School Days: Perceptions and Experiences of African American Boys in Gender-Based Classrooms

Deirdra Milligan
Kennesaw State University

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SCHOOL DAYS: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS
IN GENDER-BASED CLASSROOMS

by
Deirdra Milligan

A Dissertation

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Dissertation Signature Page

Name: Deirdra Milligan

Degree Program: Teacher Leadership for Learning - Inclusive Education

The dissertation titled: SCHOOL DAYS: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS IN GENDER-BASED CLASSROOMS

was submitted to the Bagwell College of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

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has been read and approved by the Committee:

[Signatures and dates]

[Signature]
Dissertation Chair Signature

[Signature]
Committee Member Signature

[Signature]
Committee Member Signature

[Signature]
Committee Member Signature

[Signature]
Committee Member Signature

[Signature]
Committee Member Signature
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Exploring the plight of Black males in education resonated with me when my son entered kindergarten in 2009. He did not have the exciting and affirmative experience that every kindergartner deserves. This caused me to self-reflect and reflect on educational practices in general. Additionally, in the summer of 2009 I was introduced to the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy and was astonished. Feelings I had discussed with select colleagues and family members for years actually had a name. The disconnect between many teachers and students had lead to the pitfalls many Black male students faced each day in schools across the country. This was the beginning of the journey that has brought me to this point.

In my desire to learn more about culturally responsive pedagogy, I am indebted to Dr. Hicks and Dr. Davis; their extensive knowledge of this topic has increased my understanding, caused me to question my own practices, and has lead me to serve as a leader in sharing with others the principles of culturally responsive pedagogical practices.

In completing this journey I would like to thank God for allowing me to persevere through the arduous days and nights. I would not have made it without the encouragement, support, and prayers from family and friends.

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ABSTRACT

SCHOOL DAYS: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS IN GENDER-BASED CLASSROOMS

by

Deirdra Milligan

African American boys bring unique characteristics and experiences into American classrooms. Recognizing the inherent strengths and qualities of these characteristics has eluded educators for decades, leading to misguided special education referrals, increased discipline challenges and dropout rates (Davis, 2003; Delpit, 2012; Kunjufu, 2005a; Kunjufu, 2005b; Kunjufu, 2011; Langhout & Mitchell, 2008). Limited research examines the perceptions of African American boys in an attempt to inform and transform teaching practices. This qualitative case study investigates fifth grade African American boys’ perceptions on how successful they feel in school, their experiences of being in gender-based classrooms, and the influence of teaching practices on their success in school. Data from student interviews and focus groups, student journals, classroom observations, and teacher questionnaires, suggests (1) boys perceive their success in school is dependent on classroom environment, teaching styles, and familial support—primarily of their mothers; (2) benefits of an all-boy classroom are increased attentiveness, comfortability, and teacher’s use of relevant and differentiated teaching practices (3) challenges of an all-boy class include occasional strange feelings of being in a classroom with only boys and some unproductive behaviors; and (4) teachers that foster the success of African American boys create a comfortable learning environment, hold high expectations, are encouraging, and engage
in teaching practices that relate to and motivate students. Knowing what appeals to African American boys can be used to increase participation and achievement of these students in schools.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

History of African Americans and Education

African Americans have a tumultuous history in the United States of America. The hopes of being educated and receiving an equitable education have been a struggle, and the lasting impact of these struggles continue to linger on today (Paige & Witty, 2010; Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado, & Chung, 2008). Schooling and attempts to get an education have been a tough feat in history for African Americans. During the days of slavery African Americans were prohibited from learning to read or write, and once slavery was abolished African Americans were subjugated to inferior schools and materials (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Paige & Witty, 2010). Once schools were desegregated, African Americans were made to feel inferior to Whites and treated with disdain in most desegregated schools. For many years, African Americans have fought to secure the right to a free and appropriate education. Because slavery was successful at getting to the psyche of African Americans and instilling a damaging sense of self-worth, the feelings of inferiority have plagued and continue to plague African Americans as they pursue an education (Paige & Witty, 2010). Currently, African Americans continue to struggle to receive an equitable education, not because of overt Jim Crow Laws, segregation, or prohibition, but because of covert schooling and instructional practices that are discriminatory and favor beliefs, values, and attitudes of White, middle-class students.
Lynn (2006) asserts, “Schools … are a part of a complex web of discursive cultural and social forces that further instantiate white culture, ideals, and beliefs. … The educational system becomes one of the chief means through which the system of white supremacy regenerates and renews itself. Schools… also actively subordinate the culture, language, and social, economic, and political positions of nonwhites (p.116-117).”

