these young men believe that their fate has been determined and that failure is inevitable” (p. 15). Because of this stigmatism, many African American males are able to find safety and security in the streets or the prison system rather than suffer from failure.

**Parents are at fault theory.** The central tenet behind this theory is that many African American parents do not know how to help their students to be successful in school. Parent involvement is one of the major components of school success for students; however, in schools with the largest population of African American males parent involvement is often limited. Many researchers note that it may not be that parents don’t care for their children; rather they don’t know how they should be helping their students to be successful such as exposing children to questioning and broad spans of academic vocabulary (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Thompson, 2004). Thompson (2004) discusses the notion that “schools can actually

deter African American parents from being visibly involved in their children's formal education" (p. 24). This reaction is produced when parents are not familiar with the processes and needs of the school, or how to provide the support that is needed to help their students to become successful. In this aspect, their own experiences with school can become a catalyst of fear for the parent.

**Underprepared teachers.** There is an abundance of research and information to substantiate this theory in many of our schools today. The theory of underprepared teachers is explained as many students of color are relegated to classrooms in which their teachers are underqualified or underprepared to teach them in a manner that will help them to develop and achieve at high levels (Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Sleeter, 2001; Thompson, 2004; Zeichner, 2003). One of the aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act was to strive to ensure that all staff members in schools were highly qualified in their areas of teaching praxis. The issue becomes the vast amount of teachers who are not qualified to teach are placed in school districts where students need the best teachers because they are considerably further behind academically. According to Thompson (2004), "research shows that the quality of teaching in our classrooms is the most important in-school factor in improving student achievement" (p. 27).

This constant contact with inexperienced teachers is a critical component of the experiences of African American male students in school especially in low-income areas. According to Tyre (2008), "poor schools attract the least-experienced teachers, who almost by default end up teaching rigid 'standards-based' lessons—and almost nothing else" (p. 97).

This is prevalent in the disruption of the continuum to keep the African American male student on a pathway to success.

**Low teacher expectations.** This theory ultimately can do the most harm for our students in schools today. According to Thompson (2004), “When administrators and teachers set low standards for students, they fail to equip them with the skills and knowledge that they will need to compete for high-paying jobs and admission to four-year colleges and universities” (p. 29). The work of Marva Collins is discussed in this portion of the book. Collins works as a consultant for teachers and school districts to increase academically through high expectations and effective instructional practices.

It is not uncommon in schools for African American students to be given “busy work” such as crossword puzzles and worksheets that help to build no true academic rigor. Noguero (2008) discusses a similar case in his book *The Trouble with Black Boys*, where he is walking with a principal in an elementary school and the comment is made “You know, there’s a prison cell in San Quentin waiting on that boy. I responded with shock: Really, How do you know” (p. xxii)? The principal proceeds to explain that the student’s father and brother were in prison and by his behaviors he knows that is where he will end up as well. This type of expectation from an educator can be detrimental to the Heuristic Formula that an African American male may be experiencing. The actions and expectations of educators can be harmful to student achievement and their success in school (Kunjufu, 1982; Noguero, 2008; Thompson, 2004).

## **Curriculum and Instructional Practices**

As a classroom teacher, I can recall my exhaustion from debating with colleagues about the abilities and skills of African American males in the school. There were those teachers that would justify denying these students the quality education that they deserved because of their beliefs that the future of most African American males remained in the cradle of the American prison system. These beliefs were intimately connected with how they chose to impart the curriculum to the students who were mostly African American males.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) discuss the personal philosophy as a component of the personal practical knowledge that helps to shape your actions with curriculum delivery. They define it as “beneath the surface manifestations of values and beliefs to their experiential narrative origins...a reconstruction of meaning contained in a teacher’s actions and his or her explorations of them” (pp. 66-67). In this process, a teacher’s values and beliefs serve as the way that they approach, deliver, teach, and explore the curriculum within schools. It is a rebuilding of what they know, feel, and have experienced with it and this becomes the funnel through which they impart this knowledge to their students.

## **Classroom Management Issues**

There are many classrooms where diminished perceptions about African American males, low expectations, and issues of racism undergird the educational environment. African American males are often seen as disruptive components of the educational setting thus, hindering them from obtaining a quality education. This notion is rooted deep within the African American historical struggle for educational opportunities in the United States.

bell hooks (2004) remarked that “in a post-slavery Jim Crow world, black folks had to struggle for the right to educate themselves...and even when that right was gained, the immediate need for material survival disrupted the efforts of black males to acquire education” (p. 34). It is for this reason that the historical lens utilized in parts of this study is critical to the understanding of the African American male experience.

Often in today’s classrooms, African American male are perceived to be less than adequate for the educational setting and are discarded as discipline problems that are not worthy of being taught and of less intellectual ability (Kunjufu, 2005). These types of teacher perceptions in K-12 schools are possibly some of the primary reasons that African American males are under-represented in gifted and Advanced Placement programs. Polite (1994) conducted a study in the late 1980s with African American males to examine the various components in the school environment that impeded on their success primarily because of the chaotic environment, policies, and procedures that were present. This study broadly examined the social contexts of schooling at an inner city public school. The study resulted in four findings that contributed to the culture of chaos and avoidance schooling: (1) the parents of the students had neglected their role in the educational pipeline of support; (2) there was substantially high amounts of peer pressure to resist schooling; (3) teachers and counselors neglected to demonstrate caring attitudes towards students and (4) school administration lacked instructional leadership (Polite, 1994, p. 599).

According to the Justice Policy Institute (2003), “the impact of prison on young men with little schooling was even greater among African American men...In 1999, an astonishing 52% of African American male high school drop-outs had prison records by their early

thirties” (p. 6). Some of these high school drop-outs could be a part of the invisible African American male population that had been channeled into this path because of inadequate classroom management procedures that resulted in a diminished perception of self and low levels efficacy in regards to educational attainment. These actions are usually the result of a non-effective classroom management situation where students’ especially African American males are subjected to punitive exploitation and covert methods of restraint of progress. Many classrooms across the nation are spectacles where African American male students refuse to conform in ways that a teacher or educator desires; the consequences given are suspensions, referrals to special education programs, or they are given other punitive measures that aid in the impeding on their educational process.

Often teachers may not understand that the frustrations being displayed by the student may be due to a lack of adequacy in the curriculum content or the lack of success in their schooling experiences. Low perceptions by teachers may cause them to inhibit their passion of learning and the difficulty for educators to differentiate levels of instruction within the classroom may add to the responses of these students. My own personal experience in working with African American males has provided me with evidence of this notion. I was fortunate to have students that had been victimized and labeled as “future jail-bait” however; they were some of the brightest and talented young men in the school. Again, they were dismantled by the opinions, stereotypes, expectations, and perceptions of so many teachers that they began to live the self-fulfilling prophecy.

## **Psychosocial Development in the School Setting**

Since the early 1990's, there has been a dramatic change in the value of education in school districts across the country. In the dawn of the new millennium, our schools are facing issues that include and extend beyond instructional dilemmas. In addition to the theories of underachievement, many African American males in the lower-socioeconomic class are experiencing unique and different challenges in their psychological, social, and educational development. Students are not developing the abilities needed to cope with stressors and attain educational goals in our schools. According to Noguera (2008), "sadly, the pressures, stereotypes, and patterns of failure that Black males experience often begin in school" (p. xvii).

According to Bailey and Lee (1998), the historical persistence of barriers to cultural traditions in society has been a problematic hurdle for youth particularly African-American males. It is posed by researchers that urban students of color experience barriers to healthy psychosocial growth due to the perpetuation of underlying stereotypes and images based on historical connotations regarding their value to (Bailey & Lee, 1998; Berry, 1993). These assumptions hinder students in their abilities to contribute to society often leading to rage, frustration, powerlessness, and hopelessness themes in their developmental dynamics (Bailey & Lee, 1998).

Throughout our nation's history students of color have been viewed as icons of fear and have suffered greater amounts of devaluation in school settings. In addition to that fact, the media both audiovisual and mass have provided a negative perspective of our cultural roles, values, and motivational constructs. "Several researchers have found that the pressures



that Black men and boys experience exact a toll on their (our) psychological and emotional well being...it is also important that the challenges confronting Black males not be framed in ways that characterize them as helpless victims” (Noguera, 2008, p. xvi).

Today’s urban educational institutions are optimal environments to observe these issues and additional barriers to adolescent psychosocial development. Berry’s (1993) study on the correlation between psychosocial development and school reform issues reveals many problems in the educational system. He found that school professionals have sustained the problems of these students through classroom climates that negatively affect students’ self-esteem, marginalized their cultural and ethnic heritages, and reduced their sense of self-efficacy and social competence.

Another facet of this educational injustice is the fact that many students must work through issues of social perception, racism, unique educational challenges, and perpetual blockage to success factors (Bradley, 2001; Berry, 1993; Steward et al., 1998). Poverty in low-income urban areas may not solely impede the development of children, but wrong curricular plans, insensitive teachers and administrators, and a school environment that does not give respect for the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of students can create lasting negative barriers to their psychological and social development (Berry, 1993; Booker, 2004; Bradley, 2001). Bernak and Cornely (2002) also discuss the absence of adult role models and family members that foster support to students in the academic setting as an additional barrier to the student’s psychosocial development. At this time, the development of the adolescent is pivotal as their cognitive and emotional balance is difficult to maintain.

The inability of African American male adolescents to cope with their experiences of growing up and adopting mature, positive behaviors are reflected in the attributes of poverty, academic failure, early death due to poor health care and violence, drug abuse and addiction, high unemployment rates, teenage pregnancy, gangs, and high crime rates in the urban areas of the country (Berry, 1993; De Haan & MacDermid, 1998; Richman & Rosenfeld, 1998; Steward et al., 1998). According to Steward et al. (1998) “these reflections occur during the period of adolescence when individuals are confronted with the necessity of managing the psychological, emotional, and behavioral adjustments to roles within the family structure, the high school settings, and peer groups” (p. 70).

Many of these urban adolescents are categorized as “at-risk” because of the halt in their psychosocial development. Understanding that there is tension in the label of being at-risk, this notion is reflected in the aspect that many students that reside in lower socioeconomic areas may struggle with support for their academic schooling. This is prevalent in high school age students that tend to work longer hours outside of school if they have jobs, maintain a lack of stability in residence, generate lower attendance rates in school, devote less time to studying, display fewer pro-social behaviors and close friends, lack resilience to overcome problems, and struggle with gaining acceptance by peers (Richman & Rosenfeld, 1998; Bernak & Cornely, 2002). In Richman and Rosenfeld’s (1998) study, they found that urban-lower SES students reported that they:

Engaged in less disclosure of their feelings with the adults with whom they lived; also, they reported that their adult caretakers showed less interest in their school and monitored school activities less...they also described themselves as having low self-esteem than those who reported receiving an average amount of social support.  
(p. 245)

The lack of social support from families and communities can sustain the environment for many psychosocial impediments. In dealing with urban African-American adolescents, these impediments can have an effect in the form of mental health challenges, problems of aggression and control, cultural alienation/disconnection, self-esteem issues, dependency issues, help-seeking attitudes and behaviors that are displayed in non-traditional forms (Bailey & Lee, 1998; Bernak & Cornely, 2002; Bradley, 2001; De Haan & MacDermid, 1998). Many effects of psychosocial impediments are observable issues that are displayed by students in schools and society.

The issues discussed in this subsection establish impediments to academic success and the psychosocial development for the African American males, but they also provide the basis for a framework for effective interventions with this unique group (Bailey & Lee, 1998; Berry, 1993; Steward et al., 1998). Having been a teacher, counselor, and administrator of a school with urban students in areas of lower socioeconomic incomes, I am able to fully understand the issues that confront the African American male experience in the K-12 school environment. Teachers will need to take on the role of the reflective practitioner in order to contend with the theories of underachievement and the hidden curricula that undergird classroom teaching practices in schools (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). There are the many aspects of their life narratives that can aid in our decisions of how educators implement curriculum and work to ensure that our students have a successful schooling experience.

Interestingly enough it is this *desiderata* where the meaning of curriculum is constructed. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) define the term *desiradata* as “the commonplaces [or] factors or determinants that occur in statements about the aims, content,

and methods of the curriculum” (p. 84); they are composed of the subject matter, milieu, learner, and the teacher. These are important aspects for teachers of African American male students because these commonplaces allow the teacher to find a place where all of our experiences can meet and we can become mutual learners with each other.

While Thompson’s (2004) framework for broadening the discourse related to African American underachievement theories, she offers a number of other reasons for African American male underachievement. These are: (1) effective reading and mathematics instruction, (2) improvement of writing skills, (3) classroom management, (4) low self-esteem, and (5) misbehavior as a façade for academic deficiencies. Ultimately, in order to help African American males to succeed in school systems there will have to be more large scale studies on the systemic issues that impede student success via curriculum and psychosocial impediments. Subsequently, there will be a need to develop programs and curriculum methods that will emphasize high quality professional development for teachers. A vast amount of literature supports theories of how students learn and what knowledge is worthwhile to all students. In the overall process of teaching and learning, the teacher is centrally more powerful than their students because they have the greater responsibility for shaping the classroom events that facilitate learning and development (Jackson, 2009). Thus, it is imperative that educators understand the sense of urgency needed to help teachers to understand the schooling experiences of African American males, especially those identified or not yet identified as being gifted.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Overview**

One of the problems discussed in Chapter 1 was the disproportionate amount of African American males being placed in special education versus gifted education programs. This furthers the need to explore these programs where there are biases that may exist in the methods and criteria associated with the recruitment and retention of this population in these programs in our public schools. Baytops et al. (1997) reported that the issue of underrepresentation of racially diverse students in gifted education is one of the most disturbing issues in education today. An additional factor to be explored in this research study is how the African American male experiences the phenomenon of giftedness which may inhibit accurate placement into programs as well as supports that may be needed to foster their recruitment and retention into these programs.

One of the possible reasons for the improper placement of African American Males is due to the inadequate preparation and training of aspects of gifted education. These actions may occur due to inadequate training of educators on the aspects of gifted education and what the phenomenon looks like when experienced by African American males. It was reported that African Americans only make up about 8 percent of students in gifted education programs within the nation (Ford, 1995) and recruitment or retention may be an important role in this low rate of participation. Thus, the importance of being able to explore how the phenomenon of giftedness is explored within K-12 schools by these young men. It is a known fact that while this population is underrepresented in gifted education, they remain

overrepresented in special education programs such as learning disabled, behavior disorders, and mental retardation more than any other ethnicity (Ford, 1995; Patton, 1992).

This qualitative research study employs the voices of African American male students to discover how they experience the phenomenon of being gifted in public schools. Drawing on the notion of the researcher as instrument, there is an “understanding of the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s...this is sometimes referred to as the *emic* or insider’s perspective” (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). The study utilizes the theoretical traditions of case study, heuristic inquiry, and critical race theory to explore these perspectives. This study provides an opportunity to help the world to hear the voices of these African American males amidst all of the societal noise. There is one central research question that directs this study with three accompanying sub-questions. The research question to be answered is: What do the experiences of gifted African American males in public school systems suggest about strategies needed to promote their success, recruitment and retention in Gifted and Talented programs? The three sub questions answered are: (1) How do these gifted African American males describe their experiences with gifted programs in their schools? (2) How do gifted African American males describe their experiences with curriculum, teachers, and other students inside and outside of the classroom? and (3) What do the experiences of gifted African American males suggest about practices that public school educators can use to promote the success and development of African American males in general?

I have elected to use a qualitative research approach to thoroughly investigate the lived experiences of these gifted African American males with the above questions as the focus of my analysis.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research and Traditions**

“Qualitative inquiry cultivates the most useful of all human capacities:  
The capacity to *learn*.”-From Halcolm’s *Laws of Inquiry*

Throughout this research study, I strive to generate the “thick description” needed to describe the worlds of these African American young men and to also understand the meanings that they ascribe to the phenomena of *giftedness*. The term “thick description” was utilized by Geertz (1973) to describe the extensive layers of research that ethnographers would utilize in their anthropological study of various cultures. Denzin (1989) expanded upon the original meaning of “thick description” to describe the necessity for deep, descriptive research to be completed by any qualitative researcher. Denzin noted that:

A thick description ... does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (1989, p. 83)

Using the qualitative rationale outlined by Richards & Morse (2007), I have chosen to utilize qualitative methods for the following reasons: (1) the need to understand an unexplored area, (2) the task of simplifying and managing complex data, (3) the intent to learn from the participants and keep the authenticity of their voices, and (4) the desire to deeply understand phenomena.

Qualitative researchers seek to understand how people construct meaning of their lived experiences which involves intimately connecting with their participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). In this respect the qualitative methodology is ideal for this research design, “it is not distance that qualitative researchers want between themselves and their participants, but the opportunity to connect with them at a human level” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 13). In an effort to tell their stories with the thick description that is desired; I needed to conduct inquiry at a level that would allow for the natural exploration of participants’ memories, feelings, and experiences. In the role of researcher as instrument, I grew and learned from such intensive inquiry. The strengths of qualitative research design lie within its “inductive approach, [and] its focus on specific situations or people...” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22). As the lived experiences of these gifted African American males are explored, it is critical to maintain a rich description that would allow the readers to see the world through their eyes. Merriam (2009) remarked that, “the product of qualitative inquiry is *richly descriptive*, words and pictures rather than numbers to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon” (p. 16).

Theoretical perspectives or traditions of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002) are useful for helping researchers to design studies that give a clear view of the experiences and phenomenon being examined. This research study utilized the case study tradition as the major qualitative technique and employed heuristic inquiry and critical race theory to support the research design of the study. The focus was on the “giftedness” of African American males and how they experience this phenomenon within the K-12 school setting. An additional critical element of this study was the understanding of the gifted phenomena in the



lives of the participants which in this study are African American males. I have chosen to utilize the tradition of case study to illuminate lived experiences and depictions of their interactions with this phenomenon. Heuristic and Critical Race theory were utilized as complementary traditions which inserted a critical lens that incorporated my personal, shared experiences with giftedness as well as raise issues regarding race, gender, and power.

### **Case Study**

Case studies, as defined by Yin (2002), are holistic inquiries that investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its natural setting. Merriam (2009) defines case study as:

The process of actually carrying out the investigation, the unit of analysis (the bounded system, the case), or the end product. As the product of an investigation, a case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit. (p. 46)

While the researcher identifies typical cases, consideration is also given to those that offer rich opportunities to learn about the phenomena (Stake, 2005b). A note of careful consideration was given to sampling techniques for identifying cases that “might be selected for its [their] very uniqueness, for what it [they] can reveal about a phenomenon, and knowledge to which we would not otherwise have access” (Merriam, 2009, p. 46). An essential aspect to conducting a case study is having a keen understanding that the case is a part of a bounded research system (Merriam, 2009); within the study, the boundary is the giftedness of African American males in public school settings. These boundaries align with the unit of analysis, which is the element of giftedness whereas each gifted African American male represents an individual case for exploration.

Case studies can be either single-cases or multiple-cases that explore the phenomenon under investigation for a period of time. Collective case studies or comparative case studies are forms of multiple case studies where the “study involves collecting and analyzing data from several cases that can be distinguished from the single case study that may have subunits or sub-cases embedded within” (Merriam, 2009, p. 49). This research study is a multiple case study that utilizes the natural comparative study aspect to compare the various cases of “giftedness” within the participant’s experiences. Stake (2006) further elucidates that in:

Multicase study research, the single case is of interest because it belongs to a particular collection of cases. The individual cases share a common characteristic or condition. The cases in the collection are somehow categorically bound together. They may be members of a group or examples of a phenomenon. (pp. 5-6)

Smith-Maddox and Solórzano (2002) outlined six elements of the case study approach that should be followed: “(1) begin with a question, (2) examine assumptions, (3) guide your work in the ‘field’ by a plan, (4) design your data collection protocols and methods for recording data, (5) analyze your data, and (6) write your narrative using the 3-part format” (pp. 73-74). The 3-part format consists of (1) a contextual description of the student being studied, (2) a narrative that describes the data through categories or various types of explanatory concepts, and (3) any meaning or findings for the researcher that has been developed based upon new learning from the student being researched. The write-up should contain evidence from the field notes, interviews, or data sources to support the narrative value of the case (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002).

Merriam (2009) brings focus to three distinct characteristics of qualitative case studies; particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. The particularistic nature of a case study is a “focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon” (p. 43); descriptive suggest that the “end product of a case study is a rich ‘thick’ description of the phenomenon under study” (p. 43); and the heuristic aspect “means that case studies illuminate the participant’s understanding of the phenomenon under study” (p. 44). This research study is particularistic in that it examines the particular phenomenon of “giftedness” in the lives of African American males that have extensive K-12 experiences. Finally, the heuristic nature of the study arises from the experiences of the researcher also being gifted in a public school setting as well as the vivid descriptions of the lived phenomenological experiences of the participants. This qualitative case research study will also be combined with the traditions of heuristic inquiry and critical race theory in order to illuminate their stories. However, it is through the case study format that the exploration of this phenomenon unfolds and is presented to the readers.

### **Heuristic Inquiry**

Patton (2002) explains heuristic inquiry as a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to light the personal experiences and insights of the researcher. For this research study, the heuristic tradition is appropriate because I share the experience of being an African American man as well as a gifted and talented student, therefore igniting a unique interest in the phenomenon that allowed for a deeper level of understanding with those students who also experience this phenomenon. It is important to understand that “heuristic inquiry focuses on intense human experiences; intense from the point of view of the investigator and

co-researchers...it is the combination of personal experience and intensity that yields an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 107). Moustakas (1990b) provides the root meaning for heuristics and a comprehensive understanding of the tradition:

The root meaning of heuristic comes from the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to discover or to find. It refers to a process of internal research through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. Heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self discoveries. (p. 9)

Because this study explores the personal experiences of these gifted students, the heuristic inquiry approach was beneficial to understand how they perceive and interpret their experience while also exploring my own understanding of the phenomenon. Heuristic Inquiry is a form of phenomenology although there are some distinct differences that clarify the nature of this qualitative tradition. These differences include (1) an emphasis on relationships and connections, (2) delineation of clear essential meanings and personal significance of experiences, (3) a creative synthesis that is created between the participants and the researcher’s understanding, and (4) participants remain visible in the analysis of data in the heuristic tradition (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985).

Utilizing the heuristic lens also allowed me to connect my own experiences as a gifted African American male to those of the participants in order to explore the shared manifestation of “giftedness” and act as a conduit to understanding their experiences with this unique phenomenon. Revisiting the phenomenon with the participants maintains two essential elements of heuristic inquiry at the forefront of the study: (1) the researcher must

have a strong interest in the phenomenon in addition to personal experience with it and (2) the participants or co-researchers must also have an intense experience with the phenomenon (Patton, 2002, p. 107). I never gave much thought to my own experiences as a gifted African American male during my school years until I became an educator in the classroom. As a high school teacher and a guidance counselor, I began finding many young African American male students that were identified as gifted and talented although they had been labeled daily in the teacher's lounge as the "underachievers" or "disruptors" of the classroom. I attributed this to being due to limited academic and behavior expectations that kept many of these students from pursuing viable post-secondary plans.

Initially, I assumed that all of the positive elements that were present in my life were experienced by other gifted students. This naiveté form of thinking led to the idea that there was a need for this phenomenon to be researched and explored. Although we shared the label of being "gifted" our individual experiences were different and in this light, "the uniqueness of heuristic inquiry is the extent to which it legitimizes and places at the fore these personal experiences, reflections, and insights of the researcher" (Patton, 2002, p. 108). There are six phases of heuristic inquiry that must be accomplished in order to encompass a true nature of heuristical methodology: (1) Initial Engagement, (2) Immersion, (3) Incubation, (4) Illumination, (5) Explication, and (6) Creative Synthesis (Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002). The six phases of heuristic analysis helped me to undergo the entrenching self-dialogue and exploration that is needed to bring the heuristic nature of this qualitative study to life and also used as a frame for the data analysis of this research study.

The case study tradition, permitted me to document the study from a multifaceted perspective the experiences of myself and the co researchers in such a way that the dissertation study provides the story that intensifies from the creative synthesis of heuristic inquiry. Sela-Smith (2002) acknowledges that, “when a story is formed with the embedded wholes of the transformation in it, the story itself contains the power to transform anyone who dares surrender to the listening” (p. 64). These stories are utilized to show the power of the self-research conducted on this phenomenon from the point of the researcher as well as provide the vivid experiences of giftedness from the eyes of participants. Acknowledging that these stories are built from the social construction and world views of the participants which may be entangled with issues of race and gender, it is necessary to utilize a qualitative tradition that would easily capture how these constructs have shaped their lived experiences. Moustakas (1990) remarked “essentially, in the heuristic process, I am creating a story that portrays the qualities, meanings, and essences of universally unique experiences” (p. 13).

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is utilized in this study as a theoretical tradition because it speaks to the contrast between social construction and race/equality in the world. This is a valid tradition because the discussion of gifted education alludes to a system of tracking and segregation that was built on the notion that a high IQ was a primary indicator for success and educational access. This notion was comprised from historical racial notions regarding people of color as being less intellectual than Caucasians. While gifted education programs provide needed assistance to those students that have qualified in various districts, there remains to be a hegemony that exists within our public school systems.

*Hegemony* is broadly defined as the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group. According to Stinson (2011), “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). This hegemonic existence within the system calls to the unique combination of utilizing both heuristics and critical theory as expressed by Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith’s (2008) in their edited works on critical methodologies:

Woodson (1933/2000) would argue that shared life experiences between researcher and the researched lend themselves to greater understanding of life’s conditions and circumstances, therefore rendering the “Negro’s” seeming propensity to conduct research and scholarship about like kind more accurate and necessary. (p. 85)

This study sought to bring about social justice in the field of education for African American males who are labeled as gifted in K-12 schools. The disparity in the recruitment and retention statistics between African American males and non-African American males within gifted education is too wide to not make a critical analysis of the issue and discuss implications for improvement. In order to accomplish, I utilized one of the five tenets for the usage of CRT as a theoretical tradition and qualitative tool for analysis and that is “counter-storytelling” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Counter-storytelling is a central element to the case studies of this research study. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) also discuss that this element is one of the most commonly used aspects of Critical Race Theory, they define *counter-storytelling* as a:

Method of telling a story that ‘aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority’ ...it is a means of exposing and

critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes. The use of counter-storytelling helps us to understand what life is like for others, and invites the reader into a new and unfamiliar world. (p. 27)

When utilized in the field of education, counter-storytelling can be utilized in “personal stories/narratives, other people’s stories/narratives, and composite stories/narratives” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). The CRT tradition is utilized as a methodological tool to analyze the data and also frame the case studies of these African American males. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) further reported that it is appropriate for the qualitative researcher to be:

Utilizing a CRT perspective to analyze educational inequity, the curriculum and specifically, access to a high-quality, rigorous curriculum, which has been almost exclusively enjoyed by White students. Tracking, honors, and/or gifted programs and advanced placement courses are but the myriad of ways that schools have essentially been re-segregated. (p. 28)

As the study examines the hegemony that exists in the advancement of our gifted education programs, it is necessary that “critical race researchers acknowledge that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways, with their potential to oppress and marginalize coexisting with their potential to emancipate and empower” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Duncan (2002) noted that the utilization of CRT helped him to explore the social conditions for how Black males in ‘integrated’ supposedly successful school by exposing the contradictions of the educational environment for young black men.

This research study is similar in that CRT helps to explore the K-12 experiences of these gifted young men by examining their personal accounts with giftedness. Lynn and Parker (2006) note that, “critical race studies in education scholars are those whose work focuses on the lives of marginalized students and demonstrate how CRT can be used to give



voice to students who would otherwise remain nameless and voiceless” (p. 277). Through this research study, I had the opportunity to provide a voice for those gifted African American male students, who have been ignored, de-motivated, and trained to hide from their own abilities because of marginalized expectations and beliefs about themselves. This will benefit educators of African American male students whom are both gifted and non-gifted. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) noted that within the analysis the researcher should understand that

Critical race methodology in education challenges traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color. It exposes deficit-informed research and methods that silence and distort the experiences of people of color and instead focuses on their racialized, gendered, and classed experiences as sources of strength. (p. 26)

The traditions of heuristics and critical race theory are needed to support the multiple case studies that in order to illuminate the voices and lived experiences of the participants. Keeping these traditions in the forefront during field work supported the relevant changes in evolution of the design of the study. The following section of this chapter describes the research sites and participants, sampling techniques, procedures for conducting the study, data production and analysis, and limitations of the research study including issues of validity and reliability.

### **Design of the Study**

The design of the critical, heuristic case study is guided by the study’s purpose which is to explore the phenomenon of giftedness as experienced by African American males through the exploration and analysis of their schooling experiences while also raising their level of awareness about being a gifted African American male as a result of our interactions

in this study. Such a purpose signals directions for data collection, data analysis, and report writing (Creswell, 2013). The research design involves gaining access to the research site, qualitative sampling, and means for collecting and analyzing data, as well as considering limitations and ethical issues that may be raised through the study's implementation. Data analyses are shaped by the researcher's selection of theoretical traditions; in this inquiry such procedures that were determined by the guidelines of case study, heuristics, and critical race theory.

### **Setting and Participants**

The participants of this study were African American male students in the ninth through twelfth grade that were identified as being "gifted" and attended a public school. There were two public school districts that gave approval from a district access point.