The movement continues as schools with predominately minority students are often not manned, maintained, or equipped with the meager necessities needed to properly educate children (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Talbert-Johnson, 2004).

**Origin of the study**

As I reflect upon my professional and personal life, I realize that this study has not only evolved over my career as an educator and mother, but also from when I was a student in primary and secondary school. I attended elementary, middle, and high school in the Southeast and they were not very diverse. There were very few African American students and even fewer African American staff members. In my graduating class of 881, there were approximately 25 African American students. From the first grade to twelfth grade I had a total of the three African American teachers (band, science, and American government) and all were during my high school years. In my elementary and middle school days I remember interacting with few minority students, because there were few to interact with. In high school having a limited
number of African American students caused more social distress for me than anything else.
Growing up, being the only African American student in class on occasions did cause me to feel uncomfortable. Discussions about slavery, the Civil War, and Martin Luther King, always produced stares directed toward me. I felt my response and behavior would indicate to my White peers and teacher, how I and other African Americans felt about the topic being discussed.

While going through school (K-12), I cannot say that I thought much about race as it related to school. Although I did not perform well on standardized test, I did well in school, and maintained good grades and grade point average, and graduated in the top 11% of my class. As a reserved, quiet, and timid African American girl, I did well, but many of my fellow African American peers did not. Although they were considered cool and hung with the popular crowd, my peers that had the most difficulty in high school were the African American males. As a student, I never put too much into why the boys (and a small percentage of the girls) did not care as much about school as I did. Most of them, just wanted to graduate, with few plans of what they would do after the June graduation date. Few of my African American peers had plans to attend college nor were they going into the family business (as some of our White peers). As I reflect, the disadvantages these students would face were much more than a naïve 18 year old could ever imagine.

I have been in education for seventeen years. For the first three years of my career, I was a high school biology teacher in the South. For the past 14 years, I have been a school counselor at an elementary school in the Southeast. During my years as a high school teacher, I enjoyed the daily interactions with the students and I challenged myself to make my class exciting and a class that students wanted to attend. After all, being present in class is the first hurdle to teaching a teenager. Once in class, I felt students must be engaged and the content
must be accessible. I remember when I taught biology, I frequently allowed the students to create songs/raps to demonstrate their mastery of concepts, I incorporated projects where students were able to use their artistic mind, and I often brought in scenes from popular movies that aligned with content standards. I believed that if I was bored, then surely the students would be bored! When I began as a school counselor, I was very naive. I was still under the impression that students that were not successful did not want to learn or just did not have an interest in school. I completely bought into and subconsciously adopted the ideologies presented by those of the dominant culture. This continued for a few years, until one day I realized that these same students that were labeled slow learners or academically behind were living, learning, and surviving day in and day out in their neighborhoods. They knew how to not pay full price for rent or monthly cell phone plans; they knew how to take care of a younger sibling from birth to school age, how to survive without lights and utilities, and how to make a “bed” out of available resources. These students had to be intelligent for they were survivors. My thinking began to change, but I could not figure out where the disconnect lay.

Around the same time, I would hear my colleagues speak in despair about the troubles they were having with their sons’ behaviors in general and their sons’ academic struggles specifically. However, in 2008 when I began to take a deeper look at the plight of boys, specifically black boys, in schools, I saw what resembled a terminal illness for which no one had a treatment. While African American boys possess many talents, skills, and abilities, there still lies an achievement gap between African American boys and their Asian and White peers. African American boys appear targeted for discipline infractions and are dropping out of school at higher rates than their peers. Perhaps it was the realization that my son would soon begin elementary school that made these challenges facing African American boys mean a lot more to
me. Conceivably, the problem does not lie with the students; perhaps it is deeper and more inauspicious. From that moment, I began to reflect and observe. As I looked at the students at my school, I noticed the boys were referred to the office more than girls, boys were referred to me for small group counseling for anger and behavior issues more than girls (76% of those referred were boys). When we went to gender based classes for third through fifth grades, the difference in the academic achievement in the boys and girls was undeniable. From my son to my brother, cousins to nephews, to male friends I care for deeply to students I interact with at my school, my curiosity heightened. Why are African American boys not performing as well when they possess the skills and abilities? What can we do to change their trajectory in schools? Researchers have often spoken with educators and other researchers on the best ways to assist this population, but it is rare that they ever speak to students themselves. Even fewer studies solicit the experiences and perceptions of elementary-aged students. Getting an idea of what motivates and engages students at the primary level would allow educators to employ effective practices early in the student’s academic career. This qualitative study seeks to find out how fifth grade African American boys perceive their experiences in school.

**Statement of the problem**

*Educators struggle to combat dropout rate disparities, Researcher Sound Alarm Over Black Student Suspension, Civil Rights Data Show Retention Disparities, African-American Males in Policy Spotlight* (Hallman, 2013; Shah & Maxwell, 2012; Adams, Robelen, & Shah, 2012; Maxwell, 2012), are just a few of the titles that I have come across relating to African American boys in recent education publications. The achievement of African American students, particularly boys, has been a topic of concern for many educators and systems. Unfortunately, even with the advancements of the technological and digital age, the achievement gap between
African American students and their White counterparts remains incessant. Regrettably, many African American males are not being taught the skills that they need to become successful or productive citizens. These students are not afforded the opportunities to build or experience positive schooling interactions with their teachers or classmates (Delpit, 2012; Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; Porter, 1997; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Townsend, 2002). Unfortunately, teachers often fail, intentionally or unintentionally, to meet the emotional, academic, or social needs of diverse students (Delpit, 2006; Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, & Garrison-Wade, 2008; Hucks, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lynn, 2006; Spring, 2010; Webb-Johnson, 2002). Many African American boys are repeatedly not reaching the same level of academic success as their White peers contributing to higher dropout rates, harsh disciplinary outcomes, and increased referrals to special education (Chu, 2011; Gay, 2002; Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011). When environments conducive to learning are not created, African American boys often feel alienated from school and are often unsuccessful by current school standards (Noguera, 2008; Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). How do we motivate African American boys in order to improve their academic success and outcomes?

Purpose of the study

My primary goal was to seek to understand the experiences of fifth grade African American boys’ in the classroom and the impact their experiences have on their perceptions of school and their performance in school. This study sought to find out what these boys felt they needed to be successful in school and how they perceive their teachers as impacting their performance in the classroom. Since the participants are in single-gendered classrooms, I also sought to ascertain the boys’ perceptions regarding the impact of single-gendered classrooms on their performance in school.
Significance of the study

Unfortunately, many boys, particularly African American boys, are not faring well in schools across America. As educators this should be a concern for us all. The gap in the achievement of minorities, primarily African American boys, compared to their White counterparts is pronounced and incessant (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lee, 2002; Paige & Witty, 2010; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). The disproportionality of African American boys in special education compared to their majority counterparts and the dropout rate for African American boys in this country is tragic. Many mainstream educators do not see the full potential of their African American male students, leading to their poor academic performance, misguided referrals to special education, and increased discipline problems (Davis, 2003; Delpit, 2012; Dray & Wisneski, 2011; Hitchens, 2009; Hyland, 2005; Kunjufu, 2005a; Kunjufu, 2005b; Kunjufu, 2011; Noguera, 2008; Porter, 1997; Townsend, 2002). I am in no way insinuating that the educational system is perfect for all other learners; it is not and is in dire need of an overhaul to effectively educate all students. Boys of all races are facing academic challenges and other minority groups i.e. Hispanics are struggling to reach their full potential in American schools as well (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Kunjufu, 2005a; Kunjufu, 2011; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Noguera, 2008; Whitmire, 2010). It is duly noted that African Americans boys and girls are not performing to the high standards in which they are capable of, nor are these students getting the benefits of being an educated individual in the United States i.e. future opportunities of college and higher paying jobs. As reported in Education Week, understanding the plight of many African Americans in receiving a quality education, President Barak Obama signed a White House initiative (July 2012) to improve the education for African American students (Maxwell, 2012). However, despite their potential, no other demographic is faring as
poorly on academic measures as African American boys. Giving a voice to this disregarded population, this study will focus on fifth grade African American boys. If the United States is to continue to be seen as a powerful nation, improvements in the educational system are vital to make sure all students are achieving to high standards. However, these improvements should not be done haphazardly. Educators need to investigate how African American boys conceptualize their experiences in classrooms in order to determine possible solutions.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed:

1) What do fifth grade African American boys feel they need to be successful in school?

2) How do fifth grade African American boys perceive the benefits and challenges of being in a single-gendered classroom on their performance in school?

3) How do fifth grade African American boys perceive their teachers as contributing to their academic success or failure?