First, I established contact with the "gatekeepers" within the two school districts in order to gain access to the information needed to locate participants for the research study. According to Creswell (2009), "it is important to gain access to research or archival sites by seeking the approval of *gatekeepers*, individuals at the research site that provide access to the site and allow or permit the research to be done" (p. 178). In both school districts, these were directors, assistant superintendents, or district superintendents. A secondary gatekeeper to contact was the parents of these students in order to gain permission for the participant's data to be included in this study. This was accomplished through the Institutional Review Board procedures at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. According to the Research Services website of the institution, "federal, UM-System and university guidelines require all 'human subjects research' to be reviewed by an Institutional Review Board, generally composed of

peers, to ensure that the rights of those human subjects are adequately protected” (UMKC, 2009, p. 1). Once gatekeepers gave approval for the study to be initiated in their districts, eligible students and parents that met the sampling criteria were invited to a research study informational where they received information about the goals of the study, consent/assent permissions, and the opportunity to participate.

After sampling strategies occurred, the participants that were chosen for the case study were required to choose a pseudonym name for privacy protection in the study. According to Ogden (2008), “a pseudonym is a fictional name assigned to give anonymity to a person, group, or place...many ethical codes outline the importance of anonymity and confidentiality, and researchers routinely use pseudonyms as a means to this end” (p. 693). The pseudonym assisted with meeting the needs of SS-IRB guidelines and also helped the participants to understand that information shared would remain confidential. A caution with the use of pseudonyms is the random assignment of names that can possibly offend participants and distort how they see themselves in the research or demonstrate how they are being seen by the researcher (Ogden, 2008). Therefore, participants had to choose their own pseudonym to represent their name in the study to empower, validate, and protect their representation in the research study.

### **Sampling Techniques**

Two purposeful sampling approaches were utilized in this qualitative study: (a) criterion sampling and (b) maximum variation sampling. Patton (2002) states that “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth” (p. 230).

Criterion and maximum variation sampling was therefore, employed to select the participants for the study.

**Criterion-based sampling.** The criterion-based sampling strategy was utilized to gather demographic and preliminary perception data from an open-ended survey that was distributed to gifted African American male students and their parents that demonstrated an interest in participating in the research study at the informational sessions. deMarrais (2004) affirms that, “qualitative researchers use the term *criterion-based selection* to refer to the process through which they construct a list of characteristics or attributes the participants in the study must possess” (p. 59). The rationality behind the use of criterion sampling is to review and study all of the cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance...and can be used to identify cases from standardized questionnaires for in-depth follow up” (Patton, 2002, p. 238).

The demographic and preliminary perception data served as a data source for the research study as well as the identification of the best participants that could provide a rich and “thick” description of their experiences with being “gifted” for the case study research component. According to Morse (2007), “qualitative sampling often begins by recruiting participants solely based on whether they have experienced the research topic in question...so researchers should recruit intentionally (purposefully) from wherever these people may be” (pp. 232-233). The criteria for preliminary sampling in this study was that the participant must be: (1) identified as a gifted and talented student, (2) an African American male, (3) a student in one of the target school districts, and (4) a student in the ninth through twelfth grade.

**Maximum variation sampling.** Maximum variation sampling was used to obtain unique or diverse variations that have emerged in different conditions that exist in the various districts. Patton (2002) depicts maximum variation sampling as “a strategy that aims at capturing and describing the central themes that cut across a great deal of variation” (p. 235). While criterion sampling was used to specify distinct elements for inclusion in the study, I searched for the following variations from the survey: (a) differences in educational settings, (b) academic success in school, (c) family structure, (d) socioeconomic status, and (e) participation in extracurricular or community activities. The parent permission form that accompanied the initial survey requested information relative to family income and free/reduced lunch status that was used to verify some of the variations. The survey incorporated both criterion and maximum variation elements. Sample questions included on the survey were:

- Do you receive Free or Reduced Lunch?
- How would you describe your school?
- Do you live with both parents or in a single-parent home?
- What is your grade point average?
- Are you involved in any extracurricular activities at school or any community activities outside of school?

In an effort to get maximum variation among the six case study participants, it was necessary to conduct an in-depth analysis on the results from the open-ended survey. After sampling strategies have been employed to identify the participants of the case study, the process for data collection can begin utilizing multiple sources. In order to protect the identification of the students and parents on the survey, a numerical coding process was also employed for the survey. This allowed for them to complete the survey without any identifying information

that could link them to names. I kept the key for the numerical code, informational sheets with demographic information, and the surveys in three different secure locations. After the participants were chosen, I could move forward with the data collection methods for this research study.

### **Data Collection**

It is important to note that “case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 42) and can utilize common qualitative research data gathering techniques. According to Merriam (2009), “interviewing transcripts, field notes from observations, and documents of all types, including online data, can help you uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (p. 86). The specific data sources utilized in this study were (1) open-ended surveys; (2) participant autobiographies; (3) official documents such as grade transcripts, attendance records, school and community news letters; (4) individual semi-structured interviews; (5) theoretical focus group interviews; and (6) participant observations.

### **Open-Ended Surveys**

In this research study, the open-ended survey functioned as a sampling strategy for maximum variation as well as a data collection method. The survey assisted with the identification of the participants that could discuss their experiences expansively and vividly. An open-ended question survey is a type of research data collection tool that allows the respondents to offer any answer they wish to the question (Neuman, 2006). In using this tool there are some advantages and disadvantages. Some of the advantages are “(1) they permit an unlimited number of possible answers, (2) respondents can answer in detail and can

qualify and clarify responses, (3) unanticipated findings can be discovered, and (4) they permit creativity, self-expression, and richness of detail” (Neuman, 2006, p. 286).

Disadvantages offered for the use of this tool included difficulty in coding responses, and the understanding that articulate and highly literate respondents may have an advantage with this tool over participants and parents whom are less literate.

### **Personal Documents**

The personal documents that were used for this qualitative study are student autobiographies and official documents (Bogden and Biklen, 2003). Autobiographies are classified as *personal* documents because the term “is used broadly to refer to any first-person narrative that describes an individual’s actions, experiences, and beliefs” (Bogden and Biklen, 2003, p. 124). Participants were directed to write about their experiences with being gifted and their schools using several writing prompts that were time and space sequenced. In order to have consistency and sequencing purposes, I placed the autobiographical prompts into a Google document form. The participants were required to log into the Google document with their pseudonym and the unique code in order to answer the questions. I was then able to retrieve all of their autobiographical responses that I utilized to construct their individual autobiographies. An example of these types of prompts such as: (a) describe your middle school experience and (b) what was your most memorable classroom experience like? Autobiographies of the participants helped to unearth a historical account of these African American male student’s experiences during their K-12 years of schooling while also providing additional insight into their personal backgrounds and perspectives. These written stories of their experiences allowed for the construction of meaning from the findings of

other data sources such as interviews and observations, but more importantly they provided vivid descriptions regarding other factors that may not have easily surface through other methods. Creswell (2009) noted four strengths of the qualitative utilization of documents in the forms of autobiographies:

1. Enables a researcher to obtain the language and words of the participants.
2. Can be accessed at a time convenient to researcher—an unobtrusive source of information.
3. Represents data which are thoughtful in that participants have given attention to compiling them.
4. As written evidence, it saves a researcher the time and expense of transcribing. (p. 180)

### **Official Documents**

Official documents were one of the data collection sources used to enhance the qualitative picture of the participants. Examples of the official documents that I sought from the six case study participants were transcripts of grades, attendance records, newsletters, or other documents that help to create a robust picture of the participant. A benefit of utilizing this type of research is being able to access the data unobtrusively and conveniently (Creswell, 2009).

### **Interviews**

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** In this study, there are two types of interviews being utilized as data sources: (1) one-on-one interviews in a semi structured format and (2) theoretical focus group interviews. According to deMarrais (2004), “an interview is a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (p. 54). This research study aimed to explore how the



phenomenon of “giftedness” in the lives of African American males was experienced during their K-12 schooling. Because of this, the research relies on the interview processes to gather a large portion of the data. “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them...It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88).

The problem and purpose of this research study aided in the construction of the semi-structured interview guide for the interviews because “researchers can improve the quality of their interviews through a rigorous design process in which the research problem and purpose are carefully articulated” (deMarrais, 2004, p. 67). The individual interviews utilized the semi structured format, described by Merriam (2009) where “either all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions” (p. 90). This allowed the interview to be focused and consistent while also permitting flexibility for the researcher to explore additional issues or areas that may emerge through participant responses and conversational dialogue. Moustakas (1990) discusses how “there may be moments in the interview process when the primary investigator shares an experience that will inspire and evoke richer, fuller, more comprehensive depictions from the co-researcher” (p. 47). As the researcher, I sought to effectively build a semi-structured interview guide that would lead to the unveiling of the phenomenon under study while providing the space for

free dialogue so that the participant could expand on their personal experiences. deMarrais (2004) recommended three steps for the qualitative researcher to follow when constructing an interview guide:

1. Short, clear questions lead to detailed responses from participants
2. Questions that ask participants to recall specific events or experiences in detail encourage fuller narratives
3. A few broad, open-ended questions work better than a long series of closed-ended questions. (pp. 61-62)

**Theoretical Focus Group Interview.** The second type of interview utilized in the study for data collection purposes was a theoretical focus group interview. This was accomplished with the six participants once all of the individual data collection sessions were concluded. Theoretical group interviews or “focus groups” are interviews consisting of a small group of people on a specific topic. In addition to group size being small, they also could share the findings of the phenomenon or construct under study. Patton (2002) noted that the focus group:

Is an *interview*. The twist is that, unlike a series of one-on-one interviews, in a focus group participants get to hear each other’s responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say...the object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others. (p. 386)

He further explains that “sampling for focus groups typically involves bringing together people of similar backgrounds and experiences to participate in a group interview about major issues that affect them” (p. 236). All of the participants in the theoretical group interview were those African American males that have been identified as being “gifted” and participated in the research study. Morgan (1997) highlighted the fact that segmented

samples are key to the process of theoretical focus groups and there must be homogeneity among participants in order to stimulate free flowing conversations and to identify different perspectives among groups. The participants of the study took part in one focus group sessions for two hours in order to discuss the preliminary findings from the interview data and to expand on emerging concepts; this “allows the researcher to explore issues and themes that arose during the analysis of the interviews” (Morgan, 1997, p. 23).

Since this a collective case study with each participant representing a case, I focused on the similar and different views of the group members giving them an opportunity to discuss the findings and further explore any issues or unresolved pieces of data that are found in their respective manifestations of giftedness in their K-12 schooling environment. I also allowed for a heuristical discourse between myself and the participants. In order to facilitate this discourse, an external moderator facilitated the focus group session with all research participants and the researcher as participants. An interview guide was also utilized with the theoretical focus group interview. Another data collection method employed to enhance the study were observations conducted in the natural field settings that provided first hand encounters with phenomena, especially in relation to the social experiences of the participants.

### **Observations**

Unobtrusive participant observations were conducted in the natural settings of the participants including their homes, schools, and communities. Unobtrusive measures allowed for the “creative observer” (Patton, 2002, p. 292) to learn about a variety of phenomena “from studying physical and social settings,” (p. 292). Drew, Hardman, and Hosp (2008)

state that “observation provides a direct method for qualitative researchers to record human behavior and events as they occur—by watching” (p. 195). There are two main types of observations: participant and non-participant. As a participant observer identity is known to the group and the researcher fully participates in activities (Merriam, 2009) and may or may not be considered as an insider. My role was a nonparticipant observer as I seek to understand the lived experiences of these African American male gifted students. Drew et al. (2008) documented that “nonparticipant observation strategies include nonreactive, unobtrusive research. The researcher is not directly engaged in central behaviors and activities within the situation under study. The observer is acknowledged by participants but is not involved” (p. 197).

Merriam (2009) notes that the observation process is a “research tool when it is systematic, when it addresses a specific research question, and when it is subject to the checks and balances in producing trustworthy results”(p. 118). Furthermore, unobtrusive measures allowed me the opportunity to observe as a silent witness to the participants daily interactions looking for factors that may be helpful to expand on during interview sessions. By conducting the observation fieldwork, I gathered data related to the research questions and the theoretical frameworks that inform the study. The problem, research questions, and the theoretical framework assist the researcher in determining the nature of the observations (Merriam, 2009). An observation protocol guide, similar to the interview guide, was developed that incorporated in-depth field notes and my personal reflective thoughts related to the data findings. Field notes allowed me to capture what was going on in the setting, what

did participants talk about, and how did participants interact (Drew et al., 2008) which all contributes to making meaning of the data.

The use of an open-ended survey, autobiographies, official documents, individual interviews, theoretical focus group interviews, and observations in the study of “gifted” African American males strengthened the findings as I attempt to unravel the phenomenon in concert with this particular group of participants. The quest for efficient data collection for the purpose of a strong data analysis was an intricate and cumbersome process, however it aided in constructing the study’s findings more vividly through rich description.

### **Analysis of the Data**

Although the “researcher” is the primary instrument being utilized in qualitative studies, there are vital decisions that should be made during the data collection and analysis phases. The theoretical traditions that guide this study was case study as the major qualitative approach using the complimentary traditions of Heuristic Inquiry and Critical Race Theory. Because my personal experiences with giftedness are key to the study, this specifically highlights the importance of heuristic aspects of the research. Moustakas (1990) states that “Heuristic Inquiry is a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer...[through it], the deepest currents of meaning and knowledge take place within the individual through one’s senses, perceptions, beliefs, and judgments” (p. 15). This statement provides a justification for utilizing the six phases of Heuristic Inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) for the data analysis process within the study. The six stages of this process for analysis are (1) Initial Engagement; (2) Immersion; (3) Incubation;

(4) Illumination; (5) Explication; and (6) Creative Synthesis. This framework is utilized to analyze the data that is gathered through the various data sources for the study.

**Initial Engagement.** During this phase, the researcher becomes intimately deep in the exploration of the research topic, questions, and problems to make deep connections with the central element of the research. During this phase there is “self-dialogue, an inner search to discover the topic and question...during this process one encounters the self, one’s autobiography, and significant relationships within a social context (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27). As I began in this phase, I deliberated for months on what would be an ideal topic that I was passionate about and that deeply connected with my own experiences.

As I reflected on the gifted African American male students whom I had worked with in my personal career and my own experiences as a gifted African American male, I began to reflect on my schooling experience as well as the social justice component of these experiences and attempting how did my interaction with the phenomenon impact my development and success. During this phase, the research question evolves, transforms, and begins to take shape into a viable research construct.

**Immersion.** During the immersion phase, I spent time focusing on the data gathering procedures of the study. The researcher at this moment is “alert to all possibilities for meaning and enters fully into life with others wherever the theme is being expressed or talked about—in public settings, in social contexts, or in professional meetings” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). The research topic becomes a vast pool of research regarding the phenomenon of giftedness and during this time, as the researcher, I came to know the various tacit dimensions of the phenomenon under study. I sought to build relationships with the

participants, while simultaneously examining the preliminary data gathered. The research topic and study became an extension of my very existence, further drowning me in the “deep” of the study and even more entangling was my exploration of my own personal experiences in tandem to the existing research, current research data, and stories.

**Incubation.** The third phase of heuristical data analysis is the period of incubation. During this phase, I moved away from the data and the research to allow for further insight and awareness. This phase is best described by Moustakas (1990) as a “process in which a seed has been planted; the seed undergoes silent nourishment, support, and care that produces a creative awareness of some dimension of a phenomenon or a creative integration of its parts or qualities” (p. 29). During the separation from the data, it is my intent for clarification and deeper levels of understanding to develop from the interaction with the data while occupied with something else. Although the process may seem strange due to the retreat, it is in this time that “incubating the construct while being involved with something else often brings it into awareness” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28).

**Illumination.** During the “illumination” phase, the researcher revisits the original data from the participants and begins the process of coding the data which is significant to research data analysis. According to Moustakas (1990), within the illumination process, there is a “breakthrough into conscious awareness of the qualities and a clustering of qualities into themes inherent in the question” (p. 29). The clustering of themes is a byproduct of the data coding that occurs within this phase for each of the document sources and participants.

**Data coding.** Miles and Huberman (1994) provide the definition that “*codes* are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled

during a study” (p. 56). They also refer to the notion of open coding where the researcher is making notations and coding any data that “might” be useful to the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Open coding was particularly useful in this case study because the data can be gathered and labeled without restrictions of boundaries and guidelines. Miles and Huberman (1994) note that coding is conducted as:

Initial data are collected, written up, and reviewed line by line, typically within a paragraph. Beside or below the paragraph, categories or labels are generated, and a list of them grows. The labels are reviewed and, typically, a slight more abstract category is attributed to several incidents or observations. (p. 58)

There are three types of codes that Miles and Huberman (1994) discuss for qualitative data analysis: “descriptive, interpretive, and pattern codes” (p. 57). *Descriptive coding* is the first level of coding; they have little interpretation and usually attribute a class of phenomena to some text. Many studies begin with open coding for descriptive codes followed by a sorting into a larger category of interpretive codes, then followed by more categorizing into even greater pattern codes. According to Merriam (2009), “*categories* are conceptual elements that ‘cover’ or span many individual examples of the category or [codes]” (p. 181).

Within this phase, “the construction of categories is highly inductive...you begin with detailed bits or segments of data, cluster data units together that seem to go together, then “name” the cluster...this is a category or theme or finding” (Merriam, 2009, p. 183). The second level of coding, *interpretive codes* are more complex in conception and more in-depth than descriptive codes. The third level of coding, *pattern codes* denote the emergent themes that are needed for this methodology. Miles and Huberman (1994) remark that “pattern



codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation... they pull together a lot of material into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (p. 69).

In order to discover emergent patterns and code groups, a frequency count was be taken within the categories to find helpful patterns and themes and “by a *theme*, we mean a common thread that runs through the data” (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 135). The process of establishing codes at all three levels was significant to finding the emergent themes and patterns of phenomena that are vital to the aims of the qualitative research being conducted. Miles and Huberman (1994) reminds researchers that, “coding is analysis....to review a set of field notes, transcribed or synthesized, and to dissect them meaningfully, while keeping the relations between the parts intact, is the stuff of analysis” (p. 56).

**Explication.** The fifth phase of the Heuristic Analysis process is called Explication. During this phase, the researcher begins to fully examine what has awakened from the analysis of the data to this point. This awakening occurred through the review of codes from observation field notes, transcriptions of interviews, official documents, autobiographies, and my research notes compiled during the coding process. Moustakas (1990) comments that:

In explication a more complete apprehension of the key ingredients is discovered... [and] the researcher brings together discoveries of meaning and organizes them into a comprehensive depiction of the essences of the experience. The researcher explicates the major components of the phenomenon, in detail, and is now ready to put them together into a whole experience. (p. 31)

The explication phase creates an awareness that occurs from reviewing the codes, categories, and themes from the data sources and a depiction of the phenomenological experience is captured for the participants. It is in this phase that the “heuristic researcher [is able] to construct an individual depiction of the experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 51).

**Creative Synthesis.** The sixth phase of the heuristic analysis process is called Creative Synthesis. In this phase, “the researcher entering this process is thoroughly familiar with all the data in its major constituents, qualities, and themes and in the explication of the meanings and details of the experience as a whole” (Moustakas, 1990 p. 31). Realization on the part of the researcher occurs and the portrayal of the phenomenon is developed in such a way that the issue under study comes alive beyond the data and codes. This transpired through the analysis of the individual cases of each research participant.

**Cross-Case Analysis.** This case study research examines the phenomenon of “giftedness” in the K-12 experiences of six African American males. In an effort to analyze this multiple-case study efficiently, I employed the strategies of Miles and Huberman (1994) for cross-case analyses.

When conducting the cross-case analysis on the data, the researcher should compare the single-case analyses conducted for each individual case followed by a comparison of the data to ascertain emerging patterns and themes. In regards to this aspect, Miles and Huberman (1994) wrote that cross-case analysis at “a deeper level, the aim is to see how processes and outcomes across many cases, to understand how they are qualified by local conditions, and thus to develop more sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations” (p. 172).

Utilizing case-oriented approaches allows the researcher to conduct in-depth exploration within each single case examining the phenomena in a bounded context. One of the renowned qualitative case study theorists, Robert K. Yin (1984):

advocates a *replication* strategy: A theoretical framework is used to study one case in depth, and then successive cases are examined to see whether the pattern found matches that in previous cases...and where the pattern is expected on a theoretical basis to be weaker or absent. (as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 174)

The second strategy utilized was a variable-oriented approach to the cross-case analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that *variable-oriented strategies* are when “researchers often look for themes that cut across cases” (p. 174). In this approach, emergent themes become apparent and assist the researcher in finding useful strands of data in the various cases. However, the authors [Miles and Huberman, 1994] ultimately recommend, *mixed strategies* as it is “possible and desirable, to combine or integrate case-oriented and variable-oriented approaches” (p. 176). This research study utilized a mixed strategies approach to explore the data from the cases and their findings regarding “giftedness” for the African American male.

Once a comparative analysis has been conducted on the data, I began by examining the individual case reports for the emergent findings. Many experienced case researchers suggest that much of the writing should be done during the data collection stage (Stake, 2005a; Wolcott, 1990; Yin, 1994). I utilized the case reporting protocol suggested by Smith-Maddox and Solórzano (2002) which asks the researcher to make use of data by “writing your narrative including (thick description, description of patterns and/or themes, utilization of theories as you address questions, cite relevant readings and support your responses with

“evidence” in the student’s own words or your field notes” (pp. 73-74). This facilitated the surfacing of the phenomenon for the researcher and should also aid the readers of the study. Moustakas (1990) encourages that during this phase the researcher should find the most powerful and creative method to depict the experience. This “usually takes the form of a narrative depiction utilizing verbatim material and examples, but it may be expressed as a poem, story, drawing, painting, or by some other creative form” (p. 32).

### **Ethical Issues and Limitations Including Validity, Reliability, and Crystallization**

#### **Ethical Issues and Limitations**

As the researcher of this study, it was pertinent to acknowledge the preliminary limitations of the study including techniques to ensure validity, reliability, and ethical issues are handled appropriately. In conducting research dealing with human subjects, maximum effort was taken to ensure that issues of ethics were safeguarded by following the procedures mandated by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Because the study deals with human subjects there are certain ethical guidelines and research protocols that I followed in order to protect the research participant’s confidentiality, experiences, and human nature. One method that I utilized was pseudonyms to enhance the privacy of the participants as well as any locations or people that may be discussed in the study that is pertinent to the experiences of the researcher. In addition to the ethical safeguards of the study, I also needed to be considerate of limitations that could surface as potential obstacles in the study.

A limitation that may occur in the study is the challenge of articulation of the experiences of the research participants in the most effective manner. The data collection

and analysis was extensive for each of the six case studies and care must be taken that the depiction of the participant's experience is accurate and valid. This is a primary issue with heuristic inquiry because validity in qualitative measures does not come from correlations or statistics, rather from the judgment of the researcher (Moustakas, 1990). A solution proposed for this challenge was to do more writing and spending time in the focus group with the participants. Additionally, there was a member checking that occurred to validate the expression of the experiences. This aspect is discussed further in a latter portion of this chapter.

Numerous researchers have noted that a known limitation that occurs within case study research is finding enough participants to give a good rich description of their experience with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2001; Patton, 2002). The utilization of the open-ended survey in my sampling strategy assisted me in generating enough information about the participant's experience to cipher those aspects that was needed to provide rich, descriptions of their K-12 experiences with giftedness.

A final limitation to the study would be researcher bias, as a gifted African American male educated in public schools for the majority of my K-12 experiences. Understanding that my personal experiences and beliefs have taken shape and that researching an area that connects with me on a deep, intimate level justifies the need for researcher bias to be addressed in this study. This includes preliminary notions and beliefs about the experience being examined and the public school experiences as a whole for the African American male. Because of the sensitive and close nature that this poses it was crucial for this study to employ strong measures of validity to support the findings.

## **Validity**

Validity is one of the most important aspects of the research study because it solidifies the research through multiple procedures and techniques. Creswell (2009) noted that “validity...is one of the strengths of qualitative research, and it is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (p. 191). In qualitative inquiry, a large amount of credibility lies in the *researcher as the instrument* of the study at hand (Patton, 2002). In this research study, I am the primary instrument of the study, therefore careful consideration was taken to the data collection methods and the accuracy of the findings for this study. There are seven strategies that have been documented by Creswell (2009) that I utilized to ensure that validity is present in the study:

Some strategies for validity enhancement is 1) triangulate the data, 2) utilize member checking, 3) use “rich, thick description, 4) acknowledge researcher bias, 5) discuss the negative and discrepant findings, 6) employ peer debriefing, and 7) utilize an external auditor. (pp. 191-192)

**Triangulation.** Triangulation is a central method of strengthening validity in a research study because it ensures that multiple measures are utilized to compose the findings in the research. This qualitative study utilizes multiple document collection methods and sources as noted in the earlier part of the chapter. Triangulation is the use of a variety of sources to increase validity and data accuracy (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002). Triangulation

is essential to a good qualitative study in both data collection methodology and the pursuit of validity. According to Patton (2002) the:

Multiple sources of information are sought and used because no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective... by using a combination of observations, interviewing, and document analysis, the fieldworker is able to use different data sources to validate and crosscheck findings. (p. 306)

This study focuses on the phenomenon of “giftedness” as it pertains to the African American male and could not accurately be captured in a holistic sense using one data source. A note remarked by Hays (2004) also discusses the complex nature of triangulation for case studies due to the “use of multiple methods and multiple sources as forms of triangulation makes case study findings not only more comprehensive but also more complicated, because so many perspectives are represented” (p. 228).

This was evident as the case study examines the six participants and their experiences with the phenomenon under study. There are five data sources for the study for each case, totaling a minimum of 25 different data sources in the summation of the data analysis sets for this study. There are 25 varying aspects and perspectives into this phenomenon that were compiled from the case study data. Hays (2004) particularly notes that “the case study researcher as a qualitative researcher needs to provide for triangulation (e.g. multiple sources of data and multiple methods for each question)” (p. 228). The triangulation of data sources and collection methods was an internal “checks and balances” system for the accuracy of the information received.

**Member checking.** Member checking was a critical validity measure in this heuristic study. Hays (2004) found that, “member checking not only increases validity but

also adds to the overall comprehensiveness of the case study” (p. 234). Moustakas (1990) suggests that “the heuristic researcher returns again and again to the data to check the depictions of the experience to determine whether the qualities or constituents that have been derived from the data embrace the necessary and sufficient meanings” (p. 33). This type of member checking occurred throughout the research; and eventually, participants were given a draft copy of the transcription to “member check”, verifying data and making any changes in the depiction of their experiences.

Utilizing “member checking” increases the validity of the report’s findings and enhances the ethical implications for the study. Moustakas (1990) supports this effort noting that “verification is enhanced by returning to the research participants, sharing with them the meanings and essences of the phenomenon as derived from reflection on and analysis of the verbatim transcribed interviews and other material...” (pp. 33-34).

**Rich and thick description.** The nature of case study research informs that the researcher use vivid description in the reporting procedures. The reporting method that was utilized in this study allowed me to illustrate each case with the “rich and thick description” needed for the reader to walk in the shoes of the participant as well as enhance the validity measure of the research.

**Acknowledge researcher biases.** A metaphor that comes to mind to describe the importance of acknowledging researcher bias is a person wearing glasses comprised of a glass lens and a lens covered in black material. By wearing these glasses, a fraction of the wearer’s vision is impaired and that person is inhibited from viewing a complete and accurate view. Concurrently, acknowledging researcher biases occurs when the researcher is able to



distinguish areas of the study that may be analyzed or portrayed discriminatorily based on prejudice or prejudiced beliefs. By acknowledging my own beliefs and experiences, that may potentially bias my view based upon my personal experiences, observations, or beliefs; I am cautioned to examine it from different lenses aside from just my own. This ensured that my research glasses have lenses both made of glass so that I can see the world through the lived experiences of the participants while understanding that everyone's experience is not my own. In order to do this effectively, I needed to keep in the forefront the notion of reflexivity.

Patton (2002) reported that “the term *reflexivity* has entered the qualitative lexicon as a way of emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one's perspective” (p. 299). Reflexivity speaks to the researcher being mindful of positionality in the study, personal voice, and aspects of the phenomenon under study so as not to confuse their experiences with those of the participants. Because heuristic inquiry is one of the theoretical traditions involved in the study, I had to maintain reflexivity in my perspective and biases throughout the data collection and analysis phases. According to Patton (2002) all good researchers should remember that:

Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to observe herself or himself so as to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of her or his own perspective and voice as well as—and often in contrast to—the perspectives and voices of those she or he observes and talks to during fieldwork. (p. 299)

The process of reflexivity, however, requires researchers to operate on multiple levels (Etherington, 2004), and acknowledges that the researcher is intimately involved in both the process and product of the research process (Horsburgh, 2003). During this process, the

researcher must be cognizant of what is influencing their internal and external responses while simultaneously being aware of the researcher's relationship to the research topic and the participants. To assist with this process, maintained an electronic journal of my experiences during the course of the research, mindful that as the study proceeded, I would be transformed by the experience and the findings. Additionally, journaling allowed me to record my reactions to the participants and the transformative meanings derived from the experience.

**Discussion of negative and discrepant findings.** A critical element to the research validity is to understand that it is not always what surfaces that is important, but also those things that do not surface as well. In conducting qualitative research, there are aspects of the findings that may be negative or discrepant, but as the researcher it was imperative for me to recognize them and not overlook their presence. These findings may point me in another direction of my thinking or they may illuminate deficit areas in the research study. This aspect enhances the validity of the study because it seeks to not obscure the results and justifies that I am seeking to have the readers to understand the complete picture and not just the truths that support my stance in the research.