It is well documented that African American boys are not successful by many academic measures and standards (Delpit, 2012; Hucks, 2011; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Plausible solutions for addressing this problem have been raised i.e. employing more African American male teachers, gender based instruction and/or classrooms and more culturally responsive practices (Hitchens, 2009; Kunjufu, 2005a; Kunjufu, 2005b; Kunjufu, 2011). However plausible the solutions, looking collectively at the educational system in American we are not seeing an improvement in the achievement of this population. This leads to the question of race and culture and what role they play in the education of African American male students in public schools. Why do we dawdle when it comes to doing what we can to help this population of students?
Conceptual Framework

Constructivist principles guided this inquiry, as I investigated 12 fifth grade African American boys’ perspective on how they felt about their learning experiences in a single-gendered classroom, what they needed to feel to be successful in school, and how their teachers affected their academic performance. Constructivism emerged from ideas from Jerome Bruner, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky and posits that individuals construct and gain an understanding of information based on what they know and their previous experiences (Martin & Loomis, 2006). Constructivists believe learners come into their own understanding based on what they know of the world, the experiences they have had, and how they view their environment (Martin & Loomis, 2006; Schunk, 2008). Therefore, students make meaning and understanding based on the interactions and happenings in the classroom (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Constructivist classrooms seek to discover student’s values and interest and use those discoveries to guide instruction and assessment.

Constructivists view motivation as a complex concept that is determined by different factors, for different people, at different stages in time (Schunk, 2008). Learning is learner-centered and each student learns in their own way. The learner will make sense of what they are learning based on their experiences and what they know to be true. Therefore, unless the experiences are the same, the learning will be different between individuals (Schunk, 2008). What students know going into the classroom will influence how they learn in the classroom. Teachers that utilize constructivist principles extend learning by presenting new information to students by hooking it to concepts and information that students have from past learning and experiences. This gives students the opportunity to make connections between the new learning and what they previously knew to garner deeper understandings (Schunk, 2008). Those students
who feel they can impact their success in school, will work hard and do all they can to ensure their accomplishment of a given task—a phenomenon known as implicit theories (Schunk, 2008). Constructivist thought is that “…teachers should not teach in the traditional sense of delivering instruction to a group of students. Rather, they should structure situations such that learners become actively involved with content through manipulation of materials and social interaction” (Schunk, 2008, p.237).

Theoretical Framework

I utilized the critical race theory (CRT), sociocultural theory, and culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), to frame this study. Developed in the seventies by Derrick Bell and the work of other legal scholars, critical race theory (CRT) was initiated to address the racism that existed within the legal system in America (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Kohli, 2009; Su, 2007). Critical race theory attempts to elucidate racist practices to bring about social justice (Lynn, 2006; Ortiz & Jani, 2010), and the concept has began to influence educational research. Critical race theory is constructivist by nature. Seeming that racism is a norm in America; CRT looks at how race, racism, and power impact educational practices within the school and classroom. It looks at the teachers’ race and students’ race and how this impacts relationships and the dynamics in the classroom setting. Many standard educational practices help to promote the inequities that exist in the school settings and negatively effects minority students (Hyland, 2005; Jay, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Porter, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Critical race theory exposes how schooling practices “promote racism through White-supremacist teaching practices, white-based curriculum, and school designs that privilege white culture by ignoring and/or denying how racism shapes the lives of students of color” (Knaus, 2009, p. 142). A major component of CRT is that racism exists in every facet of American society (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delpit, 2012; Knaus, 2009;
Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Porter, 1997). Hyland (2005) maintains, “Because Whites and their cultural norms dominate the major U.S. institutions, Whites are privileged, and members of other races are disadvantaged. …racism is essentially about power” (p. 431). The purpose of schooling is to instill White, middle to upper class values and norms for behavior and ways of thinking (Gay, 2002; Lynn, 2006; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Porter, 1997). “There is very little, if any, factual content that is taught simply for its own sake. In most cases, content serves an instrumental purpose in that it illustrates and transmits, skills, principles, theories, concepts, ideals, values, beliefs, and generalizations” (Gay, 2002, 624). The school systems in America are typically not culturally responsive and do not value cultures that are not consistent with mainstream America (Mitchell, 2009; Phuntsog, 2001; Porter, 1997; Richards et al., 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Critical race theory is based on five principles: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest convergence, and a critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). The principles permanence of racism and interest convergence will be utilized in this study.