**Peer debriefing and external auditor.** The study also utilized a peer debrief and an external auditor to help strengthen the validity of the research. By having critical research partners to read over the study and ask questions this allows me to understand where gaps of understanding may exist within the research study. In my qualitative research training, one of my professors stated that the research should be “transparent” and that critical readers can

elucidate areas of the research that are lacking transparency as well as components that may be unclear to an outside reader.

The external auditor helped to ensure that my coding and analysis techniques are accurate and consistent in the research study. An external auditor also assists with deriving an understanding that is made from the data source collection. This provides a strong vantage because it strengthens the research analysis through an external set of eyes but additionally, to ensure that as the researcher, I am examining all aspects of the research study. Moustakas (1990) remarked that “heuristic research is an extremely demanding process, not only in terms of continual questioning and checking to ensure full explication of one’s own experience and that of others, but also in the challenges of thinking and creating...” (p. 37).

**Reliability.** Reliability is another important component of conducting qualitative research. Creswell (2009) notes that “qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects” (p. 190).

Reliability is what allows the researcher and readers to know that the findings are consistent and more than one road has been explored to get to the same destination in the research.

There are several reliability procedures that have been documented by Gibbs (2007) that was employed during this study, check transcripts of interviews for mistakes; no deviation in code definitions through the use of qualitative memos and qualitative code books; ensuring that there is intercoder agreement in the document meaning that outside readers can cross-check my codes assigned.

**Crystallization.** In this research study, I included the principles of crystallization to the qualitative processes involved. The process of crystallization occurs through a deep, complex interpretation of the phenomenon in the research study, through this analysis, knowledge is produced (Richardson, 2000) and is heavily dependent on the degree of reflexivity on the part of the researcher and in the design, data collection, and representation of the phenomenon (Ellingson, 2009). In qualitative research methods, one of the goals is to achieve a “thick description” to enhance the story. The aspect of crystallization supports this goal but also allows for a method to travel deeper in the analyses of the phenomenon in a creative analytical manner. Ellingson (2009) described the achievement of crystallization occurs through:

The compilation not only of many details but also of different forms of representing, organizing, and analyzing those details. Strong themes or patterns supported by examples provide a wide-angle view of the setting or phenomenon; stories or poems highlight individual experiences, emotions, and expression; critiques shed light on relevant cultural assumptions and constructions; and so on...crystallization provides one effective approach to richly describing our findings to marking both overt and subtle manifestations of power in analytic, narrative/artistic, critical genres.  
(pp. 10-11)

Engaging in the process of crystallization allowed for a more creative approach to depicting the experience of the phenomenon of giftedness for the participants and myself in a way that was richly descriptive, useful, and an artistic representation of qualitative research.

### **Conclusion and Next Steps**

As the research study progressed and I moved into the next phase, I was aware that the process would be transformative and enlightening for me, the participants, and the readers. I realize that as the data was gathered, it would manifest new meanings and any

changes in the process was noted as they arose. As presented earlier in this chapter, the design of this research study is that of a heuristic, critical case study that explores the phenomenon of giftedness as experienced by African American males in public school settings.

As I reflected on my own personal experiences and prepared for immersion into the analysis from the data that I collected, I took some time to examine the heuristic thread that began my initial passion for this topic...“as an African American male growing up in the urban core of Kansas City, Missouri, I never gave much thought to the phenomenon of giftedness or how I experienced this phenomenon during my schooling”. In this same manner, I sought out to capture the stories of the participants in a way that would provide a thick and deep, creative narrative of their interactions and experiences with being gifted in their school settings.

In Chapter 4, I report on the findings of the study with a discussion around the themes, connections, and descriptive elements that manifest from the data analysis methods. Additionally, I sought to tell the stories of the participants in a creative analytic manner of short narratives using the 3-part case presentation format. Narratives that are composed from the field notes, interview transcripts, or other data provides the readers with an opportunity to think with and feel of a story, rather than only analyzing its meaning by reading (Frank, 1995). This process assists with the unravelling of the heuristic and critical elements of the case studies in an intricate and detailed manner so that the phenomenon as experienced by the participants can be elucidated for the readers of the study in an effort to understand the “Invictus Minds” of these gifted, young African American males. Throughout this process, I

reflected on the fact that “as an adolescent, I never considered my own personal experiences as a gifted African American male; however, while conducting research on this notion of *giftedness* and the history of African Americans, I came to the conclusion that the experience of giftedness for the African American male had to be a unique experience for this populace.”

CHAPTER 4:  
FINDINGS: THE UNHEARD VOICES AND STORIES  
OF THE INVICTUS MINDS

**Overview**

This dissertation research study examined the phenomenon of “giftedness” as experienced by African American males in an effort to help educators to more effectively assist them as well as understand their experiences in K-12 public schools. The purpose of this critical heuristic case study is to explore the phenomenon by carefully analyzing their experiences in the public school setting. A pragmatic goal of the study is to provide educators with more knowledge about the experience of “giftedness” by African American males in an effort to support the growth, development, and academic success in K-12 public school settings as well as gifted programming efforts.

Baytops, Ford, and Harmon (1997) reported that the issue of under-representation of racially diverse students in gifted education has been seen as one of the most disturbing issues in education today. Often, actions by African American males in classrooms today lead to improper placement because the educators have not been adequately trained on the aspects of gifted education and what the phenomenon looks like when “giftedness is combined with the unique cultural experiences of African Americans (Baytops et al., 1997; Ford, 1995; Kunjufu, 2005). There are many educators that do not understand how African American males experience “giftedness” and because of this, traditional gifted programs often inhibit their recruitment and retention in addition to prevailing societal perceptions of African American males in K-12 schools. In 1993, the U.S. Department of Education

published that African American male students were inexplicably placed in special education programs for learning disabilities, behavior problems, and programs for mentally retarded students more than any other ethnicity (Ford, 1995; Patton, 1992).

This aspect is just one shard of the puzzle comprising the issues for African American males who are gifted in K-12 public schools. The disproportionate amount of African American Males being placed in special education has been the premise of much research suggesting that gifted education programs are some of the most segregated educational programs in our nation, and that there must be unyielding efforts to ensure that students of color, economically advantaged students, underachievers, and other nontraditional students receive the education to which they are entitled (Alamprese & Erlanger, 1988; Ford & Harris, 1991; Ford, 1995). This study is a qualitative case study also utilizing the theoretical traditions of Heuristic Inquiry and Critical Race Theory to explore the experiences of African American Males who are identified as gifted students and attend public schools.

In order to explore this issue more thoroughly, there was an overarching research question that guided the study with three sub-questions to be answered as well. The research question to be answered is: What do the experiences of gifted African American males in public school systems suggest about strategies needed to promote their success, recruitment and retention in Gifted and Talented programs? The three sub questions that were answered are: (1) How do these gifted African American males describe their experiences with gifted programs in their schools? (2) How do gifted African American males describe their experiences with curriculum, teachers, and other students inside and outside of the classroom? and (3) What do the experiences of gifted African American males suggest about



practices that public school educators can use to promote the success and development of African American males in general?

The general methodology utilized for the data collection processes in the study were official documents, autobiographies, interviews, non-participant observations, and theoretical focus group interviews. The process of gathering the data enlightened me about many of the issues facing gifted African American Males in K-12 schools today. The data gathered provided a sense of their perceptions of the experiences of giftedness. As the primary investigator, I asked many questions and as data was analyzed, I was astounded by the variety of responses. Through the varied sampling methods discussed in Chapter 3, I was able to find six student participants that were able to provide a description of their “giftedness” as the study sought to explore its manifestation during their K-12 schooling experiences. The participants of the study were African American males in the ninth through twelfth grade that had been identified as participants in a gifted and talented program with their enrolled school district. I spent approximately three months with the participants collecting data for the study. Settings for observation included a classroom in their school and all participants were a part of the semi-structured interview process and the focus group interview.

A directed, purposeful criterion sampling approach was employed. This sampling strategy enabled the participants to be verified through a process of saturation that was sensitive to the trajectory, stages, and phenomenon being studied (Morse, 2007). Criterion sampling assisted in ensuring that the participants were ideal for the study. Patton (2002) noted that “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting *information-rich*

*cases for study in depth*” (p. 230). The criterion that was utilized for participants included being identified as (1) a gifted and talented student, (2) an African American male, (3) a student in one of the target school districts, and (4) a student currently enrolled in the ninth through twelfth grade. A maximum variation sampling strategy was also employed to examine and look for unique or diverse variations in the participant’s lives and district schools. I was familiar with the school settings that the participants came from, however, did not know the participants prior to the research study. The purpose of the study was able to remain the same during the study. There were many points during the data collection and analysis phases when certain connections made clear aspects of my own experience being gifted, prompting more avenues for future research, however, the purpose of the research study remained the same. Over the three months, I established a very good relationship with the participants and their parents. To the point, where many of the participants would frequently inquire as to whether or not I would continue following up on them.

Because of the connections and relationships between the students’ experiences and my own, the use of reflexivity was necessary. Reflexivity required that I as the researcher remained mindful of positionality in the study, and understand how personal voice and aspects of the phenomenon under study are conveyed so that the participant experiences did not become intertwined. Because heuristic inquiry is one the theoretical traditions involved in the study, it was imperative that reflexivity was maintained in my perspective and biases throughout the data collection and analysis phases. There were moments when I had certain feelings and biases about things occurring with the students which I attributed to my amount of experience in the world versus their limited exposure. In order to maintain my own voice

and position in the study, it helped to maintain a journal for my own thoughts, aha moments, and a record of my feelings at particular points within the research study.

### **Data Analysis and Themes**

At the conclusion of the Data Analysis portion of the study there were four themes that emerged from the data gathered from the participants. In this section, I provide definitions for the themes came together like a complex woven tapestry helping to encapsulate the stories of these distinctive young African American males. I realized that after contemplating on the different experiences of these young men, I spent weeks reviewing their autobiographies, interview transcripts, and observation data in addition to the informal conversations that I had engaged in with the participants. It was in this stage of explication, that pieces of the puzzle began surfacing out of their data as if it was being pulled from quicksand.

These happenings would occur at random points of the day, early mornings, late nights, or mid-afternoon without any prompting or specific relevance to my work on the research study. I had spent a vast amount of time trying to constantly search for what was common among the experiences that I had with the participants, that I also began thinking about what was not common nor present was equally as important to this study. Moustakas (1990) noted that “in the explication process, the heuristic researcher utilizes focusing, indwelling, self-searching, and self-disclosure, and recognizes that meanings are unique and distinctive to an experience and depend upon internal frames of reference” (p. 31).

The data sources revealed approximately 164 descriptive codes and 17 interpretive codes which merged in various segments to create the four dominant themes that arose from

the study. According to Richards and Morse (2007), when the qualitative researcher is examining data sources the:

Coding, if well done, is the way you monitor occurrences of data about your ideas and the way you test them. It makes resilient links between data and ideas, links that you can trace back to find where particular ideas came from and what data are coded there, to justify and account for the interpretation of the ideas. (p. 137)

Because of this aspect, establishing codes at the descriptive and interpretive level was a pertinent component to find the emergent themes and patterns of the phenomena that would be considered vital to the aims of my qualitative research being conducted. There were three codebooks developed to help me organize and sort data in preparation for analysis.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994) overall, “coding is analysis...to review a set of field notes, transcribed or synthesized, and to dissect them meaningfully, while keeping the relations between the parts intact, is the stuff of analysis” (p. 56).

The codes synthesized and created four themes that were central to the study: (1) *Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships*, (2) *Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems*, (3) *Gifted Systems*, and (4) *The Student Success Course*. In order to discover the emergent themes and dominant code patterns, a frequency count was created from the data sources. This aspect was important not only in seeing the dominant, common, and uncommon codes, but it also helped me to contemplate on the ordering of the themes in the study. Drew et al. (2008) noted that “as codes are developed that represent central concepts emerging from the data, qualitative researchers can count the frequency or distribution of concepts” (p. 346) in order to find those concepts that are emerging many times in the data sources. Codes assigned to units of data that are manifested in data sources multiple times, are considered to have a

“high” frequency and can help the researcher to see which concepts may be of great importance or vice versa.

The first theme *Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships* is defined as *the interdependent web of developmental relationships with self and others that encapsulate the psychosocial shifts which the participant experiences inclusive of biological and sociocultural life changes and occurrences*. This theme was comprised of five interpretive codes: (1) *Aspects of Self*, (2) *Human Support Systems*, (3) *Interpersonal Relationships*, (4) *Peer Relationships*, and (5) *Cultural Identity*. This overall theme had the largest sum total of codes in the study with 450 as a count.

*Aspects of Self* is defined as the physical or tangible aspects, the intellectual and conscious aspects, or the emotional and intuitive feeling aspects associated with an individual. *Human Support Systems* is defined as an interconnected system of things or people who act as a network to provide an individual with assistance, practical, personal, or emotional support. Many of these human support systems are found with either family, social peer groups, or school environments. Martinez and Dukes (1997) noted that:

Schools can facilitate and enhance the development of self-concept among adolescents in all ethnic groups through useful academic activities that explore and examine ethnic diversity and race relations. It is important that schools attempt to meet the developmental needs of students because in the areas of self-esteem, academic self-confidence, and purpose in life they can impact the well-being of adolescents. (p. 515)

*Interpersonal Relationships* are defined as social associations, connections, or affiliations between two or more people formed in the context of social, cultural and other influences. They vary in differing levels of intimacy and sharing, implying the discovery or

establishment of common ground, and may be centered on something(s) shared in common. This was an important construct for this study with African American males. In Hoelter's (1982) study on Race Differences in Credulity and Self-Esteem found that African Americans were more likely than Caucasians to focus on interpersonal relations as a source of self-esteem, while Hughes and Demo (1989) additionally discovered that an individual's familial relationships and friendships were the most impactful components of a high level of self-esteem particularly, for African Americans. Ultimately, there has been much research to support the aspect that relationships and appraisals of family, friends, and prioritized relationships with others were the most important factors in the development of success and well-being (Rosenberg, 1986; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Harter, 1993; Luster & McAdoo, 1995). This interpretive code was a consistent construct with the participants as observed in their interactions with family, teachers, peers, and school officials. There is research to support the notion that one of the foremost protectors' against psychological risks and social risks during adolescence is having at least one close, confiding relationship where trust has been established (Resnick et al., 1997).

*Peer Relationships* are defined as social associations, connections, or affiliations with same-age people. The relationships are multileveled and the interactions are quite socially complex. They can essentially be defined by the members' characteristics including, style of interaction, as well as the shared and unshared history of the members. The importance of peer relationships particularly with African American adolescents was found to be more diminished in neighborhoods of high risk but able to facilitate success rather than deter academic achievement (Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, and Mason, 1996). *Cultural Identity* is

defined as the identity of a group, culture or an individual, influenced by one's belonging to a group or culture. Arroyo and Zigler (1995) examined how an individual's racial identity impacted their academic achievement and well-being, and they found that the intricacies of self in relation to the school outcomes was a complex process to unravel as the home, social groups, and environment are also examined. Additionally, Smith and Silva (2011) found that "ethnic identity was more strongly related to positive well-being than to compromised well-being" (p. 42).

The second emergent theme was *Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems* defined as an *interdependent educational system that exists as a community of living organisms in conjunction with non-living components of the environment that come together to enhance or hinder the educational success of a student*. This particular theme was constructed from five interpretive codes: (1) *Supportive Structures within the School*, (2) *School Culture and Environment*, (3) *Learning Styles and Preferences*, (4) *Admissions and Policies*, and (5) *Classroom Experiences*. This pattern theme had the second largest frequency count in the study with a code composition of 183 occurrences throughout the data sources. The theme may have been the second largest in overall code count, however, this was a prevailing theme for all six participants in the research study.

*Support Structures within School* are teachers, support staff, administrators, curriculum or community resources, or programs that supported a high level of student learning and fostered personal student growth within the school setting (Sanders & Herting, 2000; Wimberly, 2002). *School Culture and Environment* is defined as the traditions, beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and

influence every aspect of how a school functions, inclusive of the physical and emotional safety of students, the orderliness of classrooms and public spaces, and the degree to which a school embraces racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity (Deal & Peterson, 1999; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Osher & Fleischman, 2005). ***Learning Styles and Preferences*** are defined as a student's consistent way of responding to and using stimuli in the context of learning and the preferences developed about how they best respond to the stimuli in the learning setting (Braio, Beasley, Dunn, Quinn, & Buchanan, 1997; Dunn & Dunn, 1993; Dunn, Beaudry, & Klavas, 2002). ***Admissions and Policies*** are defined as any references to the plan or course of action in place intended to influence and determine the decision of admittance or allowing a student to participate in an exclusive program or institution. ***Classroom Experiences*** are composed of a combination of social and physical qualities within the learning environment inclusive of classroom management procedures, as well as the way the space is organized, furnished and maintained by the teacher. Benard (2004) found that there was psychological elements needed to be in the classroom experience for students to be successful which included social competency, the ability to problem solve when issues arise, autonomy in task and choice, and the belief that they had a bright future or purpose in life. A positive psychological experience in the classroom was found to have a positive impact on academic success for students of color especially when the environment encapsulated a respectful relationships between teacher and student, meaningful tasks, and the firm insistence of the teacher that all students had the care and support needed to be successful (Bondy, Ross, Hambacher, & Acosta, 2013; Patrick, Turner, Meyer, & Midgley, 2003; Ware, 2006)



The third theme that surfaced during the data analysis phase was ***Gifted Systems*** which is defined as *the set of interacting and mutually supporting components of an individual's experience that form a system based upon the structures, behaviors, and interconnectivity of elements that affect their successes, feelings, characteristics, and deficits experienced as a gifted student*. There are also five interpretive level codes that formed this theme: (1) *Types of Giftedness*, (2) *Gifted Characteristics*, (3) *Gifted Identification Processes*, (4) *Limited Support in Gifted Programs*, and (5) *Support in Gifted Programs*.

***Types of Giftedness*** refers to the prevalent domains of giftedness that are manifested through the phenomenon of being gifted inclusive of an individual's specific content academic ability, creative expression, intellectual characteristics, leadership skills and abilities, or exceptionalities in the visual and performing arts. ***Gifted Characteristics*** are the general behavioral, learning, and creative characteristics associated with students labeled as gifted. ***Gifted Identification Processes*** is defined as any references to the referral, screening and assessment processes for eligibility in the gifted program.

***The Student Success Course*** was the fourth theme that appeared from the codes in the study. It is defined as *an ordered process or succession of stages and accomplishments that are the culmination of a student's ability to support them in society after completing the educational process*. Two interpretive level codes came together to form this theme: (1) *Academic and Personal Success* and (2) *Aspirations for College and Careers*. This theme was lowest in sum frequency count for data code occurrences and also the lowest in regards to dominant themes in the cases of each of the participants. Although seemingly insignificant to the research in regards to frequency, on a much deeper level, those

aspects not seen in the study are just as important as what was observed in the study. This issue becomes a critical area for discussion later in this chapter as well as chapter five.

*Academic and Personal Success* is defined as the accomplishment of an aim or purpose within an institution of learning or any achievement that an individual has set as a goal for what they believe will lead them to success. *Aspirations for College and Careers* is defined as any expressions of a strong desire, hope or ambition for attending college and/or having a successful career after high school (Muhammad, 2008; Olszewski-Kubilius & Scott, 1992; Shaun, 2012).

### **Within-Case Analysis and Cross-Case Analysis**

The process of utilizing the Within-Case Analysis process allowed me to explore the phenomenon of giftedness on an individual level with all of the participant's cases in an effort to understand the unique attributes, patterns, codes, and themes in a unique manner (Paterson, 2010). This was beneficial because it allowed me to see more clearly the unique aspects of the cases as well as the commonality between each participant and their data sets. Silverstein (1988) noted that within case studies we are faced with the tension between reconciliation of an individual case's uniqueness with the need for a more general understanding of generic processes that occur across cases.

Because of this need, I also utilized the process of Cross Case Analysis within this research study. According to Khan and VanWynsberghe (2008), "cross-case analysis enables case study researchers to delineate the combination of factors that may have contributed to the outcomes of the case, seek or construct an explanation as to why one case is different or the same as others, make sense of puzzling or unique findings, or further

articulate the concepts, hypotheses, or theories discovered or constructed from the original case” (p. 1). This component of the analysis allowed me to see the similarities and differences between each of the participants and to begin a deeper reflection on components of the phenomenon and the experiences. During this phase of analysis, codes that were commonalities surfaced and implications for working with this unique populace of students began to manifest.

### **The Invictus Mind of Chuck**

*“Out of the night that covers me...Black as the Pit from pole to pole.”  
– William Ernest Henley*

Chuck is a 15 year old freshman student who is bi-racial, however identifies as being an African American male. He resides in a home with both parents and is an extremely confident gifted mind. He stated:

I am a very outgoing student who likes volunteering to do things. I was the kid that always raised my hand to answer a question in class. I think that I am a very bright student as well and I say that because of how many teachers would remind me of my intelligence. Lots of people think that I am funny and athletic because when they're down, I can cheer them up with some joke. As I think about elementary school, my worst memory was a bully that I had in the 1st grade. In middle school, the best times were at Debate Tournaments because I always won a trophy and we always got pizza. The worst thing about it was leaving because I didn't see all of my friends afterwards. In high school, I have had some good experiences including making new friends. However a bad experience has been my class with my geometry teacher; she is the most despicable teacher I have ever met! All we do in class is complete a “Do Now” for the whole hour and not learn anything. This is bad for me...when I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade I completed the Algebra End Of Course Exam with the fastest completion time and scored proficient.

In Chuck’s autobiography and interview, the first significant theme that emerged was *Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships*. The interpretive codes that created this theme within his autobiography and interview data sets were (1) *Aspects of Self*, (2) *Human Support*

*Systems, (3) Interpersonal Relationships, and (4) Peer Relationships.* The first interpretive code *Aspects of Self* was evident in the interview and autobiography data sets from the stance of the importance for Chuck to appease others and also indications of his self-esteem:

I want to set a good impression on my elders and the adults around me so I could have more opportunities for jobs and other things like that and more educational opportunities than other students because other students don't really think about that. Education is what I want to do and what I want to be special in and I think that's one of the reasons that I am gifted and being that way, I think it makes me have a lot more opportunities in life.

Within his case, he frequently discusses aspects of himself in relation to making a good impression on adults, teachers, and most importantly making his parents proud. Another aspect of himself that he shares is his affinity for sports and athletic qualities.

I like to play sports and games and eat and sleep. Mainly football and basketball because I am good and won a Super Bowl championship. I'm a very small person and I'm not really that strong looking but I'm strong because when I play, there's a long back of people trying to push me straight down but they can't because of my speed and quickness but that's really one of the things I enjoy to do. Also, I'm really good in basketball and usually I go about sports by season like what season is—right now in basketball season so, I like to play basketball right now.

The next interpretive code that was prevailing for Chuck was *Human Support Systems*. There were two components of this code that surfaced in Chuck's story. One was the support that he has received from his mother and the other was the support that he received from school personnel or programs to aid him in being successful. Chuck has a close relationship with his mother and he reveres her as the nurturer, the teacher, the socio-emotional balance, and supporter of his endeavors. In regards to school support, he references some of his teachers but explicitly, a discussion about Mr. Tally, who is Chuck's Creative Writing instructor.

I'd blame my dad for my athletic abilities and my charm, but my mother put strategic thought processes in me because my mother is a very smart woman. Although she may have sometimes have her faults, I try to always make her proud and I love her so much. She supports me with school stuff when I need it.

I feel supported by my Broadcasting teacher, my Physics teacher, and my Creative Writing teacher, Mr. Tally. He's [Mr. Tally] a very outgoing person and he's a straight forward attitude type of person and I like that in him because it's either you learn or you get out. I think that he supports me in my learning because of his straightforwardness. Overall, I think my school supports me a lot because they recognize the talent that I have, not only in my major but in academics as well.

The third interpretive code within this theme in Chuck's case was *Interpersonal*

*Relationships*. Chuck references a non-supportive teacher experience that he has had in high school. This conversation surfaced during both data sets and he was extremely candid in expressing his frustration with the teacher. For Chuck, relationships and how one interacts with another is crucially important. He expressed that his non-supportive teacher experience was with:

My Geometry teacher. She's just—I'm not going to call her a really bad person but I'll call her a very bad teacher because all we do in class is sit around and talk about the Do Now. I think it's not right. I think the way she teaches as if we already know it. I don't really think she has the passion for teaching and honestly, I think that she shouldn't be doing it. Out of all the teachers that I have ever had, she is the first teacher that I ever had problems with in terms of my learning. She gives us homework that we don't understand and our parent's don't understand so we can't get help on that and she is not willing to help. That really ruined my opportunities for a good grade but I will still try really hard but I wish I could change her.

The fourth interpretive code of *Peer Relationships* was the fourth dominant area for this theme. One of the things that Chuck mentions is the close relationship between him and his best friend. He attributes this relationship and bond being so close because of the shared experiences that they have endured with each other.

My closest friend is Derrick. I would say this because I have known him since the first grade and we like the exact same stuff. We think almost exactly the same...and believe it or not, we want to do the same thing with our life. He supports me a lot because we treat each other as brothers.

The second significant theme that emerged with Chuck's case was *Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems*. The interpretive codes that created this theme within his autobiography and interview data sets were (1) *Learning Styles and Preferences* and (2) *School Culture and Environment*. Chuck first mentions the importance of understanding how he best learned in class. I wanted to know how he knew about his learning style and he responded:

We took a test last year about what type of learner we are...I like to do a lot of stuff hands-on. That's the way I can learn best...I can't learn out of an audio recorder or by just reading. That's not the way I learn. I learn by doing things with my own hands. I think this is another thing that makes me gifted because of how I learn and like to be involved with things.

He was cognizant that he had a Bodily-Kinesthetic learning style coupled with the notion of personalized learning. By personalized learning, he discussed the tailoring of teaching and learning within the frame of establishing a positive learning environment. He stated:

I like it when the teacher can help me individually. A good example is my Physics teacher right now because she's very helpful. She makes time for everybody in the classroom. We have one of the biggest Physics classes and somehow she makes it work. She can get individual time in the class and she teaches to a point where we understand. She uses things that we use in everyday life and her lessons.

Chuck also reported some positive school characteristics that has helped him during his journey particularly in high school. He discussed the creativity and appreciation within the school environment for celebrating individuality. This was an important part of the *School Culture and Environment* which was his second interpretive code in this theme. He reported:

My school is very creative. Students at my school dress creatively and in unique clothing that I think are cool. It's just full of talent and it's a kindred spirit which is a good environment for because of what's going on around me. I think it's a great environment for me to learn and I have a lot of great experiences there already.

### **The Invictus Mind of Michael Kyle**

*"I thank whatever gods may be...For my unconquerable soul."  
– William Ernest Henley*

Michael Kyle is a 16 year old sophomore student who is an African American male.

He resides in a home with his mother and is deeply spiritual and grounded. He stated:

I am an athletic person, who loves God and Church, who loves family and friends. I also love my school and am active in football, track, weight lifting, and student council. I am a funny guy who loves to have fun. I would also consider myself to be very smart and intelligent. Some of the characteristics that describe me are Intelligent, Athletic, Spiritual, Dedicated, Passionate, Trustworthy, Honest, and willing to do what is right. One my earliest childhood memories is attending Camelot Preschool/Head Start. I remember being scared of Smokey the Bear who lay under a table in our classroom, playing with Legos and blocks. Even, being told I was dumb and stupid and me hating those things being said about me. I still use those things that were said as a driving force of my learning. Sadly enough it did not stop there...in elementary and middle school, my worst memories are still being taunted and called fat, black, and ugly! Three events that have changed my life thus far is (1) being baptized, because I am God's child and I have the blood covering and watching over me; (2) being accepted into Descartes High School, because I am no longer the smartest in the school; and (3) playing high school football, because this gives me a greater chance at college, keeps me in shape, and I get to play a game I love.

In Michael's autobiography and interview, the first significant theme that emerged was *Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships*. The interpretive codes that created this theme within his autobiography and interview data sets were (1) *Aspects of Self*, (2) *Cultural Identity*, (3) *Human Support Systems*, and (4) *Peer Relationships*. One of the pivotal things that Michael discusses during the data collection period is the struggle with how he deals with separation.

He notes that this is something he has had to work at and it is a recurring aspect in the data.

He states:

It was difficult when my mom and dad divorced...but the greatest obstacle that I had to ever overcome was being dismissed from [a college prep program]. Everything in my life fell apart. My image, confidence, learning abilities in school, friendships, and focus changed all because I now had to face the reality that I was going to have to make it to college with no extra monetary support...I am going to have to do it all on my own. That pill was very hard to swallow!

Additionally, of all the participants, Michael made references to how his *cultural identity* as an African American male had been affected by the portrayal of media sources. He does this simultaneously with discussing how he viewed aspects of himself:

I will encounter more obstacles as an African American male...yes...I feel like there's already that sense of 'he's black---he's bound to mess up'. It's there just because of the fact and how, like I said before, being portrayed and how—if I see that African American male on TV doing these bad things, almost all of them must be doing the same.

TV plays a big part in our generation wanting to be seen as being cool or popular. When they said I was fat, I worked my hardest and I'm not fat anymore. I'm in shape now...but it's the images and perceptions of what people say on the TV and in social media...Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook plays a huge part in what many of us African American youth try to portray.

Michael spent a substantial amount of time discussing the various *Human Support Systems* that he attributed to his success in school and in life. He made clear connections with the relationship between himself and his mother. He references within the data sets, the importance and impact that she has made on who he is. Michael also refers to his religious connections at his church and how his bishop at the church has impacted him and supported him during his schooling experience. He also discusses the peer trust relationship that he has



with one of his best friends. These three served as the main components of his support systems.

One of the most influential individuals in my life is my mom. My mom has this work ethic that is unbelievable and her thinking and ways to do things is off the charts. She is intelligent as well and has had to raise me as a single parent...I absolutely adore that from her. I love her to death. She is really involved and you can't fool her because she was very smart in school. She goes to school now for herself for business. I remember when I was in elementary school we talked about the gifted program, she told me she was proud of me and you know, keep going and make sure you stay with this and stay up right because this is good for you.

When I'm not here dealing with school, I am at church. I love church things. They're constructive and also when I am dealing with things at the church or doing things at the church...I can't go wrong because I am in the church. Also at church I see my bishop. He has been a constant force in instilling in me how to be a man that is spiritual and takes care of what he needs to. He is an awesome man of God and a great leader.

My brother from another mother is Isaiah M. Lowe. He has been my friend since 6<sup>th</sup> grade and we have a connection and friendship that will last a lifetime. He understands me and I understand him. He knows my deepest and darkest secrets that nobody but God himself knows. We stay true and real with one another and as well as honest and trusting.

Contrary to my initial thoughts in the data collection, it was my belief that the majority of the participants in the study would have grappled with the issue of being ridiculed in school for being in the gifted and talented program. Michael was the only participant who had significant issues of ridicule within his peer relationships that seemingly played a part in his current drive to be athletic and physically fit. He expressed:

People never teased me because I was smart...it would be---because I have the bigger, chunkier teeth so they would tease me for that or calling me fat and black and ugly. I was called these names through middle school. But being a sports-driven kid, I worked to change that...it was a part of my motivation.

The second significant theme within his case was *Gifted Systems* which was created from the interpretive codes of (1) *Gifted Characteristics*, (2) *Gifted Identification Processes*, and (3) *Types of Giftedness*. One of the characteristics of giftedness that surfaced from Michael's story was associating his giftedness as an advantage over others in school. He refers to having a favorable position because of the label of being gifted and referenced the pride of being an African American male in school who was gifted. He also demonstrated positive attributes that are typically associated with the behaviors and attitudes of gifted students. He said:

Gifted and talented for me is like you are special. It's something that's a step above just being normal. You have that extra ability that a lot of people don't have. I can recollect things...the smallest thing that might not seem important to other people and I can comprehend some things to certain degree better than other people. I learned that I was gifted literally in kindergarten with Ms. Malon. I think teachers treated me good as an African American male because of the gifted program and people knowing that 'he's smart' at least we know he's got some kind of skill and stability up there mentally. Being a gifted African American male is an honor. It's a privilege. It's a special thing that you should take heed to and take hold of and take the ride...but I have learned you got to control that ride because if you don't, you're going to crash.

A unique facet of Michael's data was also his view on unidentified gifted students. When inquiring about the *Gifted Identification Processes*, he was able to recall his testing for the program, however, he also referenced his thoughts on the possibility of unidentified groups of students who could be gifted and talented.

I know too many people that could have been or should be gifted. I don't know...some just don't get in the car at all to take the ride. I know for sure, they're scared. Some just don't want to be in it. Some just don't want to. They just want to be lazy and others they just feel that how they would be looked at ain't the way they want to be looked at. They want to be looked at as cool or popular. Not good.

Michael also associated with the Intellectual Giftedness archetype. This is characterized by the affinity of being seen as smart, excited to learn new ideas, asking questions and enjoying abstract thinking or challenges, while also known to have a sense of humor or being precocious. Michael reported:

When in classes, I like to learn new things and ask a lot of questions. I also like to have fun in the classroom...people know me for making them laugh but I like a good challenge. If the class challenges me to be better than I am inclined to do better but as of now, I'm just not getting it in some them [classes]. There's just like no help when I ask questions because they [teachers] feel like their way is the way and you want to do it only their way which drives me crazy because it's not the way I learn...I know how to be successful...but its only their way or no way!

A third dominant theme in his case was *Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems* constructed from the following interpretive codes: (1) *Admissions and Policies*, (2) *Learning Styles and Preferences*, and (3) *Supportive Structures within School*. The first code *Admissions and Policy* emerged due to the high amount of references to program admissions to his high school and an area college preparation program as well feelings experienced due to his demission from the program. Having been demitted from the college prep program has been a motivator for him to continue to work hard in school, in fear that if he does not keep his grades high that he would be demitted from that school. He referenced memories such as:

A major milestone for me was being accepted into Descartes High School. Teachers from elementary have always told me that you are intelligent and you have Descartes written all over you and I believed that. I loved my other school but Descartes called and of course I listened.

Another milestone was being accepted into the Newman Scholars program. This was huge because I was just about guaranteed a scholarship for college. Man...I live knowing I messed it up by getting kicked out of a program that I worked hard to get

into...the help was important for me in school and my mom. If I could change one thing in my life it would be the Newman thing because I lost so much!

This theme was also comprised of the code *Learning Styles and Preferences*. Michael articulated his understanding of having personalized learning in the classroom and the advantages for him. He also referenced instances where the lack of a personalized approach to teaching and learning seemingly had an adverse effect on his attitude and motivation for learning in classes. He remarked:

I learn best if the teacher is interactive---I feel if you teach up at the board and we're going to work it, work it, work it until we can't work it no more, give me the practice time on it. Let's see if I get it. I need to be able to see it and have time to work on it while the teacher is not holding me up for others. Give me what I need. If I'm not working it right, say wait a minute let's get some other perspectives and questions until I find my way with it.

I'm struggling here...some of these teachers aren't teaching. I feel that way because I have always been taught and learned and got it the way I needed to. They [teachers] ask what I need help with and then they'll still be stubborn and go back and do it some other funky method and it's just not working still. So I'm just like 'okay'.

*Supportive Structures within School* was the final interpretive code that comprised this theme within Michael's case. When inquiring about supportive structures, Michael referenced the gifted program that he encountered during elementary experience. Positive thoughts and feelings about the supplemental support structures from the gifted program was noted. One of the comments that he reported was:

I learned that I was gifted literally in kindergarten with Ms. Malon...I felt like it was an honor, almost because not everyone had the ability or the choice of being gifted. It instilled the confidence that I needed in elementary and education-wise I was unstoppable. I would get pulled out to do projects and stuff...it was a very supportive program that helped me...but after sixth grade not much has been done with it.

## The Invictus Mind of Kevin

*“In the fell clutch of circumstance...I have not winced nor cried aloud.”*  
– William Ernest Henley

Kevin is an 18 year old senior student who is an African American male. He lives with his mother and has overcome much adversity in his life. He stated:

I would describe myself as being laid-back, funny, friendly, respectful, kind and cooperative. In elementary school, I loved getting treats for completing my homework. I also remember getting in trouble for fooling around and getting my mom called. My best memory was winning the spelling bee in fourth grade. I still look back on that moment and get happy. During middle school, my grades were good, although I almost had a couple fights and in high school, I met some wonderful new friends but I started to slack on my work. My best accomplishment is soon approaching and that will be graduating from high school. Three events that I think changed who I am are (1) being told I am gifted; (2) college visits, and (3) teachers that cared enough to push me to my full potential. If I could change anything it would be never letting my grades drop sophomore year, so my opportunities could be greater than they are now!

The dominant theme in Kevin’s case was *Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems* which emerged from the interpretive codes of: (1) *Classroom Experiences*, (2) *Learning Styles and Preferences*, (3) *School Culture and Environment*, and (4) *Supportive Structures within School*. In the area of *classroom experiences*, a prevailing thread in Kevin’s story at school is the lack of classroom management that he has observed and the impediments caused thereof. He typically referenced his frustration with it which sometimes caused him to become disenfranchised with learning in the classroom. He stated:

I have a few teachers that just let the students basically run the class like, let the students run all over them. We weren’t learning things because they assign the students to be teaching the class but they’re not teaching anything. We had teachers that let the students take control of the class. I’m not learning anything. Students play music and dancing, tapping those tables—crazy stuff that they’re not supposed

to do. I come in and don't feel like I'm going to learn anything because I haven't been learning anything. It kind of angers me a little because teachers should be able to control their class.

In accordance with Kevin's feelings regarding classroom management needs in the school, he was conscious of his needs in the classroom. In understanding his *Learning Styles and Preferences* he associates with the Bodily-Kinesthetic Learning Style needing the opportunities to accomplish tasks with hands-on, physical, tactile experiences. He also references aspects of personalized learning that is tailored to his unique needs. He stated:

I learn best when it keeps me interested and fun...like one of my best teachers is my English teacher that I got now Mrs. Wilcox. She's a great teacher. She gets to know all of us and how we learn. I like how she makes things make sense and has hands-on activities so everyone stays into it. I know I am a hands-on learner. In elementary, I had a teacher named Mrs. Davis. I remember her well because she made everything fun and everyone was engaged, everyone laughed and everyone was into it. She liked having us as her kids and we liked her as well. I need teachers like that can give me what I need...not be letting unruly students take that away.

Kevin's experience with *School Culture and Environment* was unique from some of the other participants. He frequently commented on negative student behaviors that he observed within the school community that was distracting, disrespectful, or off-task; ultimately deducting from teaching and learning. He reported:

At this school...I felt that I didn't belong when I first came. I felt like I was in the wrong place. Students were loud and do all that crazy and unnecessary stuff. Fighting, cursing, just out of control behavior, unnecessary stuff. I've seen a poster on the wall and they will run down the hallway and just rip it down for no reason though. No explanation behind it. Some of the teachers are doing the best that they can but the students act crazy sometimes!

During the data collection opportunities, Kevin was able to identify his appreciation for *Supportive Structures within School* that he has encountered during his school experiences.

He references the support that he received during elementary school through the gifted supplemental instruction program in his school. More specifically, he recalls the impact that positive praise had on him. Positive praise being those positive acknowledgments from teachers or staff that he received, which was a thread he mentions through his schooling experiences. In his high school experiences, he references not only the praise received from a teacher but also the impact of motivational encouragement and support. He stated:

I know that I am labeled as Gifted and Talented. It was helpful when there were special programs for us like Arena when I was in elementary school and the teachers praise you by saying things like ‘you’re so intelligent. You’re going to make it. You better go to college’ stuff like that. Teachers praising me helped a lot in elementary school, everyday my teacher in Arena told me how special I was and how smart I was.

There are a few teachers that I feel comfortable enough to go to with something personal like Ms. Wilcox. There is only a couple that I’m close to that I actually have a bond with. But the few I have, I talk to them on a daily basis and I feel like, they’re close enough that I can tell them something and know that they’ll keep it to themselves and not judge me. Like Ms. Wilcox, she will help me and give me words of wisdom. Say something positive to me. I would not be getting ready to graduate if it was not for the few like her. They motivate me and help me to stay on the right track...I just wish more teachers cared like they do!

### **The Invictus Mind of Inman**

*“Under the bludgeonings of chance...My head is bloody, but unbowed.”*  
– William Ernest Henley

Inman is a 15 year old freshman who is an African American male. He lives with both of his parents and carries the archetype of being shy.

I would describe myself as a smart young adult. I’m very mature for my age; I’m respectful and responsible also. Sometimes I like to be alone and just think about a lot of different things. I like school; I’ve been in the gifted program ever since the kindergarten. I’m also very athletic. My goal is to finish high school, go to college, & have a great career like an engineer or a doctor. Some characteristics that describe me are smart, funny, outgoing, quiet, athletic, & responsible. One good thing I remember about my elementary school experience is being in the gifted program. The

program made me feel smart, the teachers helped me, and it felt like I belonged there. It made it easier to learn new things. A bad thing about me was that I never really got along with people because I liked to be by myself most of the time and had a very bad temper! I always kept my grades up and I got along better with teachers than kids in the school. In middle school, I joined the middle school basketball team to be more social and we won a tournament. I also got into a few fights and remember the feeling of getting suspended!

Although being the most reluctant to provide information or open up to the process of the research study, within Inman's case, all four themes were dominant. The first theme was *Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships* which resulted as a culmination from the interpretive codes: (1) *Aspects of Self*, (2) *Human Support Systems* and (3) *Interpersonal Relationships*. There were two distinct *Aspects of Self* that surfaced in the case of Inman, one being comments eluding to high levels of self-esteem and the other being an affinity for sports and/or personal athletic qualities. Although the most reserved of the participants, Inman was extremely confident about his evaluative dimension of self and his abilities. He stated:

I would describe myself as a smart young man, responsible, respectful, and just all around good. Outside of school I like to play basketball. This is my favorite sport. I'm very athletic. I could play football too. One of the things I remember is winning a tournament for basketball. Being able to play sports helps to keep me on the balance.

Inman also discussed the importance of the support that was provided by his mother. He describes her with immense passion and references her frequently throughout the data sets. He also mentions the combined support of both of his parents particularly in his educational endeavors. He said:

My mom has helped me to be who I am today...she is always there when I need her the most. I choose to keep doing well in school to make her a proud mother and not disappoint her. I want her to know the reason I succeed at things that I do is because of her. I don't ever want to let her down. Both my mother and father are very involved [in school] because they're always on my back about my grades...and if I



have homework or anything that I need to get on when I get home. They are caring and loving and keep me on tabs. They always say I better not slack off on my work.

Additionally, within the area of *Human Support Systems* and *Interpersonal Relationships*, Inman shares the support that he has received within school, mainly stemming from the impact of his 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher that supported him during his middle school years. He also mentions his biology teacher that he has in high school. The primary connection that emerged from these parts of his case was the comfort and relationship that he experienced with them as positive and supportive teachers. He reported:

I can honestly say that one of my best supports was my 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Mr. Ross. He was my Economics teacher. He was the best teacher because, like, he actually cared about how I learned and I felt that I learned the best in his class. He made it easy for us to learn and he didn't just make us work questions straight out the book. He took his time, made it fun, and broke it down for us. In high school, I would say I have a good relationship with my biology teacher. He reaches out to me and understands issues I might be having, he always seemed like somebody I can talk to about anything so I started and he supports me if I need help.

The second theme *Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems* was created from the interpretive codes of (1) *Learning Styles and Preferences*, (2) *School Culture and Environment*, and (3) *Supportive Structure within School*. Within the area of *Learning Styles and Preferences*, Inman discusses how he best learned in school. He mentions one of his teachers that would adjust his approach to the curriculum and connected to the learner's interest. Inman mentions how his teacher understood how they learned and personalized it so that each student could be successful. Additionally, he provided feedback and support in the classroom for the students. He remarked:

My teacher, Mr. Ross, he would talk to me if I was having trouble in his class. We would conference and he would tell me how I could get my grade up or what things I could improve on. Also we had books, but he would put the important things from

the book and break it down and put it in a PowerPoint slide and talk to us about it while we were writing. I learn better when I can see it.

Inman also references the positive school characteristics that have impacted him during his tenure in public schools. Within this aspect of *School Culture and Environment* he references the school culture as being conducive for his well-being. He noted:

My school is a good learning environment to teach kids about how to learn and the kids, they're good classmates and stuff. They care about you too....like a family. The school gives me a challenge on my education and stuff. Teachers care about your grades. Like, if they see your grades slipping, they'll talk to you and say how you could get it up and they'll help you. There is a lot of school pride too!

Inman also noted the importance of his elementary school experience with the additional support provided by the gifted program as well as the motivational impact made on him by his 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. These descriptions of the *Supportive Structures within the School* were succinct and clear with Inman. He was able to articulate his experiences and these structures made strong impressions on him. He reported:

One good thing I remember about my elementary school experience is being in the gifted program. The program made me feel smart, the teachers helped me, and it felt like I belonged there. It made it easier to learn new things.

I also had Mr. Ross as my 8<sup>th</sup> grade history teacher and he pushed me to do good in that grade as well. He was the one who told me to try to go to Descartes High School so that I can be challenged and excel in learning. It really helped having him in school, because I probably would not have transferred.

Inman's third dominant theme was *Gifted Systems* and it was made from the following codes:

(1) *Gifted Characteristics* and (2) *Types of Giftedness*. As one of the gifted characteristics

that Inman identifies with is the gifted advantage or being seen in a favorable or better position because of the label of giftedness. Inman expressed that:

Being gifted is a gift because a lot of people can't have opportunities that I can and go to the type of schools to get an education like I did. They also don't learn as quickly as we do...I have a gift that a lot of other kids don't have and I should use it wisely.

He also made references to two types of giftedness. One being specific academic giftedness which was references to giftedness in one or more content subjects and the other being intellectual giftedness. Inman expressed his love for learning new things, being challenged in class, and being able to do complex thinking. He most closely noted his abilities in math and science content areas. He referenced:

In school I like science and stuff, and I can speak different languages, I am also good at math. I have always been good at science and math...even if my grades didn't always show it. I understand those two classes with ease...it's usually the teacher, um...that doesn't understand I don't want to share in class. Doesn't mean I am not good at it...I get science and math!

The fourth theme that was emergent from his data was *The Student Success Course* and it was the apex of the interpretive codes: (1) *Academic and Personal Success* and (2) *Aspirations for College and Career*. Within the time I spent getting to know Inman, I learned quickly that he was able to reference times of *Academic and Personal Success* most often when asked questions about his schooling experience. He referenced his accomplishments in elementary school and high school. Although he had an affinity for playing sports, his successes were academic in nature. He stated:

I remember going to Carter Elementary School and winning 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the school spelling bee. This memory helps me to remember all that I can do when I put my mind to it. Also in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, I always kept my grades up and all year long I would get A's on any tests I took, I was very proud and felt like I accomplished something big. I would say my best accomplishment in high school was my freshman year,

keeping a 4.0 grade point average for the entire 2012-2013 school year at Middletown High School. Everyone in my family was so proud of my accomplishments!

Inman also expressed his *Aspirations for College and Career*. He frequently expressed his interest in attending college and becoming an engineer and/or doctor. This was connected to his interest in math and science. He seemingly felt that this profession would be naturally linked to his areas of giftedness:

I want to go to college and become an engineer or a doctor. I figure since I like math and science classes that would be a good profession for me. I am going to look at colleges in Texas, because I have some family down there, so if I need help with anything, I'd be close to them. I want to graduate from college start my successful career and have a family of my own; I want to raise my kids like my mother raised me while being a professional.

### **The Invictus Mind of Timothy**

*“Beyond this place of wrath and tears...Looms but the Horror of the shade,”*  
– William Ernest Henley

Timothy is a 15 year old freshman who is an African American male. He lives with his mother and siblings. He is an extremely rapid and complex thinker, however tends to be characterized as a class clown. He does not like to conform to the needs of others and is unique in his own right.

I am a very hyper type of person...always upbeat and active. I am smart, funny, and intelligent but also very attentive; I tell a lot of jokes to make people laugh. I attended Johns Elementary School and my favorite teacher was Mr. Lee. I remember anytime I was in trouble, I was sent to his class room and he would let me on the computer. I liked this because instead of sitting down and doing nothing he let me get on the computer and play games. The games kept my attention. In middle school, getting suspended was a bad experience for me. My friends and I were playing as if we were fighting and then we were suspended for three days. In high school, being on probation and almost getting kicked out of Allen High School was horrible. I had to work extra hard to get my grades up. Getting into band was the greatest challenge that I have faced yet, I had to play my 12 major scales from

memory and sight read a piece of music. If I could change anything about my schooling experience or my life it would be my attention span because I lose focus very quickly and it causes my grades to drop.

There were two themes that were equally present in the case of Timothy. The first theme was *Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships* and the codes of *Human Support Systems* and *Interpersonal Relationships* constructed this theme. Timothy makes references to two main types of *Human Support Systems*: (1) his mother and (2) his siblings. Within his data sets, the impact that his mother has had on shaping who he is was clear and evident. He holds his mother in high esteem and places a high amount of value on her opinion. He lives with his siblings in the home and also discusses the influence that they have had on him growing up. He reported that:

The most influential person in my life has been my mother because she is a good supporter of my school like and she is very helpful on a lot of my hard tasks that I face. In our family, there is my mother and my siblings; I am the youngest of three. My sister helps me a lot. As I am looking at colleges, I now want to go on a college tour that she just recently went on. It will help me to choose the best college...she gave me the idea. Usually I don't—don't really value people's opinions except probably my mom, my brother, and my sister.

The second interpretive code of *Interpersonal Relationships* helped to form this theme as a dominant within Timothy's case. Timothy frequently references teachers where he has had a non-supportive experience within the school setting. One of the things that I learned from Timothy was that he is unique in his ways of accepting others into his circle or pushing them

away. He was adamant about his feelings on teachers that he did not have supportive experiences with. He says:

I can tell you I always think about my 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher Mr. Holloway. I just didn't like him because he was always like 'do this, do that, get to work'. We didn't even know what the work was. He didn't like me and I didn't like him. I look out for teachers like him...they don't even know how to teach and don't care to get to know you.

The second theme was *Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems* and it was built from the interpretive code of *Learning Styles and Preferences*. Within this code, Timothy discusses his experiences with teachers that had a lack of personalized learning within their classroom and descriptions of personalized learning that did occur in some of his classes. He communicated that:

Mr. Holloway would tell us things like 'here's the worksheet. Do it'. We didn't know anything about that subject or topic at that time. This year, I have a teacher that reminds me of him, named Ms. Rose. She doesn't well, she helps us like she gives us notes and things but when it comes down to it, she doesn't really help us. She'll say 'write down these notes' but won't be like---here's how it's done and she doesn't really give us a chance to ask questions. That's a problem...some of the teachers at the school don't teach...they just write stuff and give us worksheets and just say do it without even giving us an explanation of how to do it. I like to work things out...but it doesn't happen!

I learned best from two of my elementary teachers. One was Mrs. Thompson, she was goofy, happy, active, helpful, just things like that. The other teacher was my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher, Mrs. Patterson, she was a very smart teacher and was kind of inspirational for me to want to become smart like her. Middle school [laughs]...oh no I had no favorite or good teachers. In high school, I have two teachers that I learn from. Mrs. Washington because she's a very active teacher, she's very attentive; she even helps out a lot with social problems. I would also say Ms. Pooler. She's really smart. She missed two points on her SAT from having a perfect score. She's just really smart and is helpful...she is really good in both science and math. I respect her a lot!

Timothy is a participant who values intellectual ability and close relationships. He was certainly one of the more outgoing participants who could articulate very clearly on his feelings about an individual and the position that they had with him.

### **The Invictus Mind of Harrison**

*“And yet the menace of the years... Finds, and shall find me unafraid.”*  
– William Ernest Henley

Harrison is a 17 year old junior who is an African American male. He lives with his mother and father. He describes himself as being focused, articulate, goal-driven, and humble.

I am very athletic because I play football and baseball very well. When I think about myself, I am kind, very intelligent, studious, and genuine. I can be very nervous and shy person, especially when it comes to speaking in front of groups, including my friends. I am well rounded because I play sports, an instrument, and I can sing pretty well too. If I am having issues, I make it through with a smile on my face. When I was in elementary school, recess was always good because I could show off playing kickball. I could do everything better than all my peers. However, getting sent to time out was the worst thing! It did not happen often, but when it did, my heart dropped. In middle school, I received my first low grade and I had a hard time dealing with that. In high school, I began to meet new people from different backgrounds; because Descartes High School is very diverse. The best aspect has been finally getting to play sports. As far as changing anything about myself for now, I wouldn't change a thing. But sometimes I wish that maybe I could have been more expressive and less shy when I was young because it affects me as a student now.

In the case of Harrison, there were two prevailing themes within his case. The first theme *Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships* was constructed from three interpretive codes: (1) *Aspects of Self*, (2) *Human Support Systems*, and (3) *Interpersonal Relationships*. Harrison expressed many positive character traits of himself, shared his affinity for reading, being diffident in his actions with others, and also his affinity for sports and his athletic qualities.

He is definitely a participant where there was more than meets the eye. He is a grounded young man with a very level head, who happens to be good at many different things. During the data collection period, Harrison displayed that he knew his *Aspects of Self* which included his strengths and short-comings. He stated:

I am very athletic because I play football and baseball very well. When I think about myself, I am kind, very intelligent, studious, and genuine. I can be very nervous and shy person, especially when it comes to speaking in front of groups, including my friends. I am well rounded because I play sports, an instrument, and I can sing pretty well too. If I am having issues, I make it through with a smile on my face.

Outside of school, I like to read and play sports---I'm a big sports fan so I like to look at ESPN. I play sports and that's one of my hobbies. I'm playing baseball right now. I also like to read different kinds of novels. It's something that people never think about me---I guess it's not cool to some people to like that kind of stuff [reading] but I can relate to it so.

Harrison's *Human Support Systems* were comprised of his parents, family members, and school personnel. He mentions how the support of his parents in school has helped to develop him into the person that he is today. He affectionately shares about the relationship with his mother and the nurturing, she provides within his life. He also shares about his football coach, who has been a crucial support component within the school. He shared:

I live with my mother and father, and my little brother. My parents are very involved. If they get a call home about me not being in class, they call right back up to the school to ask why and they get all that situated out. They come to all my events. They make sure I have homework and make sure I do it too. They don't mind spending time to talk to me about different stuff, different things that I'm going to experience in school, out of school, down the road, in college and even when I become an adult. All my family members like to encourage me. When we go to family reunions, they always hear about me because my father tells them about me all the time.



Support in school, hmmm...I have teachers who support me, but my football coach stands out. He's also a teacher and he looks at my grades and makes sure I'm doing everything I'm supposed to. He helps me—he's helping me in the college selection process for the school I want to go to. He's really supportive of me even when I am playing baseball.

Closely linked to his support systems was the *Interpersonal Relationships* that Harrison had established. This was one of the prevailing interpretive codes within this theme characterized by oral stories that had been shared with him from elders within his family. He discusses the impact that these shared stories have had on him as he has grown up from childhood into a young man. In this example, he references stories of discrimination shared by his grandfather and father:

Discrimination, not getting everything that I could have just due to the fact that I am African-American. I always think about my grandfather and his experiences back in Arkansas. He said there was a lot of discrimination and racism down there because he was black. My father, he also had experiences with not getting jobs even though he was more qualified than the white person who applied as well...he didn't get the job. Luckily, I haven't experienced it like that, but I think about these things...

He also shared stories of supportive teacher experiences within his school experiences. He shared some information about his current school and then provides information about teachers who have developed positive interpersonal relationships over time. He stated:

My school, Descartes, is a very prestigious high school and it's very diverse. In the school there are many teachers that come to me and shake my hands, say 'hello...good game...or good luck' and this helps me to feel good about my school. We also have a lot of pride...wearing school colors and stuff like that.

I have had a lot of positive experiences with teachers like my 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher Ms. Schneider. She was very cool. She taught us how to make butter, paper, and lots of different stuff. We did a lot of art stuff---creative stuff in our class. Also my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher, she's probably the most supportive teacher I've met because she

always came to me personally and would talk to me. She even came over to my house before to talk to my parents. In high school, I would say Ms. Evelyn, my social studies teachers. I have gotten to know her really well and she knows me. She helps me whenever I am in need and she talks to me a lot.

The second theme of *Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems* was formed from three primary interpretive codes of (1) *Admissions and Policies*, (2) *Learning Styles and Preferences*, and (3) *Supportive Structures within School*. Harrison first discusses one of the important events of his life thus far being gaining acceptance into his high school. He continually referenced the reputation and legacy of his school and he undoubtedly understood his role in continuing the legacy while meeting the academic challenge. He said:

A milestone in my life has been getting into Descartes High School. I have always heard about the awards and the prestige it gets across the nation. It makes me proud that I could get in and I work hard to stay. When you come here, you have to step your mental game up, even if you are highly smart.

Harrison also mentions the importance for personalized learning in the classroom. He remarked that he was a visual learner but that he felt that if pedagogical practices were tailored to his learning style than he would be more successful in the classroom.

I like to learn best when I can hear and see what the teacher is talking about. I like the teacher lectures but I also want to visualize it, put it down on my paper, take notes, I really like when they show videos because I can see it. I can visualize it---I am a visual and auditory learner. If teachers make it to where I can learn like that I do much better! I really need them to consider how I learn when they present their lessons and projects.

In regards to *Supportive Structures within School*, Harrison recalls his experience with being motivated through the Arena program during his elementary school years. He discussed the

impact from the type of learning and the supplemental support that he received outside of his classroom. He said:

Nobody has really ever said anything about it [gifted] to me but I know it's good. I remember in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, when they took me and some other students to the Arena class. They made sure we learned more stuff than we were supposed to, took us on trips to do projects; we made portfolios and stuff like that. It made me feel good because I know I had a step ahead. So it's kind of a good feeling....they also taught us in the ways we could learn best too, I remember that type of support...and they motivated us to do well on the state test!

### **Observations and Commonalities**

The first data sets used for the individual cases were codes and themes that created the individual stories for the experiences of the participants. These were constructed from primarily participant autobiographies and interviews. This anomaly occurred because the majority of the patterns and themes that arose from the observation data sets was common to all of the participants. The prevailing theme for observations was *Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems* and it was formed from the interpretive codes of (1) *Classroom Experience*. The observations of the participants in their natural home or community settings did not reveal a lot of information, however school unobtrusive observations revealed some interesting aspects that were common to all of the young men. I conducted the classroom observations of the participants in a classroom that they chose for me to visit. In each of the observations, there was significant time spent by the teacher lecturing or presenting some previously prepared material for the class. The classes were arranged in pod type groupings and each of the classes began with some type of class business being handled (i.e. turning in homework, getting books, getting computers out).