Counter-storytelling gives a voice to those who are not of the dominant culture (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Knaus, 2009; Ortiz & Jani, 2010). Counter-storytelling seeks to question the assumptions that mainstream society holds to be true. Therefore, beliefs and truths of the dominant culture are critiqued and expose how many of the common practices in education preserve racist ideologies and stereotypes (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Jay, 2009; Knaus, 2009). DeCuir & Dixson contend, “Counter-storytelling is a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes” (p. 27). Therefore, many educational practices and policies perpetuate racist notions as it relates to the education of diverse students.
Due to the history of minorities in the United States and the role of race in the U.S.; being of the white race is viewed as a privilege or something valuable to retain or be (Knaus, 2009; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Being of the white race affords those individuals privileges that non-majority individuals are not afforded. Whites easily gain societal acceptance and the advantage of social, economic, and political policies and practices repeatedly and consistently working in their favor (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Picower, 2009; Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Yosso, 2005). In America, being White is seen as ‘normal’ or ‘regular’ and something that white people fervently and gladly pass on to their descendants.

Interest convergence is a principle of CRT that maintains that those of the dominant culture only entertains equal opportunity or civil rights issues if supporting these issues do not infringe, minimize, or eliminate the rights and perceived entitlements of Whites or the white race (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Picower, 2009; Su, 2007). If educational policies seek to level the playing field for diverse learners an extreme paradigm shift would have to occur, abolishing the advantages of white middle-class students. Although many white people are oblivious to the inherent privileges they receive (Knaus, 2009; Picower, 2009; Vaught & Castagno, 2008), this type of sanction would not receive the support of many in mainstream America. Finally, the last tenet of CRT is a critique of liberalism which fosters a colorblind or color neutral ideology approach to policies. While many open-minded Americans will agree that we are all equal and everyone should be treated the same, looking at U.S. history and the issue of race in America, nothing is colorblind or color neutral. DeCuir & Dixson, 2004 argue, “… the notion of colorblind fails to take into consideration the persistence and permanence of racism” (p. 29). Colorblindness although seemingly the way to neutralize racial bound issues; does not address
inequality or oppression faced by minority persons (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Dickar, 2008; Gay, 2002; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Picower, 2009; Su, 2007). Therefore, even when education and educators take a color neutral approach to instruction and educational practice, minority students are still forced to achieve and interact in a system that perpetuates, maintains, and adheres to values, beliefs, and attitudes of the dominant culture (Gay, 2002). Looking through the lens of critical race theory this study will investigate the role of race in education, in hopes of moving teacher praxis to be more socially just when working with African American males.

Culture forms our attitudes, beliefs, values, language, and communication styles, how we see others, how we view the world, and how we process and interpret information (Ford & Kea, 2009; Gay, 2002; Neuliep, 2009). Birthed from constructivist philosophies is the sociocultural theory. The sociocultural theory maintains that our cognitive development and learning are based on our environment, culture, beliefs, values, and behaviors. Vygotsky, the father of the sociocultural theory, thought schools should be responsible for helping children gain a better understanding of themselves and their place in the world (Schunk, 2008). Vygotsky believed that “learning ‘appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level; first between people (interpsychology), and then inside the child (intrapsychology)” (Wang, 2007, p. 151). Therefore, learning occurs naturally in social interactions; meaning students will take information from interactions amongst their peers and teachers; internalize, process, and interpret that information based on their cultural knowledge and experiences.

Sociocultural learning methods are learner-centered and are based on the principle that collaboration through social interactions and culture are critical components of learning (Wang, 2007). Collaborative learning allows students the opportunity to work in small groups with a common objective; students are able to express themselves, consider the opinions of others, and
collectively problem-solve and complete a task. Additionally, each of these are skills that are required in most workplaces, therefore the benefit is two-fold. A tenant of sociocultural theory is the zone of proximal development (ZPD) which is what children can do on their own as opposed to what they can do with others, when students work with others in their ZPD their learning improves (Schunk, 2008). For learning to occur it is necessary for students to talk and discuss issues with one another and their teacher in order to formulate and make new connections and formulate new ideas (Wang, 2007). From collaborating with their peers, students are able to reflect and construct meaning about the concepts they have studied.