The six research participants were engaged during the class time with some type of technology either a netbook or work on a desktop computer at some point during the class. Each of the participants were punctual to class and exhibited an Alone Positive demeanor in the classroom. This meaning that there was minimal interaction with other students or the teacher, however, they listened and remained on task. They also demonstrated some type of assisting behavior either helping the teacher or other students in the classroom. It was also noted that Teacher-Student interaction between the participant and the respective classroom teacher was high in all six cases.

At the conclusion of all data collection methods and the analysis portion of the study, the cross case analysis revealed that the commonalities between the participants reached across all four themes in the study constructed from 42 descriptive codes and 14 interpretive codes (see Table 1). Counting was utilized in the tallying of the codes that made up the commonalities for the study. It was important to do this because what aspects were absent in the study also became implications for the study. According to Miles & Huberman (1994) wrote:

A lot of counting goes on in the background when judgments of qualities are being made. When we identify a theme or a pattern, we're isolating something that (a) happens a number of times and (b) consistently happens in a specific way....when we say something is 'important' or 'significant' or 'recurrent', we have come to that estimate, in part, by making counts, comparisons, and weights. (p. 253)

By counting frequencies, composite correlations could be made about the phenomenon being studied.

Table 1

*Frequency Count*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Interpretive Code</b>	<b>Total Frequency Across Cases</b>
Gifted Systems	Gifted Characteristics	31
Gifted Systems	Gifted Identification Processes	6
Gifted Systems	Limited Support in Gifted Programming	18
Gifted Systems	Types of Giftedness	19
Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems	Classroom Experiences	84
Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems	Learning Styles and Preferences	29
Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems	School Culture and Environment	13
Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems	Supportive Structures within School	35
Student Success Course	Academic and Personal Success	28
Student Success Course	Aspirations for College and Career	53
Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships	Aspects of Self	128
Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships	Cultural Identity	15
Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships	Human Support Systems	87
Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships	Interpersonal Relationships	32
<b>Total</b>		<b>578</b>

*Source:* Cases studied

The following narrative of “The Black Triangle” has a dual purpose in this dissertation research project: (1) it is a semi-fictional composite story created from segments of the lived experiences of the researcher and the six participants of the study, while also

incarnating the commonalities of the participants into an experiential narrative of three young African American men and (2) it is a counter story that reveals aspects of a marginalized African American youth in a public, urban school district with the experience of giftedness. Counter storytelling stems from critical race theory, and Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define it as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 26). So, these stories can typically be utilized to expose, analyze, as well as challenge deeply-entrenched narratives and characterizations of racial privilege, sex, etc. Counter stories assist with the promotion of social justice by putting a human face to the experiences of often-marginalized groups. This promotes their sense of social, political and cultural cohesion and teaches others about their social realities. It is in this exploration and sharing that the views and experiences of someone outside of the dominant culture can be enough to create a new narrative, particularly in the stories of marginalized adolescents (Williams, 2004). According to Solórzano & Yosso (2002) researchers should understand that:

Composite stories and narratives draw on various forms of “data” to recount the racialized, sexualized, and classed experiences of people of color. Such counter-stories may offer both biographical and autobiographical analyses because the authors create composite characters and place them in social, historical, and political situations to discuss racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination. (p. 33)

As the data was gathered from the individual stories to form the composite counter story, some scholars suggest that there remains the need to maintain a balance between theoretical and cultural sensitivity (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Bernal, 1998). Theoretical sensitivity refers to the special insight and capacity of the researcher to interpret and give meaning to data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Cultural sensitivity (Bernal, 1998) refers

to the capacity of individuals as members of socio historical communities to accurately read and interpret the meaning of informants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

As the researcher, sharing this phenomenon of giftedness with the participants, I was able to maintain theoretical sensitivity with ease. There was a continuous re-reading of stories, data, and my own personal experiences to ensure that the cultural sensitivity could be maintained for all readers of the study. In this counter story, the data gathered from the common heuristical experiences of the researcher and participants, merge to create the main characters of The Black Triangle Narrative consisting of Albert Brun and his two friends Aaron and Nicholas. Their stories of struggle and success in the public school system are a culmination of their experiences as African American males of color.

**The Black Triangle: From the Perspective of the  
Invictus Mind of Albert Brun**

*“It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll, I am  
the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.” – William Ernest Henley*

My first name is Albert and it means to be “noble and bright”. My last name is Brun, meaning “Brown or dark”. I learned this information on this program on a computer program that tells you the meaning behind your name. I would like to think that I am noble and bright...but brown or dark? Brown or dark what? It must be the color of my skin. If that is the case, I hate it when people refer to me as dark. It has always been a judgment on who I am...even being brown has its weight to pull as well. I am a gifted African American male who attends a high school in an urban municipality in the Midwest...at least that’s what they told me in elementary school...”Albert, you are gifted!” I haven’t heard it much

since elementary school...but I would assume that I am still gifted. After all, I make decent grades...and I am pretty successful in school.

It is my senior year and I am sick and tired of preparing for graduation. I seem to be the only one taking this senior reflection paper seriously out of all of my friends. I know they sometimes think I am a nerd because I like to focus on my work, but it's cool...because they don't have my parents at home...LOL! I am sure they figure "AB is tripping..." yeah my friends affectionately know me as "AB". When I was in middle school, I was told Albert was a white name so I decided to go by AB. Now I have to wonder does that mean that I couldn't be noble and bright because I was brown or dark. Hmm... now that's a question for me to ponder on some other time. So this paper that I am working on is killing me! I have to write about the recollection of my schooling experiences as I prepare to exit. I probably cannot even remember back to the beginning of my schooling experiences. Ms. Motif is a phenomenal senior English teacher and she knows how to keep us thinking and engaged. She said that as we exit it is important to think about where we have been and the door we will go in next. Her motivational saying for us was the old cliché, "*you can't know where you are going until you know where you have been.*" As I closed my notebook, I am thinking "where have I been?" She wants this reflective paper to be a conversational narrative. I have to write it as I think it and let my thoughts tell the story for me as if I were having a conversation with an interviewer. She is looking for AUTHENTICITY! My first question to reflect on was how I would be seen in the school by a stranger. Ms. Motif guaranteed us that this would lead us more places than we can imagine...so here goes.



If a stranger came in the school and saw me they would see me dressed in relaxed sports or casual wear which is what I put on for school each morning...thank God...we do not have to wear uniforms anymore! That was crazy all of us being the same. I pretty much have a quiet demeanor in my classes...that is time for me to take care of business unless I am talking to friends or answering questions. My counselor last year, Ms. Shine told me that I have a high level of self-esteem which can be observed in his daily interactions...I figure why not feel good about myself? At least on the outside, I can portray that I feel good about me. I know that I am confident in who I am and I know my strengths and limitations. My freshman English teacher told me that when she saw me she could see a young man who was determined to be successful, loved being challenged and pushed to the limits.

There is something about the challenge that takes me to a place of competitiveness and I know that my best opponent is me although I love beating the brakes off of some people...in school or outside of school. By “beating the brakes”, I just mean winning and being triumphant over my opponents. My coaches have always told me that I have a unique affinity for sports activities and the spirit of athleticism. For as long as I can remember, I have been good at football, basketball, and baseball. Don’t ask me how I learned how to play all of them...but when I would watch television with my “pops” which is what I call my dad; that’s all you would see is people that look like me playing ball. Plus, all of my boys in the neighborhood played one of the balls....football, basketball, or baseball. If I wanted to be down with them...you had to get in there and play one them. I used to love to read...but now I spend most of my time at school, sports, hanging with friends, or social media. I have

always been a good reader...many of my teachers have said it but you know reading hasn't always been cool.

Growing up in some of the neighborhoods where I did, if you were reading a book and not playing ball with the boys in the "hood"...you were seen as being "soft" or weak. Sometimes you might even be called a "fag or gay"....so I just keep my reading under wraps. I remember one of my close friends, he never had an interest in playing sports and they roasted him. "Roasted" meaning that they talked about him really bad. We have a lot in common and we are still close...but I hated when they used to do that. So I made sure that I learned how to play sports and became exceptionally good at it. Overall, I think that my friends are cool and I am an all-around good person. We are called "the Black Triangle"...similar to the Bermuda Triangle we are a unique and mysterious group of African American young men who have interesting things that occur within. But most people wouldn't understand unless they ventured into the triangle and most people don't...in fact they fear us....they fear getting to know us....they fear understanding us. I think that we are an awesome group though. When people ask me to describe myself...I can usually flood them with positive character traits. I think I have a lot of good qualities to offer the world. My family has told me that on numerous occasions.

I grew up in the urban core with a middle class family who strives to make it. My family supports me in all of my endeavors especially with school. I live with my mother, father, and siblings. However, I have a host of extended family including grandparents, aunts, and uncles that all form a network of support for each another but especially for me. I have been given the expectation that I must attend college and be successful at it. My parents

support me in school by checking and verifying my grades, helping me with projects and assignments, motivating, and encouraging me to be the best. Since I got to high school it is mainly checking up on me and motivating me. I want to make them proud because both of my parents have a strong supportive role in my life, but there is a special position for my mother. I love her so much and she is the wisest, strongest, supportive and sacrificing woman that I know.

She is the one who always checked my homework, taught me life lessons, demanded that I have neat handwriting, helped me to know the benefits of a strong work ethic and to know how to budget my money, encouraged me to always do my best, taught me to never make myself feel less so that others could feel like they were more, and to have pride in all that I do. She instilled within me the drive to help others in need and never ask for anything in return, always give my faith to God and turn to him when in need. She was the one who expected me to attend college, would take me shopping and showed me how to wear the appropriate attire to different events, she listened to me vent about school, work, and life. At times when I felt like an outsider, she was the one who told me that it was okay to be different...as long as he loved myself that was all that mattered. She supports me at all of his sporting events and loves all of my friends like they were her own sons.

She taught me that there is nothing wrong with speaking good English and demanded that I never be ashamed to pick up a book and love reading. She spent much of her time affirming my potential to be successful in the world and always asked that I strive to have a life much better than the one that they had been able to give me. There are so many ways

that she has been the pillar of strength...I just have to make her proud. I don't tell her that I am not reading as much but I think she is cool with it because my grades are good.

I know that I am an African American male and it has much to do with the color of my skin. I am not sure what all that entails but from what I can see it means that I am not valued like others. It means that I am going to have to work twice as hard to get where I need to be in life. It means that because of where I go to school...most people make an assumption that I am not worthy of being successful like students who attend school in the suburbs. I can see this through my experiences with not getting asked to be in advanced classes at my school. I can tell when I am in stores and people look at me like I am targeting them for a robbery.

Being an African American male is made up of the contextual experiences around me...I can admit that I don't know much about the deep meaning of being a "brown boy" but I do feel how being a "brown boy" hurts sometimes because of the situations around me...to say the least I feel this most at school. School...the training ground of learning your place in life where dumb assumptions prevail and the numbing of our minds take place. Although there are some great teachers that inspire and create hope for us, there looms a dark and malevolent shadow guised in the mirror images of the teachers that brighten our day...yes, in schools their dark counterparts exist.

I have attended a couple of different schools during my K-12 schooling experiences, ranging from an urban school with a bad reputation for gang violence, physical altercations, low teaching expectations, low community expectations all the way to a high performing school with its own admissions policy, numerous awards, and a diverse positive student body

and positive school environment. Additionally, I have also attended a couple of schools that could easily fall between the two. I have had many diverse experiences with school environments and with teachers. I have been blessed to have some very good teachers that encouraged me, helped me to be successful, challenged me, and supported me within the school environment. These teachers came to know me as more than a name on a roster or a warm body in a chair. They knew about my parents, my struggles, my hopes, my failures, my dreams, my fears, my desires...they knew me! I was not a “brown boy” to be feared...I had a bright future ahead of me and my supportive teachers knew it...they believed it...and fought for me to achieve it. In my eyes, these were not just teachers they were my school guardian angels. I can talk to them about anything and know that it would never be utilized against me. They were able to help me to understand concepts that my parents could not.

On the contrary, school had also been a place where the antithesis of these supportive teachers lived as well. Although they were fewer in number, the sting of their whip was a horrific act that sometimes could easily be inflicted daily. Watching it frequently made me think about this excerpt from a book we read in our African American History class called *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of A Thousand Witnesses* (Weld, 1839):

Children are whipped unmercifully for the smallest offences, and that before their mothers. A large proportion of the blacks have their shoulders, backs, and arms all scarred up, and not a few of them have had their heads laid open with clubs, stones, and brick-bats, and with the butt-end of whips and canes--some have had their jaws broken, others their teeth knocked in or out; while others have had their ears cropped and the sides of their cheeks gashed out. Some of the poor creatures have lost the sight of one of their eyes by the careless blows of the whipper, or by some other violence.

But punishing of slaves as above described, is not the only mode of torture. Some tie them up in a very uneasy posture, where they must stand all night, and they will then work them hard all day--that is, work them hard all day and torment them all night.  
(p. 20)

Some might say that it is a harsh description to compare it to but as I saw it...they were the very same acts. I've seen them treat some of my friends like crap and embarrass them in front of the class or school. It wasn't right. My mother always said that if I had conflicts with a teacher to try to resolve it with them before she was involved. It is a hard thing to do when you do not feel comfortable communicating with them. If I have an issue with any of the teachers who are supportive of me, I can talk to them with ease because of their kind nature, mutual respect, and they do not make you feel afraid of the punishment for expressing yourself!

A very good example of this type of teacher that is non-supportive would be Mrs. Piranhavitch. She taught Social Studies during my freshman year at Riley High School. I was in the class with one of my best friends Aaron. Aaron has had a rough life...no father, mother on drugs, and he is trying to get money the best way he can to provide for his siblings that are much younger than us. He looks like what some people would call a "thug", and he may be a little rough, but growing up in the streets will do that to you. I have known Aaron since elementary school and we were both in the gifted and talented program. People would tell him that he was a very smart young man too...now they judge him before they even get to know him! I have "mad respect" for him...that meaning "a lot of respect" but most of the teachers don't give him the time of day.

Mrs. Piranhavitch is an older white teacher who frequently would tell us how she felt like being at Riley was a waste of time. I can recall times when she would chastise Aaron for the smallest things like not having a pencil. "Only idiots come to class with no supplies and come to class 2 minutes late no less"...she had no clue that Aaron took three buses to get to

school this morning, did not sleep last night because he was watching and protecting his two younger sisters from the possibility of being attacked by strangers in the middle of the night...all because his mother is on drugs! I wish that I could have restrained or talked to Aaron before he cursed her out...she really began to humiliate him then...even after he was suspended for five days.

In my mind, was thinking...he made a mistake...what good will five days at home do him? She was so malicious that she even referenced him while he was suspended. "Isn't class so peaceful without *THOSE* types of students that don't want to do anything with their lives...now to work on the rest of you that are three to five grade levels behind!" She was referencing the Z-Corner. The Z-Corner was the back corner of the room where she placed eight of the black boys in our class. There was no mercy for them. Aaron was a part of the Z-Corner and he was frequently the example of her cruelty.

Mrs. Piranhavitch was not the only teacher that was like this. There was a band of teachers that aligned with her and systematically broke down the Z-Corner and many of the students in our school that looked like them. I figured they would have tried to treat me like them but I can recall, Ms. Mevlon telling her and the other teachers: "That Brun student...you got to be careful with him...his parents will call the administration and raise hell!" I was usually not mistreated like the other boys in the class, but I was still mistreated...no challenge, no motivation...our day consisted of worksheets... worksheets... and more damn worksheets! I asked Ms. Mevlon, why could we not do any projects? Why do we always have to do worksheets that are too easy? Her response was "why ask for things that will make it impossible for you to pass the class? Most of ya'll kids can't read anyway."

I got offended but took the lashing and did the worksheets. But who the hell was she to say we couldn't read? I was an excellent reader and I know Aaron could read. He was an even better reader than I was. Most of the students in our classes that year lost hope, came to school just because they had to, or came only to be lashed and whipped. There was a handful of teachers that inspired hope but they could only do so much and help so many.

Additionally, most of the teachers that imposed that subtle form of slavery and punishment on the black students in the school had no clue of the fights...the horrors....the horrible things that tormented them at home. Case in point...students like Aaron, one of my closest friends, who was most of the time smarter than I was....but because of his appearance, lack of parent involvement, and the cruel whip of a band of disconcerted teachers...spent almost 90 days at home on OSS. Last time, I saw Aaron...he simply said "f\*\*\* school"! American slavery huh....who would know and who cared enough to do anything about it even if they did know?

My parents pulled me out of Riley High School after that school year. Maybe they saw how beat down I seemed after a day's work at school...it wasn't a cotton field but sometimes I felt like it was. Some of my friends like Sarah and Michael who attend suburban schools and are of the Caucasian color....don't have to deal with issues like I had to deal with. We would chat on Facebook or text about the experiences in our classrooms and they were appalled by the stories. They had challenging work....that I could do if I had classes like them. The two of them were siblings that I met in a summer program at one of the local universities. We had a blast and immediately became cool. They would scan some of their assignments and projects from their Advanced English or Freshman Physics class to



get help from me. I helped them in advanced courses at their school that counselors placed them in to help them prepare for AP and IB courses their junior and senior year. Let me say that again...I HELPED THEM SCORE GOOD GRADES in a class that I wasn't even sitting in...and that damn teacher handed me a worksheet accusing me of not being able to read or do complex work! Yeah...that's part of the reason why my parents wanted me to attend another school...or maybe it was when I told my mother about Ms. Mevlon's accusation...or possibly Mr. Bleak, one of the counselor's response when I asked him about a physics course at Riley. The conversation went like this: "Mr. Bleak, I have some friends that are taking a freshman Physics class and seems pretty interesting...what can I do to take that class here?" His response, "You are in Physical Science class so that will have to be enough; plus the Physics class is reserved for seniors...we normally don't offer it though because not enough of you do what you have to do to make it in...we spend most of our time putting you in Credit Recovery so you can graduate"! Who was "you" and why would we have to wait until senior year when my friends are taking it as freshmen?

The next year, I went to DuBois High School in our district. You had to apply to be admitted into the school and there were two main emphasis points of the school: (1) preparing students for college through college prep coursework and (2) enhancing their scholars through access to the Visual and Performing Arts. This was a mecca compared to Riley High School. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to notice that although our school does an excellent job of preparing students...there are some pockets of teachers like Mrs. Piranhavitch and Ms. Mevlon...their lash is a much more subtle punishment though. Most of my classes here at DuBois have been structured in a consistent format. We come in

and handle our class business (agenda, procedural activities, etc.) which is followed by the teacher lecturing to us. They present material that they prepared for the lesson and will answer a couple of questions if anyone asks.

Normally, there are times when they will ask if we have questions before we do our work. The students are expected to talk to each other about the assignments or work together a lot of the time. They will come and answer individual questions or provide me feedback if I ask for it. I usually like to come to class and focus on my work....this aspect has not changed for me across the school landscapes. LOL...I just like to do me in these classrooms...it's bad enough in most of my classes, the desks are grouped into pods...I really just like to do me! By "doing me"...I mean that I want to do what I have to do in order to be successful and not have too many classroom interactions with other students. I always receive good marks for attendance because I am in my classes on time. Another good thing about my classes at DuBois is that we are "technology and data-driven"...as the teachers often say. Most of us are expected to utilize technology, our teachers use their Smart Boards, and we can actually rent out laptops from our district. This part of the classroom experience is cool to me! It reminded me about this technology program we had in elementary school.

Now that I think about it, I have been involved in a couple of programs...the "GT" program and sports. Oh...GT stands for Gifted and Talented. I was in the GT program when I was in elementary school. I remember the first grade being tested for it. If someone was to ask me a definition for it...I would have to tell them being smart, special, or a group that got some better teaching. I loved my teachers in the GT program...they were caring, they knew

how I best learned, and they did projects that really challenged me to think! In my GT class there was 11 of us and only Aaron, Nicholas, and I were the African American boy students in the class. We knew we were the stuff...nobody could tell us anything. We were smart and we knew it.

There were some definite advantages to being in the program; all of our teachers saw us in a favorable or superior position because of the program. I remember my fourth grade teacher telling Nicholas and I that since we were in the GT program she was going to use us to be student teachers. We thought it was going to be easy...nope; Mrs. Illyana or Mrs. Yana as we called her made us plan, think, and work harder than the rest. Everyone knew we were part of the elite students, we had our own special badges to show that we above the rest. We could look forward to getting our brain worked every day...and I do mean every single day! I just hate that out of all the boys it was only us three. I am not sure why that is but...those were the golden years. Aaron wasn't in our fourth grade class but he always smoked us in Academic Bowl competitions. Oh yeah "smoked us" means to win by a long shot not anything with cigarettes or smoking. Most of the time, our elementary teachers had positive things to say about us like "[insert some PCT]" and our GT teacher told us those were some good characteristics or things that are connected with gifted students.

Most of us loved the fact that we were known as being smart, loved learning new ideas, we learned quickly, used a large vocabulary, asked questions and enjoyed abstract, complex thinking, we could have what is called some precocious behavior at times and most of us had good senses of humor. Nicholas, was the comedian of our trio...he had a heart of gold. We were all like brothers each with their own part of the story. Aaron was the brains

of the group...he kept us motivated and was the thinker...in many ways I would say he was fearless. He overcame a lot at home and in the “hood”...it was interesting because he handled everything with iron clad armor. Everything except the teachers like Mrs. Piranhavitch that took jabs at him...why couldn't he withstand her wrath? I remember in middle school, a boy pulled a gun on him and he did not show an ounce of fear. Were the things the teachers did more dangerous than that gun that looked him in his face?

Nicholas...or Nick-Knack as called him was the heart of our group. He would do anything for us and he was the light-hearted fellow in the group. Nothing got Nicholas down...until he was messing with Lana and she got his mind all twisted up. Everyone said that I was the only one who could reach Nicholas when he was so far gone...I hate that I left Riley only because of him and Aaron. Nicholas and I have not had the chance to talk in the last week or so, but normally is with Lana. I hear from some of our neighborhood friends that he has been skipping school to be with her. Nicholas just lost his mind once he got “hooked up” with her. “Hooked up” meaning connected with her by a friend. See, in elementary school Nicholas had some rough times being teased. People would call him black, chunkster, and even gay because he was a library helper. Some of those chumps knew better than to call him names around us but I am sure it still hurt him to have to endure it. I can recall Aaron whooping up on this kid for calling Nicholas a black faggot!

As we got older, Nicholas just kinda faded away from us. He became closed in and stopped letting a lot of people in. I wonder if he was so wrapped up in Lana because she was good looking and he was trying to prove something to himself. Even though, Nicholas lost all of the weight he had in elementary school...I think he carried the pain with him. Lana

went to elementary school with us and her sister Shyann was in GT with us. In high school at Riley, Nicholas was eventually coined a part of the Z-Corner, not because he was a thug but he just didn't care! Oh did I tell you that Z stood for zero. Yep...that's what the teachers referred to them as...the zero corner! Damn...zero- as an adjective meaning having no measurable quantity or magnitude...that's crazy. The only reason I got out was because of my parents being involved...but my boys deserved the same treatment and chances to be successful. After all we are three sides of the same triangle. We all were gifted, we had the same GT teachers, and we pushed each other.

As you read this, Ms. Motif you are probably wondering what part I played. They called me "the glue" of the group. I was the one who held us together...I saved seats for them at lunch or assemblies. In middle school, when I would go to camps, I would get applications for them and make sure they came. I double-checked their work, called them in the morning to make sure they were woke and on time, I listened to them, counseled them, I was the motivational, spiritual strength to the group. I had a humble heart and I think it served me well all of my life. We used to call ourselves, "The Black Triangle" in elementary school...where is the triangle now? It makes me think about how that GT time was our time to bond, connect, and be one even if we didn't have the same teacher. In middle school, we didn't have any GT time and in high school it has been non-existent.

We need that program...why would we have it in elementary school and then be dropped off and never picked up. How would things be different between "The Black Triangle" if we had a gifted teacher or staff member who provided additional services to help us in addition to the regular classroom instructional time? I might have gotten some Physics

instruction LOL. When we were in middle school, Ms. Yana was a GT teacher who came and checked on us. She said we were her lil' assistants...she even encouraged Aaron. He wasn't in our fourth grade classroom but she got to know him through us. If someone like her came to work with us in high school, I am certain that we would all be successful in school. She did not mind standing up to teachers for us. She would have "checked" Mrs. Piranhavitch really quick at Riley! Yeah, and by "checked" I mean get her in line or correct her behavior.

All of us could have benefited from having more guidance support from elementary school through high school. We need counselors and specialists that can help us to get the academic, career, college readiness, and personal/social help we need to be successful. I would have loved to have high school counselors like Sarah and Mike's that saw them as IB and AP worthy and helped them to plan for it....hell, not only plan but them on the path to success. I have had some good counselors here at DuBois but I am not sure if it is the right assistance that I need. I need someone to fight for me to get what I need. At Riley, they need counselors to help Aaron who is slipping through the cracks.

We needed some real help with Nick-Knack in elementary school and middle school when he was getting teased. But it would have to be someone strong to stand up to the people that were against us. I never told Nick but I can recall one of our teachers, Mr. Chaney asking me "was he gay and why was he always reading or doing homework instead of playing with the other kids at recess?" My reply to him was it just wasn't his thing. It only made matters worse when he was chosen by the principal to help out in the library because he was the only boy...but he had a gifted mind like no other! He could organize,

sequence, and logically process stuff better than most. Yeah, we would have needed a tough counselor to stand up to teachers like Mr. Chaney...and he probably wouldn't be where he is now with Lana!

I had a lot of support at home so I was good on that but I needed the academic help....I needed to break through the barrier of classroom access and teaching to get what I would need. Now granted when I was at Riley, there were some negative behaviors exhibited by students in the classroom that could be considered distracting, disrespectful, or off-task but to be honest...most of it occurred because they did not have a place where they felt cared for, supported, or nurtured. The most common experience that I shared with Aaron and Nicholas was that we all wanted to be given what we needed in the classroom. We learned in some different ways than our peers. If a teacher was giving us information on something new....we could easily write or take notes and we had to do this in order to process it, however, we were subject to be punished because it seemed like we were not paying some type of homage to them! I could easily daydream in class if the material was not connected to my experiences or adjusted for my learning. I could remember Aaron, saying "damn" we learned this four or five years ago....the teacher didn't even ask us. Just assumed we didn't know it because we were young black boys. Often, if there was something that we did not understand it was a small part of the subject but we would have to wait until the teacher got there....if we asked sooner, we were chastised. The fact of the matter was that we learned differently than others and we needed that individualization to be successful.

I had a few classes that gave me that at DuBois but the other parts of the Black Triangle did not get that privilege. They did not get a chance to be in a school that was positive for personal satisfaction, morale, or academic effectiveness. DuBois had a great reputation for being an academic institution with tons of school pride and most of the people there acted like us in our old gifted program in elementary school. Keeping your grades up and competing with one another was a mainstream aspect of my school.

Most of the counselors were concerned about your grades and particularly at DuBois because your grades could be the reason you are dismissed. I had decent grades...above a 3.5 but it has been a struggle in some of my classes. I honestly think that a lot of it has to do with the way the teaching goes on in the classroom. Not necessarily my capabilities to learn the material but so often you hear it the other way around...it's that we can't learn the stuff that instructors are trying to teach. I figure it is not the way I learn, if I can help Sarah with her Physics work and I am not even in the class or school with her.

The last time I talked with Aaron and Nick about grades....Aaron was at Feathers, a fast-food chicken restaurant. He handed me his grade report and it was mostly F's and a couple of D's. He said they gave him D's because they felt sorry for him. His reply to the comment was that he told them "Feel sorry for the dumb a\*\* worksheets they gave him and feel sorry for the all of the simple crap that they kept suspending him for". My boy is slowly fading away...I keep telling you he was the brains of the Black Triangle...it's almost like he has forgotten that part of him. I called Nick a couple of weeks ago to try to get him to apply for this program I am going to for three weeks this summer. It is for African American



students interested in engineering, science, technology, or math careers at one of the HBCU in Tennessee.

He said he didn't have the grades because he slipped below a 2.5 grade point average. When I asked how his grades got that low, he replied "them teachers don't care about nobody's work from the Z-Corner whether it's right or not". He said one of his English teachers accused him of plagiarism on his semester paper because he could not have written such a well-articulated paper. Nick went on to tell me how he had some disrespectful word exchanges with the teacher and began skipping the class to hang out in the gym with Lana. Anybody who knew Nicholas would have known he is a human dictionary...we used to joke about it being a perk from all those days he spent as the librarian assistant. We have all struggled with low grades but dang...my boys are sinking.

The Black Triangle was known for being achievers and leaders...what the hell happened? If there was something to be won...we usually got it or at least one of us represented. Every year, at our end of the quarter assembly we had some type of honors, achievements or awards that we earned for exceeding average standards in either academics, athletics, or in citizenship. We were the core of the district Academic Bowl competition and we all won medals for the spelling bees...but you know who "cleaned up" in that category. By "cleaned up", I mean won everything. Sometimes, I remind Aaron and Nick of those days and there seems to be a slight glimpse of hope...but it quickly fades. We all have an interest to go to college after high school but Aaron is worried about his little sisters and their safety, Nick is worried about where Lana will attend—if she attends somewhere, and I am focused on my goal to move forward to the next stage.

I have been accepted to six universities so far and now I am trying to narrow it down. Let's see...the big 6 for me will be either (1) Massachusetts Institute of Technology, (2) Stanford University, (3) Georgia Institute of Technology, (4) Cornell University, (5) Columbia University, and (6) Morehouse College. Yep, five out of six of my acceptances are from schools with engineering programs that rank within the Top 20 in the nation. It is a significant experience for me even though I think some help from someone like Ms. Yana as my GT teacher in high school would have helped me to get even more. Getting into a good engineering program and being prepared for it has been my primary focus lately. I have always been told that I have Visual-Spatial Learning Style. This meant that I learned best from some type of visual perspective through the creation or interpretation of images; seeing things in 2D visual or 3D visual dimension. When I went to my first pre-engineering summer camp, I came to understand that this may be the reason why I am drawn to the field of engineering....why I like to draw....why I like math and science....and the reason I learn best when the teacher is showing us something on the screen or I am taking notes.

Overall, I am preparing myself to go on to the next phase of life....BEATING THE ODDS that is put out there for me. All of us in the Black Triangle were supposed to be able to beat the odds....we were the special group. We wanted to attend college and be successful and live the All American Dream of being happy with a high level of material comfort. So how was it that we had all lost so much of our common goals all because of our different schooling experiences? Why is the Black Triangle slowly becoming the Black Line? Although I am moving forward...I understand and have accepted that I cannot unleash the full potential of who I am because I am seemingly inhibited by the color of my skin. As I

think about this authentic narrative conversation, who is to blame? I know that there are many African American boys like us...but the color of their skin says that it's impossible for them to beat the odds!

Why can't Aaron or Nicholas have the same experiences as me? I am worried about them. I am worried about how they will continue to mask who they really are? I am frustrated that we are conditioned to believe that we cannot beat the odds without being a "sell-out" or being "gay"? I have to figure out how to help my boys and still do what I need to do. So I will end it with this....my first name is Albert and it means to be "noble and bright". My last name is Brun, meaning "Brown or dark". I would like to think that I am noble and bright...but brown or dark? Brown or dark what? It must be the color of my skin. If that is the case, I hate it when people refer to me as dark. It has always been a judgment on who I am...even being brown has its weight to pull as well. I am a gifted African American male who attends a high school in an urban municipality in the Midwest...at least that's what they told me in elementary school..."Albert, you are gifted!" I am a gifted African American male who is a part of the Black Triangle or should it be the "Brown or Dark Gifted Triangle", a place where young African American boys who were once gifted and bright with dreams of success can mysteriously disappear under circumstances of oppression, marginalization, and a simple lack of belief and support. It makes me think of this other poem from my African American History class:

**We Wear the Mask by Paul Laurence Dunbar**

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,--  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,

And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask!

### **Findings**

The final data collection component to the research study was the Theoretical Focus Group Interview. This was one of the most powerful components of the data collection and analysis phase. In the data, I was able to see the culmination, similarities, and differences within the participant's experiences and also reflect on my own schooling experiences as a gifted African American male. Moustakas (1990) remarked that "the heuristic researcher's 'constant appraisal of significance' and 'checking and judging' facilitate the process of achieving a valid depiction of the experience being investigated" (p. 33) and it was in this continuous review of the data that the phenomenon began to merge into a singular creative experience for myself and the participants. An aspect that enhanced this component was the use of an external moderator for the group and my participation as the researcher sharing this phenomenon. An assumption of focus groups is that with a permissive atmosphere that fosters the support of varying opinions and thoughts, a more complete and revealing understanding of the issues can be obtained (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Patton (2002) noted that the "sampling for focus groups typically involves bringing together people

of similar backgrounds and experiences to participate in a group interview about major issues that affect them” (p. 236). By utilizing both of these conditions, permissibility and theoretical sampling, the participants were able to respond to questions about findings that surfaced in the study and construct recommendations based on their experiences that would improve and enhance gifted education programs in our schools. Findings from the focus group interviews were merged with other findings from the research data sets to answer the guiding research questions.

### **Sub Question 1**

Within the theme of Gifted Systems and Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems, I was able to analyze the individual experiences of each of the participants to answer the first sub question of *how do these gifted African American males describe their experiences with gifted programs in their schools?* Despite slight variations in their personal experiences, however, there were seven common experiences throughout the data sets: (a) their *definition of giftedness*, (b) *giftedness being internalized as an advantage*, (c) *characteristics of intellectual giftedness*, (d) *personal ascriptions to positive characteristics associated with gifted students*, (e) *expression of the lack of guidance support*, (f) *expression of the lack of gifted support at the secondary school level*, and (g) *the expressed need for supplementary gifted support structures during the entire K-12 experience*. The findings explored in this section in addition to the focus group findings to certain questions that relate to their experience as gifted students. The research participants defined “giftedness” as an association with being smart, special or part of an isolated group that in some way was superior or more favorable because of their intellect and capacity to do well. This surfaced

for all of the participants and was a springboard for their desire to excel, be competitive, as well as foster a greater need for their support during school. All of the participants mentioned this component of their gifted experiences as part of the elementary programming. A few of the participants asserted that they had forgotten they were gifted because it had not been discussed or supported during their secondary years.

Through the data collection phase, this seemingly woke up a sleeping giant within these students. They began to be more in tune with their personal selves as developed in their early schooling experiences. This began to shape the discussions particularly as we discussed and focused how they best learned in classrooms which are discussed in another section of this chapter. They all displayed characteristics of intellectual giftedness which are references to being smart, a general excitement about new ideas and challenges, the ability to learn material precipitously if provided in format conducive for visual and hands on learners, displays an affinity for vocabulary acquisition, expresses the enjoyment of asking questions and engaging in complex thinking with frequent displays of precocious behavior and a sense of humor. The participants saw themselves as part of a program instead of being the finite construct that made gifted programs possible.

When participants were asked about the best part of being in gifted programs in their schooling experiences, there was an agreement between the participants that the following were favorable aspects of gifted education programs as they had experienced them: (a) *hands-on activities*, (b) *pull-out resource instruction in addition to classroom instruction*, (c) *challenging lessons and lessons on Greek mythology*, (d) *being able to chart their progress and know that they were engaged in more activities than their peers*, and (e) *the affirmation*

*of being a gifted students.* A caveat to these findings is that they all occurred in the elementary school gifted programming. Students were able to concretely agree on these areas and some of the participant responses prompted others memories of these experiences in the gifted classroom as well. The participants were drawn to the differentiated learning style instruction they were provided by gifted instructors. The hands-on activities and opportunities to build and problem solve was a prevailing aspect. There was also an expressed additive to the experience by having a gifted resource instructor to provide them supplemental instruction where they were provided challenging lessons, able to maintain their own progress and set measurable goals, and have opportunities to be engaged in cooperative learning activities with three to four other gifted students.

When asked about challenging lessons or instructional lessons that they remembered all of the participants agreed on lessons about Greek Mythology. It was at this point in the research that I reflected on my own experience as a gifted student and how I was drawn to the genre of Greek Mythology as well. I could vividly remember checking out books from the library on Greek myths and studying about the gods and their domains of power. This was a common strand of instructional gratification among all of us. A possible conclusion could be the fact that in mythology there is the foundation of allusion and character genesis in literature which could relate to the personal expressions of our own schooling experiences and the seemingly dual development of the African American male as a socially constructed human and a gifted one as well which is contradictory to mainstream society.

The aspect of affirmation was also mentioned by participants as a part of their gifted experience. Affirmation is psychosocial element that became critical in their experiences

through the support and motivation instilled within them during their schooling experiences. As one participant noted in his interview, “people just don’t understand the pressures we experience in school”. This element of support is a critical aspect of the students being able to cope with the issues of complex personality and identity development, masking, and the balancing of personal and academic acceptance. Within the data sets, a common finding among all of the participants was high levels of positive self-attributes, confidence, and self-esteem. They were proud to be gifted students in as much as they knew about the phenomenon. They were asked about what elements of their schooling experiences has helped them to develop such high levels of self-valuation. The responses were: (a) *being a self-motivator*, (b) *determined to do their best because of high expectations*, (c) *maintaining a positive outlook on life despite challenges*, (d) *faith and belief in a higher power*, and (e) *the desire to obtain high levels of education and success which resulted in a no-quitting attitude*.

The participants realized through their work within the gifted programs that they had to be self-motivators in their academic and personal lives. This was linked to the personal goal-setting and progress charts that they maintained during their experiences in gifted programs. This was an additional area that was an intimate connection with my own experiences as a gifted student. I was able to reflect on my own personal goal-setting skills and strategies that helped me from elementary school through the world of work. Personal and academic goal setting is a powerful tool when leveraged with the challenges and expectations often associated with African American male success in school. It builds personal intrinsic motivation through the satisfaction and implications of the goal



achievement and the charts remain to be the evidence that can justify and affirm the ability to accomplish and surpass challenging tasks. All of these are responsible for constructing and increasing the self-confidence of an individual. Goal setting was a prevailing aspect of their experiences and reasoning for the high levels of self-valuation; there has been much research to support goal-setting as a motivational tool to increase confidence, success, and personal values (Latham & Locke, 1991; Locke, 1996) and this was evident in the findings from the study.

These elements in addition to high expectations being clearly communicated to them helped them to develop positive coping outlooks on their lives despite personal challenges they may have endured at school or home. For many of the participants that had a religious foundation these actions correlated to messages conveyed at institutions of faith development regarding the faith and belief in a higher power to support them in times of trouble or difficulty. All participants noted that they developed at an early stage the desire to obtain higher levels of education and success in their personal lives. A caveat to include with this component of the findings is that again these actions primarily occurred in the elementary school setting or gifted program. There were some instances when it was fostered in the participant's school secondary experiences as a result of positive interactions with certain staff members who indirectly provided this type of support.

These principles relate to Bandura's (1991) Social Cognitive Theory of Self-Regulation. Within his theory, motivation is continuous and promoted through self-influence. There are three principles that are present to increase personal self-regulation and this includes (a) self-monitoring of one's behavior, its determinants, and its effects; (b)

judgment of one's behavior in relation to personal standards and environmental circumstances; and (c) affective self-reaction. Self-regulation is an umbrella concept to the building of motivation, goal-setting, and the achievement of an individual by their merit and choices and it comprises a central role in the exercise of personal agency by its impact on thought, affect, motivation, and action.

A final reflection during the focus group was the participant's beliefs about the comparative experience with gifted students that were of students in private school institutions or students of other races/ethnicities that may attend public school institutions. The responses that surfaced were: (a) *better funding sources and resources* for those students; (b) *more opportunities and experiences* for them to have access to programs and experiential vantages that may be springboards for academic success or college acceptance; and (c) *teachers tend to instruct with a biased lens for students of color* regardless of the setting.

The participants were not able to identify specific elements that were comparative in nature, however, they were able to articulate and agree upon the aspect that students in private institutions or school districts that were in highly affluent suburban areas, that the funding and resources for gifted student programming may have been more. There were many of the students who were able to communicate the differences with access to programs and specific course offerings that students of color were not privy to (i.e. higher level math and science courses). Participants mentioned the lack of guidance counseling and the curriculum/instruction leadership to encourage them to take higher levels of curriculum offerings particularly in the areas of math and science. Some students reported that they had

not been given the opportunity to enroll in higher level math courses or it was not an offering at their school which limited them in being able to compete with counterparts in suburban school districts. All of the participants expressed the desire to attend college, however their limited interaction with educators to provide academic, career, college readiness, and personal/social growth during their entire K-12 experience was a deficit experienced by the research group. As I reflected on my personal experiences, I was fortunate to have had a guidance counselor who provided those structures for me but having been a guidance counselor in my career path; I had to acknowledge their expression of this aspect as a part of their experiences.

Additional deficits experienced by the participants were the lack of gifted programming at the secondary level. Many of their experiences were rooted in the elementary experience; however, all of them felt that they would have been more successful if program structures were in place through the K-12 schooling experience. This area is associated with the expressed desire to have supplement support either a gifted teacher or staff member who could provide additional services of an academic or psychosocial nature to them in addition to their regular classroom instructional time. After awakening their understanding, remembrance, and experiences of being gifted, they all craved the support and attention for their experiences, accomplishments, and struggles in the secondary school. I was asked by the participants would I continue to meet with them and listen to their struggles and accomplishments after the study was over. This was the need for the supplemental support manifest in an indirect manner within the research study.

A final finding within this area was the common feeling that regardless of the setting, teachers tend to instruct students of color different than they do other students. In this aspect, the lack of personalized instruction was mentioned, being inundated with low level worksheets, and low expectations was mentioned. These aspects of curriculum, instruction, teachers, and peers are discussed in the next section in more detail.

### **Sub Question 2**

The themes of Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems and Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships captured how the participants described their experiences with curriculum, teachers, and peers. In examining the sub question *how do gifted African American males describe their experiences with curriculum, teachers, and other students inside and outside of the classroom*, the information from the data analysis has been encapsulated into five findings: (a) *curriculum experiences*, (b) *instructional experiences*, (c) *teacher and staff experiences*, (d) *peer experiences*, and (e) *the impact of school culture on their experience*.

In regards to the curriculum as experienced by the participants, all of them expressed the need to have more rigorous and challenging work in their classrooms. They had a broad understanding that they were placed in classrooms based on the belief about their performance rather than their abilities to actually be engaged within the work. They described many instances where the instructors for the classroom, gave them pages to read in a book without any purpose or the use of worksheets as a tool to keep them occupied was employed. Feelings of devaluation, low expectations, and being kept from more challenging courses were common expressions among the participants.

Of course, there were some teachers that engaged the students from a curricular standpoint and pushed them to more challenging work, however, a vast majority of the curriculum experiences were descriptions of a course with low expectations and curriculum knowledge. The majority of the teachers in their classrooms provided rules, graded assignments, regulated classroom behaviors, and gave them directions to complete assignments. In the discussion of these classroom curriculum experiences within the data sets, the search for the instructional competency of the instructor surfaced. All of the participants referenced that they looked for teachers who knew their content, could answer their questions, keep them engaged, and develop higher level tasks within the classroom. I reflected on my own experience and could relate to the search for the classes that were challenging to me and the instructors knew their content as well as pedagogical techniques. Deplorably, what the students described was Haberman's (1991) Pedagogy of Poverty in which he stated that the following:

...teaching acts that constitute the core functions of urban teaching are: giving information, asking questions, giving directions, making assignments, monitoring seatwork, reviewing assignments, giving tests, reviewing tests, assigning homework, reviewing homework, settling disputes, punishing noncompliance, marking papers, and giving grades. (p. 291)

The students were rudimentary functions in the classroom and for some of the participants the excuse for this curriculum experience was the need for classroom management purposes. Even for the participants that attended high-performing schools; this type of curriculum experience was conventional for many classrooms. The participants, who would more than likely be classified as underachievers, had full comprehension of the lack of educational experience that was occurring in their classrooms, although their academic performance

would show that they did not need a higher level course. In this aspect, it may have been the low expectations and lack of challenge that propelled these African American male students into the tailspin of underachievement.

Regarding the instructional experiences among the participants, the visual-spatial learning style was a prevailing trait that was experienced by all of them. They expressed that they understood that their best learning occurred from a visual perspective through the creation or interpretation of images, seeing things in two-dimensional formats or being able to have some hands-on experiences with three-dimensional objects. They associated this type of learning with the aspect of personalized learning, which was the tailoring of pedagogy, curriculum and learning environments for individual learners including the adjusting of pace of instruction for the learners, adjusting the approaches of instruction, and connecting the content to the relevant aspects of their interests and experiences. The intertwining of individualization and differentiation of instruction merged to become the ideal of personalized learning. The participants understood that they tended to learn more quickly than peers and an expressed frustration surfaced with the notion of being slowed down. I could relate to the experience with the participants. In my career, I am cognizant of my needs and I typically lose attention if those needs are not met. The student participants exhibited similar traits in their classrooms and were labeled or deemed unable to perform or aloof. Some comments provided about the student informally was they were easily distracted or they do not pay attention in class—daydreams! When in fact, their mental processes are being decelerated within the classroom and there are few activities if any that keep their

attention. The ability of the student to multitask during classroom activities was a prevailing notion that was common to the group as well.

However, the contrast of personalized learning was the lack of personalized learning experienced by the participants in classroom. This was the opposite of what the students needed and was exhibited in many of their classrooms. In this facet, the pedagogy of poverty could be seen as descriptions of classrooms where the student work is standardized, lack of interactions between the teacher and student, teacher directed lecture as the prevailing instructional format, low academic and behavior expectations, and limited access to higher level tasks of learning. Interestingly enough, the participants linked the lack of personalized learning in their classrooms to the incompetency of the teacher in being able to provide instructional experiences to meet their needs as gifted learners. The instructional delivery in these classrooms lacked relevance, rigor, and application of knowledge activities. In general, the participants felt these classrooms dominated their secondary experience especially due to the quality of teachers and their abilities to manage the classroom as well as build positive relationships with students.

The research indicated that the participants tended to do well when they had supportive experiences with teachers or staff members who established a positive rapport with them, challenged, and maintained high expectations for their learning. They felt an affinity towards those staff members that could manage their classrooms as well as impart high levels of content knowledge. It was in this aspect that valuation for competency of their teachers surfaced again. The young men felt that it was important for them not only as students, but as African American students to have these human support systems in place

within the school system. Memories of positive teachers that had impacted their lives were prevailing. In most cases, the amount of high expectations held by teachers in the primary grades became a self-fulfilling prophecy for the students which in this case would be aligned with Jussim and Harber's (2005) findings that sometimes among social stigmatized groups, the self-fulfilling prophecy occurs in a selective yet, powerful manner.

Likewise, non-supportive teacher experiences were just as powerful in the experiences of the students. Participants were guarded in their maintaining of relationships with those who they held in high regard. As they began to think about experiences that were less positive during their schooling, feelings of anger and frustration emerged. Participant's memories or current experiences sometimes lead to their lack of participation, effort, and willingness to be successful in a classroom at the expense of having to endure the teacher and their actions. Issues of labeling and misguided biases was an issue for the students particularly, those who the teacher had no awareness of their determination as a gifted student. Feelings of judgmental biases and images of being seen as either a thug or an African American male who didn't care about their education was a prevailing issue among most of the participants. This was evidence that the actions and expectations of educators can be harmful to student achievement and their success in school (Kunjufu, 1982; Noguero, 2008; Thompson, 2008) because the students carry these experiences with them. However, the participants claimed to have had more positive experiences than negative and a strong indication of their success and persistence was promoted through school programs and personnel that helped to support their success. Ultimately, the data revealed the importance and strong impact of personal relationships on the student's experiences with being gifted.



In regards to peer experiences during their schooling experiences, there were instances where the relationships that were established between the student and peers was an important in their lives, however, no evidence was found to show that this was a common experience among all of the participants. A factor that did have an impact on the student's experience was that of the school culture, albeit good or bad. The participants were able to unambiguously identify aspects of the school culture that had promoted their success, acceptance, and eagerness to embrace being a gifted African American male. They referenced their elementary experiences being in schools where the culture and climate of the building was conducive to the notion of the African American male as an achiever.

There were frequent references to honors, achievements, or awards that were earned by the participants for exceeding average standards in academics, athletics, or work ethic. Descriptions of teachers that were excited about teaching and recognition for efforts and academic achievement was a common, prevailing theme in these schools. High expectations was characterized in the work that was given in classrooms, activities were seen as fun and engaging, and most importantly a feeling of "closeness" was exhibited by the classroom and gifted personnel. Overall it has been shown those teachers' instructional practices and interpersonal relationships with students are highlighted as potentially powerful factors influencing student motivation and performance (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998) within the school environment.

Additionally, the students in their secondary experiences referenced the impact of positive school characteristics on their experiences as a student, not as much, a gifted student. They discussed aspects of the school that promoted personal satisfaction, positive morale,

school spirit, and effectiveness in regards to student learning, fulfillment, and well-being. They acknowledged that classrooms and networks of non-supportive teachers were present within the school system; however, they connected these aspects to being microcosms of the world at large. The result of these classrooms was un-engagement, withdrawal from activities, or lack of participation, which resulted in low grades or classification as an underachiever, yet, they viewed their school environments as being overall positive in nature or at least moving in that direction. In regards to their experiences with giftedness, all of the young men acknowledged that there were no programs or staff members that advanced their giftedness and talents at the secondary level.

### **Sub Question 3**

The third sub question to be answered was *what do the experiences of gifted African American males suggest about practices that public school educators can use to promote the success and development of African American males in general?* In examining the issues that these young men experienced in their stories, a vast amount of work can be implemented by educators in fostering and supporting positive images and the healthy development of their self-concept. The findings have been summarized into three areas: (a) *cultural identity*, (b) *aspects of self* and (c) *familial support systems*. The participants were asked about their cultural identity during the interview portion of the data collection and among all six participants they were able to identify with being an African American and associations with being seen as a Black American or labeled/judged by the color of their skin. As adolescents, a few of the participants had some knowledge about the cultural experiences of African Americans from social studies classes that they had seen or movies observed about slavery.

However, most of them did not see many connections between that experience and schooling, other than the aspect that at times they had witnessed maltreatment of either peers or themselves by teachers due to the color of their skin at some point in their schooling experience. All of them agreed that their teachers at the secondary level did not observe them as being gifted African American males, rather they were seen as “likable”, “precocious”, or “hyperactive” students. The students were sometimes labeled as being extremely hyperactive or unenthused. During one of the observations, a teacher remarked to me that she thought the participant needed to be in special education because he could not sit still and he would get up out of his seat and begin “tinkering” with items. As the researcher, I thought about the diminutive amount of information that is provided to educators on gifted African American male students and how this further perpetuates the problem of our youth being subjected to discrimination and not receiving the resources that they need to be successful in our schools. According to Kunjufu (2005):

Many African American males are erroneously placed in special education, when in reality they possess the following gifted and talented characteristics: (1) keen power of observation, (2) sense of the significant, (3) willingness to examine the unusual, (4) questioning attitude, (5) intellectual curiosity, (6) inquisitive minds, (7) creativeness and inventiveness, (8) high energy levels, (9) need for freedom of movement and action, (10) versatility, (11) diversity of interests and abilities, (12) varied hobbies. (pp. 4-5)

All of the participants in the study agreed with the notion that in life there are more obstacles that they will endure due to the fact that they are African American males. Some of these beliefs espoused from life observances, oral stories from family members, media, or literature of some type.

As the data was analyzed from the study, there were three areas that arose within the aspect of self. The first aspect of self was an affinity for sports or a display of athletic qualities. These were references to an attraction or engagement with one or more sports activities or being athletic. All of the participants were involved with at least one sport or more and were extremely competitive in their achievements in this area. They seemingly felt that their participation in these activities helped to balance them out as personal beings not overly observed as academic beings but to others more of a sports being. A conclusion for this is that due to the media, neighborhood pressures, and social acceptability for sports, these gifted young men became adaptable in their areas of athletic prowess as a form of masking for the lack of acknowledgment during the middle and secondary school years.

The second aspect of self that was observed was high levels of self-esteem and self-conceptualization. This area came out of references to high areas of self-valuation encompassing the beliefs and emotions such as triumph, despair, pride, and shame. The participants described themselves with generally positive characteristics and had positive images of their current self; confidence either bold or subtle was a common trait among the young men. Implications of self-concept and teacher expectations were intertwined components in the experiences of these gifted African American students. High levels of self-concept seemed to positively affect the gifted African American male student's educational experiences. It was how the student's perceptions were shaped and the negotiation of each of the participant's experiences led to a clear path of who they were currently. Even those that experienced ridicule and/or harassment, have compensated and

been shielded by the high levels of their self-conceptualization. Marsh and Shavelson (1985) had an applicable definition of self-concept being:

Broadly defined, is a person's perception of him or herself. These perceptions are formed through experience with and interpretations of one's environment. They are influenced especially by the evaluations of significant others, reinforcements, and attributions of one's own behavior. (p. 107)

The students were self-regulated by their own choices, motivation, and determinations of their own personal and academic goals.

An additional aspect of self, discovered in the study was the affinity for challenges. The students liked the aspect of being challenged or pushed toward accomplishing difficult tasks. In most of the cases, the participant's love for challenges was met by victory in the athletic realm; however, all of them mentioned academic accomplishments and conquests as a motivational factor. In addition to being creative and intellectual, the thrill of the challenge was a lure that they willingly participated in. This was another aspect of their giftedness, through which I could relate to their experiences. None of the participants liked to be told that they could not do things and once they set their mind to an issue or task it was accomplished. Teachers that established favorable relationships with the students frequently mentioned the high levels of determination exhibited by the student and the competitive will to succeed.

The final area of findings could be encapsulated into the topic of familial support systems. This area was divided into (1) parental support and (2) other family support. Interestingly enough all of the participants had strong relationships and bonds with their parents. Not all of the participants, had fathers in the home but there was some mention of a

father figure type in their lives. There was an overwhelmingly large amount references to the relationship with their mothers. This was either the woman who gave birth to them or a female who has taken that role and has the responsibility of physical and emotional care of the student. As I reflected on my own personal experiences, I began to contemplate the strong relationship that I have always had with my grandmother who served as the mother figure in my life. I wanted to know more about the relationships and the significance of the maternal-son relationships in this gifted experience and posed the question to the participants during the focus group interview. The responses to why their mother had been such a powerful influence in their experience as a gifted student was as follows: (a) mother was seen as inspirational, (b) lived experiences are motivating, (c) first supporter and teacher, (d) nonjudgmental, (e) encourages me to do better, (f) witnessed how hard she works for me, (g) constant supporter regardless of choices, (h) displays a mother's love that is unconditional, and (i) has always been the person to promote school and success in it. Taylor & Roberts' (1995) study revealed that kinship social support to mothers/female guardians was positively associated with the psychological well-being of the adolescent. Maternal parenting processes such as acceptance, firm control and monitoring of behavior and autonomy granting was shown to be positively related to adolescent well-being.

Additionally, the participants had been impacted by the amount of parental support they had been provided during their schooling either through checking on grades and classes, helping with assignments, motivating, and encouraging them. Interestingly, the views, perceptions, and the need for approval were weighted more from the parental standpoint than peers, school, or neighborhood pressures. Maton, Hrabowski III, & Greif (1998) found that

the combined importance of parental-determined academic engagement, discipline, nurturance, and community connectedness in the lives of high achieving African American males appeared to counteract potentially negative contextual influences of neighborhood, peers, schools, and society. In the role of the father, most of the participants looked to these individuals as moral compasses in regards to making the right decisions, having a strong work ethic, providing discipline and structure. The young men also mentioned how other familial relationships had impacted them in their schooling or personal development through support, encouragement, and affirmation of abilities. These roles were often held by siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Within these findings, it was simple to see the impact of a family support structure in the lives of these gifted African American males and more importantly the need for consistent forms of socio-emotional support during their schooling experiences and at home.

### **The Research Question**

The central research question of this critical, heuristic case study is *what does the experiences of gifted African American males in public school systems suggest about strategies needed to promote their success, recruitment and retention in Gifted and Talented programs?* The experiences of the gifted African American males that were participants of the case study research informed the development of the Jigsaw Framework for African American Males. Through their voices and experiences, strategies were identified and encapsulated that were areas of support needed in order to be successful in the school environment. The caveat to the framework was the issues of recruitment and retention for gifted students.

As I examined the issue of recruitment for these African American male students, there is definitely a need for less subjective method for students to be identified by educators for potential gifted screening. The participants in the study all noted that they were tested at some point for the gifted program during their elementary school experience due to the reference provided by a teacher or staff member. This referral was more than likely provided due to academic abilities displayed within the classroom. If we are going to genuinely examine issues of recruitment for African American males into gifted programs, it is crucial to examine the defining factors of giftedness in our school districts. I chose to use the definition of “*giftedness*” from the Javits Act of 1988 used by the National Association of Gifted Children which defines it as:

Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (p. 1)

Currently, I would speculate that assessment measures utilized to screen for giftedness in most school districts do not give deep insight or any insight into the creative, artistic, or leadership capacity. Utilizing wider measures to screen for giftedness coupled with the training and professional development of teachers and staff members on the indicators of a possible gifted student will assist with recruitment. However, much work will need to be done to help students to be successful early in their schooling experiences and have trained professionals to observe, recommend, and provide professional training for school members. The participants at the inception of the study only saw giftedness as being “smart” or a “program for smart people” rather than a sentient part of who they are and even more



importantly, a lifelong attribute. This was a direct implication that as students are identified as gifted there is more work to be done to help them understand the intricacies of this phenomenon on all aspects of their life.

In looking at retention of students in gifted programming, I believe that it first begins with school districts understanding and recognizing the potential of gifted students in their schools. Most of the students that I communicated with for possible participation in the study did not know that they were still classified as gifted because of the lack of programming during middle and high school. I would suggest that (1) districts need to rethink their implementation of gifted programming and expand them into K-12 pipelines of support, (2) the inclusion of elements of the Jigsaw Framework can be used to support not only gifted African American male students but non-gifted students as well in order to increase academic, personal, and motivational supports, and (3) developing cadres for parents and students that are identified as gifted to provide both stakeholder groups with information about development programs and resources to assist them with academic, personal, and college/career information. One of the questions, I was able to ask participants during the Focus Group Interview were: *If the perfect gifted program could be developed for African American males what would we need to include in that program?*

The participant responses were: (1) high quality staff members who are passionate about teaching and not afraid of African American males, (2) a safe learning environment, (3) activities and classes that engage students with learning, (4) teachers that care and know how to teach their subject, (5) quality principals and support staff to assist them, (6) experiences and field opportunities for students, (7) hands-on activities, (8) lessons designed

based on how they learn best, (9) extracurricular activities, (10) quality sports programs, (11) current technology that can be used in the classroom, (12) books that are culturally relevant, and (13) programs for the gifted students to be able to support each other in the school setting.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this critical, heuristic case study is to explore the phenomenon of giftedness as experienced by African-American males through the exploration and analysis of their schooling experiences. As a result of the study it is my hope as the researcher that (a) raise the participant's level of awareness about being a gifted African American male as a byproduct from the interactions with the researcher and other participants, (b) help the world to hear the voices of these gifted African American males in an effort to provide support to public school systems in nurturing their success and retention in gifted programs as their stories are often unheard during their matriculation as students in K-12 public school, and (c) assist national programming efforts, school district leadership, educators, and policy makers by providing more successful approaches that can assist with the recruitment and retention of more African American male students in Gifted and Talented Programs.

In the synthesis of the data sources and code books, the overarching themes for the data sets were *symbiotic psychosocial relationships*, *phalanxial educational ecosystems*, *gifted systems*, and *the student success course*. The codes and data within these themes spoke to the powerful influence that arose from various levels of support both inside and outside of the traditional school program. One of the contradictory findings that I discovered was that the literature spoke to identity issues as it pertains to racial identity for many African

American students. This did not appear to be an issue for the participants in this study. My belief is that the main proponent undergirding this was that the participant's school setting was predominantly an African American population of students which may have inhibited the racial identity issues that were prevalent in the research literature.

I found that the gifted participants easily internalized the deficit-thinking orientations presented to them in classrooms and valued the importance of positive relationships in their schooling experiences. Often, they began to sabotage their own achievement as a result of withdrawal, disconnection, or anger. However, they had aspirations for collegiate and professional careers and were moreover looked at as well-rounded students. Some of the gifted African American students assumed the role of the "class clown" or "athlete" to conceal their academic abilities and giftedness.

While many of the students in the research study were very strong in their self-concept and views of themselves as gifted students, there was a discussion held about peers who were also gifted in their elementary programs, however overtime, they succumbed to negative pressures to avoid achievement, particularly from their peers; and they associate or equate academic achievement with the stereotypical notion of "acting white." I believe this to be the case when examining students that are gifted specifically in schools or districts where the majority of the student population is African American students. Many of the members of the schools and leadership of the research participants in this study had were oblivious to the identification of the students as being gifted and talented. While the participants in the study were able to provide a rich and thick description of their experiences with being gifted, an implication that resulted from the discussion was the wider variation of those African

American males in the school whom are either unidentified or continue to mask or refute their giftedness.

Furthermore, the data analysis revealed that gifted African American students had better memories and experiences during their elementary school years, where more structured support systems and programs were present to support them as gifted students. For other students, an issue for the underrepresentation of African American males in gifted programs may be that they underachieve deliberately, refuse to be assessed for gifted education services, and refuse placement if eligible. This refusal of services and placement could be the amount of pressure from the high expectations, an inclination to “downshift” in abilities/performance, or an inherent connection to the societal perceptions associated with African American males. There was a trend of psychosocial issues that were prevalent in the data sources which I included under factors that influence identity. I believe that this study further demonstrates the need for understanding the gifted phenomenon specifically experienced by African American males. Educators and policy makers can make decisions based on the implications of these studies to facilitate the recruitment and retention of more African American male students in Gifted and Talented Programs.

A major issue in the underrepresentation of African American males in gifted education is the method of identification and retention. It may be that teachers systematically under refer this population for gifted education services. Ford (1995) discovered that many African American students with high achievement scores (e.g. 95<sup>th</sup> to 99<sup>th</sup> percentile) were underrepresented in gifted education because teachers did not refer them for screening. Moreover, when teacher referral is the first (or only) recruitment step, gifted students of color

are likely to be underrepresented. Based on the interviews and the data for this study, I have found that “giftedness” is often solely attached to intelligence aided by the notion that the phenomenon of “giftedness” is experienced differently by African American male students. A conclusion made from this study is that there is a lack of understanding about “giftedness” among the participants and as an adult African American male who is gifted, I am able to understand that in K-12 school settings, these students identify being gifted with a connection to a program rather than being a sentient part of the students’ life and in this aspect demonstrates that more work needs to be done in order to help African American young men who have been identified as gifted in public schools to understand this phenomenon.

In Chapter 5, I examine the implications of the study as well as recommendations for programming and future research. Within those recommendations, I discuss methods for educators to address the issues that have been raised through the research in an attempt to aid practitioners in further understanding the phenomenon of giftedness as it is experienced by African American males in public schools.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **My Journey as the Heuristic Researcher**

As I bring the research study to a close and reflect on the journey as a heuristic researcher, I begin those thoughts with the initial purpose of the research study. The purpose for this critical, heuristic case study was to explore the phenomenon of giftedness as it is experienced by African American males in K-12 public schools through the exploration and analysis of their schooling experiences while also raising their level of awareness about what it means to be a gifted African American male as a result of interactions with the researcher and other participants.

A pragmatic goal of this study has been to provide educators with more acute knowledge about this phenomenon to assist national systems of education in supporting the growth and development of African American males while also increasing their recruitment and retention into gifted programs. The journey was near and close to my heart because it helped me to analyze not only the experiences of the participants but also to more closely understand aspects of my own learning, preferences, needs, and even behaviors that I exhibit in my adult life. The phenomenon of giftedness was an aspect that I never considered as I moved through educational systems, however, it is a maze of intricate paths and turns that is a sentient component of our lived experiences, rather acknowledged by us or not. Moustakas (1990) eloquently noted that:

Once one enters into the quest for knowledge and understanding, once one begins the passionate search for the illumination of a puzzlement, the intensity, wonder, intrigue, and engagement carry one along through ever growing levels of meaning and

excitement. A unique, temporal rhythm has awakened in one's absorption and sustaining gaze, a rhythm that must take its own course and will not be satisfied until a natural closing occurs and a sense of wonder has fulfilled its intent and purpose. (p. 55)

### **The Winding Path of Exploration**

During the course of the journey there were many twists and turns that I felt were important to my experience as the researcher and also for those would look on to the journey of the gifted African American male as a reader of this research study. Some of the areas that I want to discuss are (1) *the lack of African American males in gifted programming from a local standpoint*, (2) *the lack of responses or interest in exploring this issue from a district standpoint*, (3) *fear or impediments for not wanting to participate in the research*, (4) *the lack of knowledge that teachers hold about gifted students*, (5) *the participant's attachment to visitations and processes of the study*, (6) *the need for gifted programs and support through the K-12 spectrum*, (7) *the need for more guidance components designed specifically for the gifted students in our schools* and (8) *unidentified gifted African American males*.

During the recruitment portion of the study there was an unearthing realization of the crisis for the African American male as I struggled to find students that met the requirement of having been identified as a gifted student. Additionally, as I began soliciting the study to districts for their support, I was met with no responses to any interest in participating in the study or some districts blatantly expressed that there was no African American male students in their entire school district that had been identified as a gifted student. At this point, I realized that the need for the study was no longer an option but it was an imperative to assist an entire populace of students that are matriculating through our educational systems.

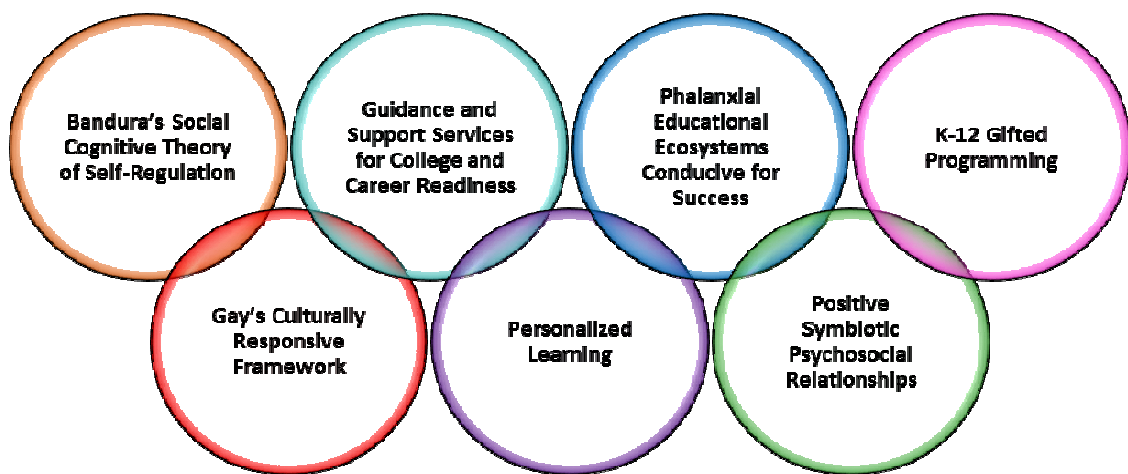
Subsequently, after finding students that met the requirements and soliciting their interest, I had some students that were reluctant to participate in the study---I suspect that some of the anxiety with these issues may have been attached to a fear of what more understanding would mean for them in their responsibilities and lived experiences.

As I observed my participants, informal discussions with teachers revealed that there was a prevailing lack of knowledge around giftedness in students as well as best ways to help them to learn and be successful in the classroom. Although some of the participants had to grapple with biased opinions about their behavior, I established authentic relationships with them as a gifted African American male adult and came to understand their behaviors and outlooks on life as well as their schooling experiences. Because of this, some of the participants expressed that they looked forward to having discussions about being gifted and inquired if I would continue to check on them in the future. This aspect alone was manifest of the importance of relationships and support systems that are needed for these students to be even more successful in school systems. As all of the participants foundations and benefits from the gifted programs were in elementary school settings it is a high need for school districts to begin looking at these programs across the K-12 grade spectrum with needed components for college counseling and guidance support.

The final observance was the overwhelming amount of possibly unidentified African American males who could be beneficiaries of the support provided by a well-planned and executed gifted program. During the focus group interview, the participants had an opportunity to discuss the issues or obstacles that they speculated may keep other African



American male peers from being identified as gifted and some of the findings were: (1) attitude problems, (2) trying to maintain a “cool” reputation, (3) fear of being challenged, (4) having a “hood” mentality being tough and cool, (5) fear of judgment from peers, (6) not pushed towards doing well in school or having college aspirations, (7) teachers making judgments about the African American male students---not understanding them, (8) being invested in materialistic items, and (9) not enough African American males liking to read.



**Figure 2: Jigsaw Framework of Support for African American Males**

## **Jigsaw Framework of Support for African American Males**

After conducting the study and reflecting on the themes and data gathered through the story around the participant's *Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships, Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems, Experiences with Gifted Systems*, and their *Student Success Course* it helped me to further conceptualize the needs and experiences of gifted African American males including the aspects of my own schooling experience that paralleled with these young men.

This compelled me to explore this notion that I have coined "*Jigsaw Giftedness*". Jigsaw Giftedness is defined as the phenomenon experienced by gifted African American males when there is a fragmented sense of self-concept, prevailing issues of racial identity development, social stigmatization, and a lack of environmental support which impedes on the individual student's experience of their "giftedness". An example of this could be observed with an African American male teenager who has a low level of self-concept, is not far in his identity development, suffers from friends and family that tell him school is not acceptable, and have teachers who have labeled him as a failure based on personal perceptions.

The framework is designed as a way to counteract and mend these components in an effort to help the students to be more successful in their schooling experiences and in life. Additionally, it is a framework that can assist all African American males---gifted, unidentified gifted, or non-gifted. Therefore, it provides a resolve to the third sub-research question and the overarching research question: *What do the experiences of gifted African American males suggest about practices that public school educators can use to promote the success and development of African American males in general?* There are eight components

that compose the elements of the framework: (1) K-12 gifted programming, (2) Positive Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships, (3) Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems, (4) Challenging and Experiential Curriculum, (5) Personalized Learning, (6) Social Cognitive Theory of Self-Regulation, (7) Gay's Culturally Responsive Framework, (8) Guidance and Support for College and Career Readiness.

### **K-12 Gifted Programming**

The first element is the need for a continuum of gifted programming that encapsulates the K-12 curriculum. This is the only element that may not be applicable to identified gifted students. In this aspect, the ancillary support structures that existed for the students in their elementary experiences were a positive and lasting impact. The students would benefit from having similar services and support during the middle school and high school years as well. As the staff is identified for working with these gifted students it is imperative that they are (a) knowledgeable about content, (b) relevant, flexible, and skillful in teaching to various modalities, (c) passionate about working with students needing motivation, (d) have a good and uplifting personality, and (e) are firm with order, discipline, and structures but love to teach. Additionally, within the gifted programming structure is more non-discriminative ways to identify African American males for testing, induction, and support in gifted programs.

### **Positive Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships**

The second element of the framework is positive Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationships. This is one of the themes lifted from the results of the study. These are webs of positive interdependent developmental relationships with self and others that encapsulate

the psychosocial shifts which the African American male experiences inclusive of biological and sociocultural life changes and occurrences. In this aspect is the purposeful teaching of the importance of identifying aspects of self, human support systems, interpersonal relationships, peer relationships, and the fostering of a strong cultural identity. These relationships was the highest in regards to the frequency of incidents during their schooling experiences and throughout the data sets, proved to be of the highest impact within their personal experiences as a gifted student. As programs are developed and revised to meet the needs of these students this is an area of professional development and intentional implementation to ensure the success of the students.

### **Conducive Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems**

The third element of the framework is Phalanxial Educational Ecosystems that are conducive for student learning and growth. These are defined as the interdependent educational system that exists as a community of living organisms in conjunction with non-living components of the environment that come together to enhance or hinder the educational success of a student. Within this area, educational leaders and decision makers should examine the types of support structures that exist within the school environment to help students with academic and personal needs. One of the aspects that surfaced in the study was the desire from the participants to have systems of support when they were in need. Also within this area of the framework, implications of a positive school culture and environment are desirable. Within the study, student experiences were more positive in educational environments where the school culture was one that appreciated learning,

individual student growth, school pride, and positive staff members who held high expectations for their learning.

Additionally ensuring that the Phalanxial Educational Ecosystem has processes in place for classroom teachers to consider the individual learning styles and preferences of the student while considering our induction programs into all schools as well as the types of classroom experiences that students have while in the educational ecosystem. An evaluative tool could be developed to help school administrators to gauge and measure the various aspects of the Phalanxial Educational Ecosystem from anecdotal information and also from staff, student, and stakeholder input. The students in the study were able to recognize that the school was more than a building where they went to learn, rather a complex system of variables (living and non-living) that would either come together as a united force to support and promote the student or contrarily hinder and obstruct their growth.

### **Challenging and Experiential Curriculum**

Providing the students with a challenging and experiential curriculum could be a subset of the Phalanxial Educational Ecosystem as some of the curriculum and experiences are constructed as living and non-living components of the school environment. However, I believe that the area was important enough to stand alone in the Jigsaw Framework. An aspect that the participants mentioned was having access to a curriculum that was both challenging and experiential. The participants had the desire to want to acquire new knowledge and information about certain subject areas; however, they had a firm understanding of when the pedagogy of poverty (Haberman, 1991) had been deployed against them in the classroom. The pedagogy consisting of core classroom functions such as

the teacher giving information, giving directions, monitoring seatwork, punishing non-compliance, etc., while failing to acknowledge the essentials of curriculum and instruction that help students to become independent, deep critical thinkers. During the Focus Group interview, participants were able to reveal that they desired curriculum and classrooms that (1) consisted of teachers that can teach to different learning styles, (2) flexible with instructional practices, (3) more rigorous and challenging work, (4) classes that were relevant and connected to their individual college and career goals, (5) fewer students in the classroom so that the teacher can work with students with varying learning styles, (6) comfortable and inviting learning environments, and (7) access to classes that will help them to make transitions to college or make them more attractive to college representatives.

The young men were aware that they had been often placed in “dummy” classes and therefore never applied themselves to do well in the class. Their awareness of teacher perceptions and school system beliefs about their abilities were prevailing in this area. As we continue to develop and implement this component of the framework, it is imperative to keep the words of Haberman (1991) in the forefront of our curricular efforts:

The pedagogy of poverty is sufficiently powerful to undermine the implementation of any reform effort because it determines the way pupils spend their time, the nature of the behaviors they practice, and the bases of their self-concepts as learners. Essentially, it is a pedagogy in which learners can ‘succeed’ without becoming involved or thoughtful. (p. 292)

The participants had either been victim or witnessed the victimization of the pedagogy of poverty in their classrooms, these objects being African American males. Within this area of the framework, we have the moral imperative to ensure that all students are involved in their

learning and not being sacrificed to this system of teaching designed to keep already disadvantaged youth further deprived.

### **Personalized Learning**

The fifth component of the framework works with the viable application of pedagogical strategies to enhance the effectiveness and proficiency of the individual learner's activities in an effort to promote their success and motivation from an intrinsic standpoint. During the study, the conclusion of the importance of how the participants learned was a key component to whether they embraced the subject matter in the classroom or refuted it. I am suggesting that educators begin to develop learning profiles for the students to help understand the instructional planning and pedagogical strategies that need to be operational in order to move them to higher levels of proficiency and growth within the school environment. While this is a strategy that should be utilized with all students, I believe it becomes of significant importance for African American male students and those farthest from the mark. As this framework is further explored, those strategies in the process should be pedagogically informed to ensure that the learning experience is suitable for the learner and the environment in which the learning will occur. Kolb and Kolb (2005) discusses the impact of experiential learning theory (ELT) created from the tenets of John Dewey and Kurt Lewin through which they not only examine how students should learn but also the importance of creating spaces for the learning to occur. They suggest that it begins with an assessment of the learning style and from their instructional planning can occur, however, as this process occurs, instructors need to consider the following: (1) making space for conversational learning, (2) creating a hospitable space for learning, (3) respect for the

learners and their experience, (4) begin with the learners experience with the subject matter, (5) setup spaces for feeling and thinking, (6) maintain space for acting and reflecting, (7) enabling space for inside-out learning, (8) promoting space for the development of expertise, and (9) ultimately making space for learners to take charge of their own learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

As I explored the needs of the participants and thought about my own personal learning needs, the following were prevailing thoughts from the group: (1) need exciting classrooms where I can learn how I best learn, (2) educators that know how to get us to really understand the subject matters, (3) classrooms and curriculum designed for the learner, (4) do not make assumptions about my success or what is important to us, (5) experiential and extracurricular activities, (6) more experiences with learning outside of the classroom, (6) practical and hands on learning activities, (7) allow us to discuss what we don't understand and help us to expand our thinking. Kolb and Kolb (2005) wrote that "making space for students to take control of and responsibility for their learning can greatly enhance their ability to learn from experience" (p. 209). As we continue to think about classroom management processes as well as instructional principals, there may be more work to be explored with the concept of experiential learning spaces and the theory of Experiential Learning and the impact it has on classrooms in general.

### **Social Cognitive Theory of Self-Regulation**

The sixth part of the framework is rooted in Bandura's (1991) Social Cognitive Theory of Self-Regulation. As discussed in Chapter 4, his theory examines the notion that motivation is continuous and promoted through self-influence. Within the research study, the



gifted male participants eluded often to their lack of motivation in classrooms despite their goal of doing well, specifically if they were not a component of the student's Symbiotic Psychosocial Relationship web. One of the aspects that surfaced was being the need to be able to achieve despite feelings toward the instructor, additionally, the amount of support and assistance needed for them to be successfully matriculated through the system requires some skills to overcome those types of systemic impediments. There was also discussion about other African American males in the classroom who had been in gifted programs but had given up because of not knowing how to get help or be successful, particularly when there were very few positive teachers or supportive relationships within the school setting.

Zimmerman (1989) wrote that:

Students can be described as self-regulated to the degree that they are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process. Such students personally initiate and direct their own efforts to acquire knowledge and skill rather than relying on teachers, parents, or other agents of instruction. To qualify specifically as self-regulated in my own account, students' learning must involve the use of specified strategies to achieve academic goals on the basis of self-efficacy perceptions. (p. 329)

As an educator who works with African American male students, I can attest that the explicit instruction of self-regulation strategies would be critical in assisting students in the classroom and outside of the classroom. I acknowledge that some of the strategies for self-regulation, I was taught by teachers during my elementary private school experience and others from mentors or teachers who took additional time to provide me with those tools. Having concluded the study with the participants, there was little to no evidence of self-regulation strategies that were employed during their secondary school experiences and some were evident in their elementary experiences particularly with the gifted ancillary support

staff members. There are 14 strategies proposed by Zimmerman (1989) that I believe help to construct a roadmap for the types of self-regulation strategies that would help students in their quest for higher academic knowledge and success: (1) self-evaluation, (2) organizing and transforming skills, (3) goal-setting and planning, (4) seeking information, (5) keeping records and monitoring, (6) environmental structuring, (7) self-consequating behaviors, (8) rehearsing or memorizing, (9-11) seeking social assistance from peers, teachers, and adults, and (12-14) working with record reviews from notes, tests, or textbooks.

As we understand, that self-regulation is an umbrella concept to the building of motivation, goal-setting, and the achievement of an individual by their merit and choices and it comprises a central role in the exercise of personal agency through its impact on thought, affect, motivation, and action for students. As the needs for the African American male is further examined, I believe that Zimmerman's purpose for the Social Cognitive Self-Regulation strategies would help to increase their rate of success in schooling environments and in life settings. He explained that the "purpose of each strategy is to improve students' self-regulation of their (a) personal functioning, (b) academic behavioral performance, and (c) learning environment" (Zimmerman, 1989, p. 337).

### **Gay's Culturally Responsive Framework**

The seventh part to the framework is actually a sub-framework built on cultural responsive pedagogical practices. While there have been many researchers to conduct and promote the work of culturally responsive and relevant work in the classroom. For the conclusion to this study, I ascertained that Geneva Gay's (2000) work on Culturally Responsive Teaching aligned best with the needs as defined by participants in the study. Gay

(2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as the use of cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; keeping in mind that it should teach both to and through the strengths of the students. Because of the Critical Race Theory component of the study, there was a notion of the marginalization for the African American male that was examined. Specifically, participants felt that the educational services they received during their schooling (primarily middle and high school) had lacked any connection to their culture as African American males and often were able to discuss opportunities where they had witnessed the obliteration of the African American male in the classroom rather than their upliftment.

Gay (2000) discusses the notion that culturally responsive teaching is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. These are powerful components especially with young African American males who are conditioned by social media, multimedia, and environmental expectations of their roles and responsibilities. The participants had a very limited understanding of the meaning of being an African American male, other than the explicit connection to skin color. Thus, without these foundational practices within the classroom, it is easier for students to move through without being valued, associated with, or be received as a worthwhile component to the learning environment rather than an expendable.

Gay's (2000) framework discusses (1) culturally responsive pedagogy, (2) the power of caring and expectations, (3) connections with culture and communication, (4) importance of culturally relevant curriculum, (5) cultural congruity in teaching and learning, and (6) the

culturally responsive pedagogical praxis of educators. These elements are crucial to the support and achievement of our African American males and her framework has a synergy with the other components of the framework of support. Participants of the study maintained that they would have more struggles in their life because of the fact that they were African American. Gay's framework is an ideal combination of elements that were desired by the participants when thinking about the ideal classroom: high expectations, relevance to their lived experiences, caring, establishing positive interactions, making the curriculum interesting, using diverse and authentic texts/artifacts, competency in the subject matter, active engagement, and the existence of routines and procedures for classroom management that are not counterproductive methods to student achievement. Helping school systems and educators to embrace these elements as needed components in the schooling experiences for these students, I believe would tremendously assist with efforts to rescue this population from the dismal statistics that loom over our country. Ideally, as a part of the framework, key essential elements may be condensed to professional development modules for teachers and districts.

### **Guidance and Support for College and Career Readiness**

The final component of the Jigsaw Framework of Support is the presence of strong guidance and support services for African American males. Within the research study, the aspiration to attend college was a high frequency code; however, there was an absence of college planning, guidance services, and curriculum support for enrolling in courses that could assist them in being more prepared for college programs. These issues were not limited to lack of offering for higher level math or science courses, information and

assistance with summer bridge programs, and information/counseling in choosing careers and college programs.

Many of the participants discussed the seemingly non-existent presence of guidance counselors unless it was enrollment time or graduation. As a former counselor, this was unearthing to me, because I always saw the guidance program as a process that began as students entered the building until they crossed the stage on graduation night and sometimes even beyond. I can recall students, whom I would accompany their parents to the university to help them enroll in the appropriate classes. Some of the participants had connections with students in other school districts who provided them with information on programs, however often the participants were not able to meet the qualification due to being enrolled in lower level courses early in their secondary schooling experience. The participants suggested that the following items would have helped them: (1) classroom work that connected with college work, (2) help with college information, scholarships, and college choices, (3) staff members to support and motivate them to college, (4) college mentors, (5) college planning that could begin in elementary school, (6) opportunities to connect with peers in school that want to attend similar colleges (college-career cadres) and (7) programs to help parents and students to better understand course needs for bridge programs.

Socio-emotional support is a critical area of need for this population and guidance counselors have the ability to navigate all of the socio-emotional needs to help stabilize

psychosocial impediments to their growth and success. Aratoni, Wight, & Cooper (2011)

wrote that:

A wealth of literature documents racial gaps and poor outcomes of school-age African-American children across a range of domains, including educational achievement measured by indicators such as test scores and rates of school exclusion. African-American children and youth are two-to-three times more likely to be suspended from schools...for optimal personal and collective development of children and adolescents, five developmental domain factors are considered important: identity, emotion, social, cognition, and physical health. (p. 3)

Effective and structured guidance support systems could allow for a human support system to help students to cope and develop healthy ways to explore these domains as they matriculate through the school system. It is no secret that the downward spiral for educational outcomes begins early with African American males, in some cases during Early Childhood programs. The participants in this case expressed socio-emotional needs sporadically throughout their schooling experiences but primarily during the secondary years during the absence of gifted support. Some of these socio-emotional supports were provided to the participants in the elementary school setting through their gifted resource teacher. However, most school districts and state systems provide for a guidance system to be in place during the K-12 school experience. This is an area where that specialist could help to build successful and effective programs and activities to shape educational outcomes for this populace of students.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study examined how African American males experience the phenomenon of giftedness in K-12 public school settings. As the study progressed and final conclusions were made from the data, I was able to identify seven areas that would be beneficial and supportive domains of future research for African American males and their educators. The

first area is further exploration about the *teacher's knowledge about gifted students* in the school setting. This study focused on how the student experienced being gifted, however, it is crucial to understand how teacher's perceive and interact with this population of students. Consequently, in many school districts the classroom teacher serves in the capacity of the gatekeeper for induction into these programs. Their fate is impacted if the gatekeeper holds biased beliefs about the African American male students in their classrooms or share a lack of understanding in the “what to look for” when identifying potentially gifted students, thus continuing to narrow the recruitment of this population into these programs.

The second area of future exploration is *additional research with African American males who are not gifted to further examine the Impediments to Academic Orientations*. All of the participants in this study recognized that they were oriented toward academics in the elementary school setting and this was the proponent that brought awareness for gatekeepers to recognize their abilities. For African American males who are not identified, it would be valuable to find out why they are not oriented to academic learning in the school setting. The research participants were able to provide their thoughts on why some of their friends and peers were not in programming, but it would be interesting and beneficial for educators to understand the early impediments to academics. The third area where possible research could be conducted is the *Evaluation of the Educational Ecosystem*. An aspect of this study was the understanding of this network of living and non-living organisms that construct the school setting. With that in mind, there are opportunities to begin evaluating the health, positive outcomes, negative outcomes, and effectiveness of components in the school (living and non-living) as an effort to build more reliable and holistic school improvement plans.

The fourth area identified is further exploration with *Teacher's Efficacy with Personalized Pedagogical Practices in Urban Schools*. This aspect was a prevailing factor or need from the participants in the study. We often assume that teachers understand how to deliver personalized learning to students in their classrooms, when it actually may be a deficit of our professional development programs and pre-service training programs for teachers. It would be advantageous for more research to be done particularly in urban schools with the knowledge, existence, and understanding of the implementation of personalized pedagogical practices within their classrooms. Concurrently, the fifth area of future research is closely related to personalized learning and it involves the *Impact of Experiential Learning Environments in School Settings*. The research on experiential learning would aid educational leaders at a building and district level in improving the way that we look at classroom setup and management strategies. Ideally, it could help us to understand the effects of the learning environment and space on student academic learning particularly in urban school settings and/or low performing schools. Often management is delivered to teachers as the efficiency of the routines, rules, and procedures executed in the classroom, whereas this paradigm could shift the thoughts from those areas to looking at the learning environment as a fluid conception based on the assessment of student learning styles and the instructional planning of the teacher.

The sixth area is *Identifying Student Efficacy with the Utilization of Self-Regulation Strategies in Urban or Schools with predominant African American Populations*. The study revealed that particularly at the secondary level, elements of self-regulation were needed in order to best cope or deal with issues in the school setting. This is an area that could benefit



many school districts from a curriculum and instruction standpoint. It would be valuable to know how well students in urban school districts or schools with predominant African American student populations utilize self-regulation strategies in their daily curricular experiences. A possible extension of this area could be examining how well teachers in those settings understand how to teach those strategies to students who struggle. The findings from this type of research could aid student success rates in academics and behavior metrics.

The final suggestion for future research would be the *Evaluation of Culturally Responsive Classrooms and Teacher Training*. This is a wide area of research for schools and it is critical to understand to what degree classroom teachers and administrators are exhibiting and promoting elements of the culturally relevant framework. As an administrator in an urban school, each of the areas within the framework could be areas of extensive research within their own right. Understanding and knowing that this is an important aspect for the success of African American males, the dilemma becomes where do we start within our districts and schools to (1) see culturally relevant principles as viable and needed components for student success and (2) begin imparting and shaping professional development/transformation programs to build systems that are conducive for students to feel valued and appreciated beyond just their skin color but also the cultural experiences they bring to the table.

### **Walking on the Path of the Gifted**

As I walked on the path of researching the gifted...it led me back to an early component of my writing with this dissertation. As an adolescent, I never considered my own personal experiences as a gifted African American male; however, while conducting

research on this notion of *giftedness* and the history of African Americans, I came to the conclusion that the experience of giftedness for the African American male had to be a unique experience for this populace. I revisited this epiphany often and spent numerous hours discussing my thoughts with professors, friends, and critical research partners. My prevailing thought was how could a group of people that have experienced centuries of psychosocial degradation and devaluation have the same experience with this phenomenon of giftedness as non-African American students? It almost seemed oxymoronic when examining the educational and penal statistics regarding African American males in the United States. Reflection on my own journey helped me to think about the times that I had worn a costume of invisibility that would be the wardrobe of giftedness. At this point, I began to explore my own K-12 experiences more deeply as an African American male gifted student and this became my platform to begin examining this phenomenon of giftedness.

As I walked the journey, I began picking up heuristic partners in the young men named Chuck, Timothy, Kevin, Michael, Inman, and Harrison. Although being a school administrator, an educator, and a gifted African American man, they helped me to see things through a much clearer lens more than I ever believed. I got to understand their lived experiences in the classrooms of today tackling with this phenomenon of being gifted which to some was a blessing and curse. I was able to understand that even in my adult life “my giftedness” will impact how I connect with people, concepts, trainings, etc. It is not a program, a resource teacher, a set of books, a school, or hands-on activities----rather it is a way of life. It is a sentient and living component to all facets of our lives rooted in the relationships we develop, the environments we interact in, the programs that support us, and

our personal orientations to success. I frequently took time away from the research and each time, I came back to it I began to learn something new within the data collection, the participant's experiences, my experiences or the culmination of all three. As I wrestled with the frustration of why so many elements seemed to continue to surface from the study, I had to revisit Moustakas' (1990) statement that read:

The creative synthesis encourages a wide range of freedom in characterizing the phenomenon...the researcher taps into imaginative and contemplative sources of knowledge and insight in synthesizing the experience, in presenting the discovery of essences---peaks and valleys, highlights and horizons...there is free reign of thought and feeling that supports the researcher's knowledge, passion, and presence; this infuses the work with a personal, professional, and literary value. (p. 52)

Through this research and the heuristic nature, I saw the peaks and valleys, as well as the highlights and horizons of not only my life, not only the participant's lives...but more importantly in the lives of the African American males whom I work with each day as a school administrator. At every juncture of the findings, I began to contemplate the presence, implications, and power of the Jigsaw Framework components and the lives that it could impact within my own daily locus of control. In this effort, I realized that my giftedness did not come to a conclusion when I graduated from high school or college...it is a living component of who I am...and with this knowledge I have the responsibility to help awaken the "sleeping giftedness" within the many African American males who still wear the cloak of invisibility...in this effort the greater task begins now!

APPENDIX A  
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN  
A RESEARCH STUDY

## CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY

### **Invictus Minds: A Critical Heuristic Case Study of Giftedness in the African-American Male**

*Student Investigator:*  
*Jermaine Arnell Wilson, Ed.S.*

#### **Invitation to Participate**

You are invited to participate in a research study to explore how African-American male students experience the phenomenon of being gifted in a K-12 public school setting. This study “*Invictus Minds: A Critical Heuristic Case Study of Giftedness in the African-American Male*” is aimed at exploring the phenomenon of “giftedness” as experienced by identified gifted African-American males through the exploration of their perceptions about their school experiences while also increasing their own level of awareness about “giftedness” as a result of interactions with the researcher and other participants in the study. There are two goals for this study:

- (1) Provide educators with more knowledge about this particular phenomenon in an effort to assist national educational systems in supporting the success and development of African-American males while also increasing their recruitment and retention within gifted programs.
- (2) Examine ways that school systems can enhance the educational practices for African-American males in general within the K-12 public school sector.

The findings of the study will be shared through a research dissertation submitted to a doctoral committee on behalf of the University of Missouri at Kansas City (UMKC).

The researcher in charge of this study is *Mr. Jermaine A. Wilson*. While the study will be conducted by him, other qualified supervising professors and faculty at the university who work with him may act for him for supervisory purposes or data analysis auditing.

Research Supervisor:

**Dr. Loyce Caruthers, Ph.D.**  
**339 Education Building**  
**816-235-1044**  
**caruthersl@umkc.edu**

#### **Who Will Participate in this Research Study?**

This qualitative research study is a multiple-case design with two sampling designs (1) criterion and (2) maximum variation. Criterion sampling is used to define characteristics or attributes the participants in the study must possess. These characteristics or attributes are

the reason that you have been invited to take part in this research study. You have been invited to participate because you are:

- (1) Identified as a Gifted and Talented student in your school district according to Academic Standards utilized in screening for eligible students
- (2) An African-American male student
- (3) A student in one of the target school districts chosen for the research study
- (4) A high school student in the 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade

Maximum variation sampling is used to obtain unique or diverse variations that have emerged in different conditions that exist in the various districts. Through the use of an open-ended survey, I will also look for the following variations among the participants: (a) differences in educational settings, (b) academic success in school, (c) family structure, (d) socioeconomic status, and (e) participation in extracurricular or community activities. Parents and students will be asked to complete the survey at the research study informational. They will then be able to elect whether they would be interested in participating in the case study in which six participants will be chosen to look more closely at their experiences as a gifted African American male.

If your parents choose to complete the open-ended survey, the demographic information collected will be utilized to help me as the researcher to understand and present the variation of the population of gifted African-American males and also identify participants with diverse experiences for the purpose of case study participant selection.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this critical, heuristic case study is to explore the phenomenon of giftedness as experienced by African-American males through the exploration and analysis of their schooling experiences while also raising their level of awareness about being a gifted African American male as a result of interactions with the researcher and other participants. By conducting this study, I will have the opportunity to help the world to hear the voices of these gifted African American males in an effort to provide support to public school systems in nurturing their success and retention in gifted programs. Their stories are often unheard during their matriculation as students in K-12 public schools. The results of this study can be utilized by educators and policy makers in order to provide more powerful approaches to assist with the recruitment and retention of more African American male students in Gifted and Talented Programs. There is one central question that will guide this study with three sub-questions.

**The central question to be answered is:**

- (1) What do the experiences of gifted African American males in public school systems suggest about strategies needed to promote their success, recruitment and retention in Gifted and Talented programs?**

**The three sub questions that will be answered are:**

- (1) How do these gifted African American males describe their experiences with gifted programs in their schools?**
- (2) How do gifted African American males describe their experiences with curriculum, teachers, and other students inside and outside of the classroom?**
- (3) What do the experiences of gifted African American males suggest about practices that public school educators can use to promote the success and development of African American males in general?**

The findings to these questions will be shared through a published research dissertation presented to the doctoral committee of the researcher Mr. Jermaine A. Wilson on behalf of the University of Missouri at Kansas City (UMKC).

### **Description of Procedures**

If students and parents are interested in participating in the case study research component of the study, you will need to sign and complete the consent and assent forms in their entirety and also complete a demographic survey. The assent form will be completed by the student. Once the six participants are chosen, there will be 5 sessions that participants will be engaged in as a part of the study.

- **1<sup>st</sup> Session-** The participant will be asked to choose a pseudonym that will represent them in the research study and also construct a brief autobiography around their experiences in school. (45 minutes to 1 hour)
- **2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Session-** The participant will participate in an interview session that will last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour each session. These will take place at the participant's home/community setting or at the university based on the preference of the consenting parent. Participant interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes.
- **4<sup>th</sup> Session-** The researcher will conduct an observation of the participant in a natural setting outside of school (i.e. home interacting with parents, community, extracurricular activity, etc.); this will only last for 30 to 45 minutes.
- **5<sup>th</sup> Session-** The six participants will be brought together for participation in our Focus Group Interviews. At this time, we will discuss topics, themes, and issues around being a gifted African American male. This will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The focus group will be audiotaped for transcription purposes.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be involved in this study for ***four months*** until data from the six sessions have been gathered. As a follow-up, parents and students will receive a copy of the findings of the research study. Participation in the study is voluntary and at any point in time, the participants may withdraw from the study by providing it in writing via email to the researcher.

### **Methods/Procedures for Interviews and Focus Groups**

The methods of data collection for this study will be individual interviews and focus groups. The sessions will be audio-recorded, and transcribed to ensure accurate reporting of the information that is provided by the participants. Transcribers will sign a form stating that they will not discuss any item on the tape with anyone other than the researchers. There will not be any names asked or revealed during the focus groups or individual interviews. However during the focus group, should another participant call you by name, the transcriber will be instructed to remove all names from the transcription. The audio files will be stored in a removable hard drive and locked for security after being transcribed. The audio files will be stored in a removable hard drive and locked for security after being transcribed and will be destroyed after 3 years. All other data files including the transcriptions will be kept for 7 years after the completion of the study.

### **Risks and Inconveniences**

There are no physical/emotional risks associated with this research study.

### **Benefits**

Participants in this study will have an opportunity to reflect on their experience related to the phenomenon of giftedness as it is experienced in the K-12 setting. Additionally, they may benefit from a deeper understanding of what giftedness means for their lives and schooling. On a broader level, this study will contribute to the existing research on giftedness while also providing educators that work with African American males a better understanding of how giftedness is experienced in public school settings by this population. In doing so, educators can then develop strategies that can be utilized by school systems to improve recruitment and retention of African-American males in Gifted and Talented programs.

There is existing literature addressing the areas of recruitment, cultural identity, and program retention with less attention given to factors that are associated with the experiences of African American males in gifted programs (Baytops et al., 1997; Ford & Harris, 1992; Ford & Harris, 1996). As a result of this study, policymakers and practitioners will have a descriptive understanding of how the phenomenon of giftedness is experienced by African American males in the public school setting as well as strategies that may assist in educating both gifted and non-gifted African American males.

### **Fees and Expenses**

There are no monetary costs to you for participating in the research study.



### **Compensation**

The six participants chosen to be a part of the case study component of the research study will receive a \$50.00 gift card at the conclusion of the data collection portion of the study.

### **Alternatives to Study Participation**

The alternative is not to participate in this study.

### **Confidentiality**

To protect confidentiality on the demographic survey that will be utilized for Maximum Variation sampling, there will be a cover sheet that participants will be asked to complete if interested in being a part of the research study before being given the survey. A unique 8 digit code will be utilized to keep your responses confidential. Only the student investigator and primary investigator will have access to the code key that will link your consent form and survey data. This will allow for protection of confidentiality but also provide a way to contact the six participants chosen for the case study. All other remaining survey data will be destroyed.

The data that will be collected will include participant autobiographies, semi-structured interviews, official documents, and observation notes. Participants in the case study will be able to choose pseudonyms to represent them during the study to provide them with an unidentifiable code for their name in the study. The pseudonym will be represented in all completed data presentations (i.e. autobiographies, interviews, transcripts, and observation notes). The six case study participants will also participate in a Focus Group Interview to discuss findings of study and reflect on their experiences as a Gifted African American male. Findings from individual participants will not be shared during the focus group interviews, rather broad topics that were illuminated during the study.

While we will do our best to keep the information you share with us confidential, 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 to make sure we are doing proper, safe research and protecting human subjects. The results of this research may be published or presented to others. You will not be named in any reports of the results.

All findings used in written reports or publications which result from this research study will be reported in aggregate form with no identifying information. It is, however useful to use direct quotes to more clearly capture the meanings in reporting the findings from this form of evaluation.

### **In Case of Injury**

The University of Missouri-Kansas City appreciates the participation of people who help it gain knowledge by being a part of research studies. It is not the University's policy to pay for or provide medical treatment for persons who are in studies. If you think you have been harmed because you were in this study, please call the researcher, **Jermaine A. Wilson**, the researcher at **(816) 726-1903**.

### **Contacts for Questions about the Study**

You should contact the Office of UMKC's Social Sciences Institutional Review Board at 816-235-5927 if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research subject. You may contact the principal investigator:

Name: **Jermaine A. Wilson, Doctoral Student, University of Missouri at Kansas City**  
Telephone: **(816) 726-1903 (cell phone)**  
Email: **jawvxd@mail.umkc.edu**

### **Voluntary Participation**

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. If you choose to be in the study, you are free to stop participating at any time and for any reason. If you choose not to be in the study or decide to stop participating, your decision will not affect any care or benefits you are entitled to. If you decide to leave the study, the principal investigator for data analysis will retain the information you have provided in the form of surveys, autobiographies, and interview transcriptions. You will be told of any important findings developed during the course of this research.

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 you 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 **Mr. Jermaine A. Wilson** at **816-726-1903**. By signing this consent form, you volunteer and consent to take part in this research study.

**Authorization**

You will be provided a copy of this consent form by the researcher to keep for your records. By signing below, the parental consenting party is stating that they are the legal parent or guardian of the interested research study participant and that you agree with your child possibly being one of the case study participants.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(Parental Consenting Party) Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

(Parental Consenting Party) Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Home or Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant (Student) Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant (Student) Birthdate: Month \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_

Participant (Student) Grade in School:    **09**            **10**            **11**            **12**

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX B

ASSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY

ASSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY  
**Invictus Minds: A Critical Heuristic Case Study of Giftedness  
in the African-American Male**

*Student Investigator:*  
*Jermaine Arnell Wilson, Ed.S.*

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation research study “*Invictus Minds: A Critical Heuristic Case Study of Giftedness in the African-American Male*” which will look at how you have experienced the phenomenon of giftedness as an African American male in a public school setting. I value the unique contribution that you can make to my study and am excited about the possibility of your participation in it.

In the study, I will be seeking comprehensive depictions or descriptions of your experience as a gifted African American male in a public school setting. In this way, I hope to illuminate or answer my primary research question: *What do the experiences of gifted African American males in public school systems imply about strategies that are needed to promote their success, recruitment and retention in Gifted and Talented programs?*

I hope that the information that you share with me through this study will help me to do two things:

- (1) Help teachers and educators to have more knowledge about what it is like to be an African-American male who is gifted and develop a framework of support to help other African American males to be successful in school while also increasing their recruitment and retention into gifted programs.
- (2) Examine ways that school systems can better assist African-American males in general within the K-12 public school sector to be more successful.

Through your participation as a co-researcher, I hope to understand the essence of the phenomenon as it reveals itself in your experience. You will be asked to recall specific episodes or events in your school experiences in which you experienced the phenomenon that we are investigating. I am seeking vivid, accurate, and comprehensive portrayals of what these experiences were like for you; your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as situations, events, places, and people connected with your experience. You may also wish to share personal logs or journals with me or other ways in which you have recorded your experience---for example in letters, poems, or artwork.

Participating in this research study presents no greater than minimal risk than what would normally occur in your daily activities and you will not be allowed to take part in this study without your parent’s or guardian’s permission on the official consent form. The only document that identifies you will be this assent form. There will be six students chosen to participate in this case study research component. If chosen to participate in the study you will be asked to choose a pseudonym (*a name that someone uses instead of his or her real name*) for the research study. There will be 5 sessions that you will be asked to participate in:

- **1<sup>st</sup> Session-** You will be asked to construct a brief autobiography around your experiences in school. (45 minutes to 1 hour)
- **2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Session-** You will participate in an interview session that will last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour each session. These will take place at the participant's home/community setting or at the university based on the preference of the consenting parent. You will be audio-recorded during the interview sessions so that I can accurately capture your experiences as you provide them to me.
- **4<sup>th</sup> Session-** The researcher will conduct an observation of you in a natural setting outside of school (i.e. home interacting with parents, community, extracurricular activity, etc.); this will only last for 30 to 45 minutes.
- **5<sup>th</sup> Session-** You will be brought together with other participants for our Focus Group Interviews. At this time, we will discuss topics and issues that arise around being a gifted African American male. This will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes and will be audio-recorded so that our group discussion can be captured and examined accurately.

The audio files of our interview and focus group interview will be secured and transcribed (typed into a readable document). The files will be destroyed after 3 years and all other data files including the transcriptions will be kept for 7 years after the completion of the study. When we are done with our meetings, I will use all of this information to write a report about what I have found out. Your name will not be used within the report at any time.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you can choose to not participate at any time during the process. Participants that complete all of the sessions of the research case study will receive a \$50.00 gift card upon completion of the 5<sup>th</sup> session. Please contact me at (816) 726-1903 or jawvxd@mail.umkc.edu if you have any questions or concerns. If you have any questions about being in this study, you can also contact my research supervisor, Dr. Loyce Caruthers at (816) 235-1044 or the administrative office of the UMKC Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 816-235-5927. I look forward to your participation in the study!

Sincerely,

Mr. Jermaine A. Wilson, Student Investigator

**Signing this form means that you have read this paper or someone has read this to you and you are willing to participate in this research study:**

Participant's Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C

PARENT/GUARDIAN INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE  
IN RESEARCH STUDY

Dear **Parent/Guardian:**

My name is Mr. Jermaine A. Wilson and I am a doctoral student at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. I am proposing to conduct a dissertation research study titled, *“Invictus Minds: A Critical Heuristic Case Study of Giftedness in the African-American Male”* and I am seeking permission to utilize the **Kansas City Public Schools** as one of my district sites to recruit participants.

The study *“Invictus Minds: A Critical Heuristic Case Study of Giftedness in the African-American Male”* is aimed at exploring the phenomenon of “giftedness” as experienced by gifted African-American males through the exploration of their perceptions of giftedness while additionally expanding their level of awareness about the phenomenon as a result of interactions with the researcher and other participants in the study. There are two primary goals for this study:

- (1) Provide educators with more knowledge about this particular phenomenon in an effort to assist national educational systems in supporting the success and development of African-American males while also increasing their recruitment and retention within gifted programs.
- (2) Examine ways that school systems can enhance the educational practices for African-American males in general within the K-12 public school sector.

The findings of the study will be shared through a research dissertation submitted to a doctoral committee on behalf of the University of Missouri at Kansas City (UMKC). Eligible students in this study would be 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students who are African American males and identified as gifted in your school district. If you would support me in utilizing students in your district as one of the potential recruitment pools, I would need the following items:

- *Procedures for how your district identifies and selects students for gifted programs*
- *Student and parent names and addresses of eligible students in your district **OR** permission for me to deliver invitations to schools/contacts of your choice to invite them to a research study informational session.*
- *Letter of Site Authorization from either you or your designated district official for Social Sciences-Institutional Review Board approval.*

Outside of the information listed above, all data collected through interviews and focus groups will be kept confidential without any identifying information of the participant or district. There will be no school observations as a part of this study. If you agree for your district to participate you will (1) receive a copy of approved IRB documents before recruitment for study begins, (2) anonymity in the research study, and (3) a copy of the results of the research study findings. As I desire to recruit students with diverse experiences in schooling, I hope that you will allow for your district to be utilized. If further information



is needed about the study, I am available to answer questions by email or in person at your convenience. I have included a sample copy of the site approval letter for your perusal.

Please feel free to contact me with questions or comments at **(816) XXX-1903** or by email at **[jawvxd@mail.umkc.edu](mailto:jawvxd@mail.umkc.edu)**.

Sincerely,

Mr. Jermaine A. Wilson, Ed.S.  
Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Student at the University of Missouri-Kansas City

APPENDIX D  
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

**Research Participant Code:**

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**Please Select Your Grade: (Check One)**

- 9th Grade       10th Grade       11th Grade       12th Grade

**Survey Questions:**

1. **Do you receive Free or Reduced Lunch?**     *Yes*       *No*

2. **How would you describe your school?**

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3. **Do both of your parents live in your house with you or do you reside in a single-parent home?**

- Both Parents Stay In the Home*       *Single Parent Home*

4. **What is your grade point average (GPA)? (Check One)**

- 4.0 and above*     *3.0-3.9*     *2.0-2.9*     *1.0-1.9*     *I don't know my GPA*

5. **Are you involved in any extracurricular activities at school or any community activities outside of school?**

- Yes*       *No*

*If yes, please write what they are:*

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6. **Are you currently enrolled or have you taken any Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes at your school?**

*Yes*                       *No*

7. **When did you learn that you were a Gifted and Talented Student?**

*Elementary School*                       *Middle School/Junior High*                       *High School*

8. **Who told you that you were Gifted and Talented? (Check All That Apply)**

- Parent*
- Teacher*
- Counselor*
- Administrator*
- Gifted Coordinator*
- Other: Please List* \_\_\_\_\_

9. **Have you ever been treated different by teachers, peers, or other school staff because you are gifted?**

*Yes*                       *No*

10. **How would you describe your experience as a Gifted African American Male in A Public School?**

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**Thank You for Your Participation!**

APPENDIX E  
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

## **Invictus Minds: A Critical Heuristic Case Study of Giftedness in the African-American Male**

*Jermaine Arnell Wilson, Ed.S.*

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

1. How would you describe yourself?
2. How do you define gifted and talented?
3. What do you know about being “gifted and talented”?
4. When did you learn that you were “gifted”?
5. How do you feel about being a “gifted” student?
6. In what school level (elem, middle, high), did you receive the most support for your “giftedness”?
7. What does it mean to you to be African American/Black?
8. Do you think that as an African American male you will have more obstacles?  
[Prompt: why?]
9. Have you ever been treated differently because you were an African-American Male?  
[prompt: If yes, explain]
10. As an African American male has there ever been times when you felt like the expectations your teachers had for you were different than other students that were not minority?
11. If you had the option to change who you are---would you? [Prompt: If yes, describe what changes you would make?]
12. Describe your school for me?
13. What do you like best about your school?
14. What things would you want to change about your school?
15. Do you feel that you are supported in your school?
16. How do you feel about the curriculum and classes that you have taken while in school?
17. Do counselors or school staff talk to you about challenge courses, AP, IB, Dual credit courses?
18. Tell me about some of the best teachers that you have had...describe them to me?
19. Tell me about some of the worst teachers that you have had...describe them to me?
20. Do you feel like your building principal and staff know who you are as an individual?

21. Who can you go to in school if you need additional support with anything? [Prompt: why this person?]
22. Do you feel that you are being successful in school?
23. What things makes school or certain classrooms memorable?
24. Have you ever felt like you didn't belong at the school? [Prompt: why?]
25. What do you want to do after high school? [Follow up: college, etc.]
26. What is your career goal?
27. What do you like to do outside of school? [Follow up prompt: Why do you like this activity?]
28. Who do you live with at home? [selection of individuals]
29. How involved are your parents in your education? How so?
30. How would your parents describe you?
31. Have you ever had family members or peers that discouraged you from your educational goals?
32. Does what your family and friends think about your schooling, impact you?
33. How would your friends/peers describe you?
34. How do you choose your friends?
35. Have you ever been teased or treated differently by peers in school for being gifted? [why]
36. Does it matter more to you what your peers/close friends think of you rather than teachers and parents?
37. Does anyone talk to you about being gifted and talented in high school?
38. Describe three people whom you value their opinion over everyone else?
39. What assistance would you like to receive to help you to be successful in school?

APPENDIX F  
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE



**Invictus Minds: A Critical Heuristic Case Study of Giftedness  
in the African-American Male**

*Jermaine Arnell Wilson, Ed.S.*

**Focus Group Interview Guide**

1. When you hear the term “gifted” now, what does that mean to you---how would you define it?
2. When you hear the term “African-American Male”, what does that mean to you---how would you define it?
3. Do you believe that people treat you differently because you are a gifted African American Male? How so?
4. What have been your experiences in school that have aided to your success with being gifted?
5. As you think about your years as a gifted student in school...what things could have made your experience better? [academically, socially, culturally, psychologically]
6. If you had to describe your best teachers that met your needs as a gifted student---what would those descriptors be?
7. If you had to think about teachers that did not meet your needs as a gifted student---what would those descriptors be?
8. As you prepare to move forward in life---what do you feel that you still need to be successful?
9. After progressing through the study---what are some things that you have learned about yourself as a gifted African American male?
10. If you could have a magic wand to give you the best educational experience as an African American male---what would you change?
11. [Discussion on Broad Thematic Topics That Surfaced Through Study]

APPENDIX G  
OBSERVATION GUIDE

**Invictus Minds: A Critical Heuristic Case Study of Giftedness  
in the African-American Male**  
*Jermaine Arnell Wilson, Ed.S.*

**Participant Name:**

**Time Observation Began:**

**Time Observation Concluded:**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Includes</b>	<b>Research will look for:</b>	<b>Observation Notes</b>
<b>Appearance</b>	Clothing, age, gender, physical appearance	Anything that might indicate membership in groups or in sub-populations of interest to the study such as socioeconomic class, religion, or ethnicity	
<b>Verbal behavior and Interactions</b>	Who speaks to whom and for how long; who initiates interaction; languages or dialects spoken; tone of voice	Gender, age, ethnicity, and profession of speakers; dynamics of interaction between the participant and others.	
<b>Physical Behavior and Gestures</b>	What people do, who does what, who interacts with whom, who is not interacting	How the participant uses their bodies and voices to communicate different emotions; what individuals' behaviors indicate about their feelings toward others	
<b>Personal Space/Environment</b>	How close people stand to one another? What is the environment like?	Preferences displayed about personal space from the research participant. How do they interact with the environment and what does it look like? (setup, etc)	

<p><b>People Who Stand Out</b></p>	<p>Identification of people who receive a lot of attention from others</p>	<p>The characteristics of these individuals; what differentiates them from others; whether people consult them or they approach other people; whether they seem to be strangers or well known by others present</p>	
<p><b>Activities of Engagement</b></p>	<p>The types of activities, resources, and the level of engagement displayed in the observation</p>	<p>What is the participant doing? Who or what are they engaged with during the observation period? What types of activities are being completed in the observation period?</p>	

APPENDIX H  
SS-IRB APPROVAL



UMKC  
5319 Rockhill Road  
Kansas City Missouri  
TEL: 816 235-5927  
FAX: 816 235-5602

## NOTICE OF NEW APPROVAL

Principal Investigator: Loyce Caruthers  
615 E. 52nd St.  
Kansas City, MO 64110

Protocol Number: 13-982

Protocol Title: Invictus Minds: A Critical Heuristic Case Study of Giftedness in the African-American Male

Type of Review: Designated Review

**Date of Approval: 03/04/2014**

**Date of Expiration: 03/03/2015**

Dear Dr. Caruthers,

The above referenced study, and your participation as a principal investigator, was reviewed and approved by the SSIRB. You are granted permission to conduct your study as described in your application.

This approval includes the following documents:

### Attachments

Proposal Approval Form - Jermaine Wilson  
Subpart D  
Invictus Minds Study Rationale  
Research Interest Cover Sheet  
Jermaine Wilson Site Authorization- Raytown Quality Schools  
Demographic\_Survey\_Version2  
Jermaine Wilson Site Authorization- Kansas City Public Schools  
Design of the Study  
Recruitment Flyer  
Invictus Minds Study-Observation Guide  
Subpart D-Jermaine Wilson  
Parent\_Consent\_Form\_Approved\_Version5\_Dated\_03-04-2014  
Invictus Minds Study-Semi-Structured Interview Questions  
Invictus Minds Study-Focus Group Interview Questions

The ability to conduct this study will expire on or before 03/03/2015 unless a request for continuing review is received and approved. If you intend to continue conduct of this study, it is your responsibility to provide a Continuing Review form prior to the expiration of approval.

This approval is issued under the University of Missouri - Kansas City's Federal Wide Assurance FWA00005427 with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). If you have any questions regarding your obligations under the Board's Assurance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

There are 5 stipulations of approval:

- 1) No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date. (PIs and sponsors are responsible for initiating Continuing Review proceedings).
- 2) All unanticipated or serious adverse events must be reported to the IRB.
- 3) All protocol modifications must be IRB approved prior to implementation unless they are intended to reduce risk. This includes any change of investigator.
- 4) All protocol deviations must be reported to the IRB.
- 5) All recruitment materials and methods must be approved by the IRB prior to being used.

Please contact the Research Compliance Office (email: [umkcirb@umkc.edu](mailto:umkcirb@umkc.edu); phone: (816)235-5927) if you have questions or require further information.

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## VITA

Jermaine Arnell Wilson was born on March 21, 1979, in Kansas City, Missouri. He was educated in both private school and also the Kansas City, Missouri public school district. He graduated from Central High School with honors and received a full ride scholarship to attend Missouri Western State College in St. Joseph, Missouri from which he graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration with an emphasis in Management.

After working with the K-Mart Corporation as a manager and human resources director, he decided to pursue the field of education as a consultant and substitute instructor. During this time, he began a Master's Program in Education from the Rockhurst University with certification in Business Education and English. He concurrently attended the University of Missouri-Kansas City where he received a B.A. in Counseling Psychology and Guidance. During this time, he served as a classroom teacher, guidance counselor, and College/Career Readiness coordinator in the Kansas City Public Schools.

In 2007, he began working as an administrator in the school district and earned his Education Specialist degree in K-12 administration. He has had the opportunity to work in a variety of settings within the Kansas City metropolitan area as an assistant principal and a principal in the entire K-12 school setting. He currently works as the principal at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in the Kansas City Public Schools.