Sociocultural theorist view people’s positioning in the world in relation to their culture, social affiliations, and political situations (Mitchell, 2009). Teacher expectations can greatly affect students’ self-efficacy and perceived abilities of themselves (Rumain, 2010; Schunk, 2008). The concept of self-fulfilling prophecy, also known as the Pygmalion effect, contends that students will perform based on your expectations of them (Gates, 2010; Kunjufu, 2005a; Paige & Witty, 2010). Researchers Rosenthal and Jacobson conducted research on this phenomena and maintain if a teacher has negative thoughts about a student’s ability, the teacher’s interactions with and attitudes toward the child, consciously or subconsciously, will negatively impact their performance in the classroom (Gates, 2010; Paige & Witty, 2010; Rumain, 2010; Schunk, 2008). As Ladson-Billings (2009) contends, “…they [students] continue a cycle of poor school performance that was initiated by a teacher’s biases and predispositions toward them” (p. 64). Students may often feel invalidated and left out when the instructional practices of the teacher reflect only the values, beliefs, and behaviors of mainstream Americans (Richards et al., 2007). Therefore, there is a critical need for culturally responsive schools and
classrooms, classrooms where a student’s culture and strengths are identified and embedded in the instruction and practices.

Developed in the 1960’s, critical pedagogy, emerged from the works of Paulo Freire, as a means to bring about social changes through education (Martin & Loomis, 2006). Critical pedagogy encourages teachers and students to objectively and collaboratively investigate social ills in order to bring about change and build more socially just communities (Martin & Loomis, 2006). Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is a concept birthed from critical pedagogic ideologies. In the late eighties and early nineties, Gloria Ladson-Billings, a professor and researcher, sought to identify the practices that successful teachers of African-American students used to get their students to perform to their potential (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Ladson-Billings investigated at great links teacher attitudes, behaviors, and instructional practices that engage, motivate, and inspire African-American students to perform academically at high levels and maintain a positive sense of self (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Upon her investigation she found that teachers who were thriving in educating African-American students possessed certain qualities, beliefs, and engaged in distinct teaching practices (pedagogy). She termed this teaching pedagogy as culturally responsive in nature. Culturally responsive or culturally relevant pedagogy uses the culture of the students to engage, motivate, and instruct. Culturally responsive educators understand the impact of race and culture in education. They are aware of the injustices that occur within the educational systems, they make sure students are aware of the injustices that are often perpetrated against them, and they do their best to counter the detrimental consequences (Hyland, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006, Porter, 1997). “Culturally relevant teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 140).
Teachers who are culturally relevant help their students understand that often expectations for them to succeed and become productive are low, therefore, they empower students to reject this line of thinking and debunk stereotypes and myths. Students are encouraged to reflect, question, and analyze information to discover their own truths about information that is presented. Students are taught to be suspect and question information presented in the classroom in order to combat inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Culturally responsive educators make learning culturally relevant to the students in which they teach. The student’s culture is embedded into the curriculum, instruction, assessment, and classroom management practices of the educator (Brown, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). Culturally responsive pedagogy is constructivist by nature, it seeks to utilize the student’s culture and experiences to guide instructional practices, motivate, and assess student achievement. Since the material presented is relevant, students are able to construct meaning and learn from information presented in the classroom and transfer that learning to other settings. Culturally responsive pedagogy has three fundamental components; institutional, personal, and instructional (Richards et al., 2007). The institutional component takes into account educational policies, values, and administrative practices. The instructional component takes into account the materials utilized, the way the classroom is set up and managed, the types of instruction implemented in the classroom, and the forms of assessments used in the classroom. The personal component takes into account the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the teacher (Richards et al., 2007). Culturally responsive classrooms foster a multitude of thoughts, viewpoints, and experiences that are brought by the teachers and students.
Chapter 2
Review of Literature

Why Race Matters in School

Schools are political institutions established to produce productive citizens and support the states and areas in which they reside (Hinchey, 2010). Schools were constructed to provide students with a common knowledge, where students at each level are mandated to master selected content and values (Hinchey, 2010). It should be noted whose values and common knowledge are being endorsed and taught. Observing school funding, school hiring practices and staff demographics, disciplinary policies and practices, and mandated curriculum content; it is obvious that school systems in America were not created to benefit African American students, but rather to instill the values and norms of the dominant culture and maintain the status quo (Hinchey, 2010; Hyland, 2006; Lynn, 2006; Spring, 2010). Schooling systems endorse practices that keep those with the power, in power and those without power, powerless (Hyland, 2006; Lynn, 2006; Porter, 1997)! Even as the demographics of students in school change, the “others” (those not of the dominant culture) are at the mercy of those in power to promote their best interests.

School demographics have changed dramatically over the last few years, with an increased number of students who are linguistically, racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse (Dickar, 2008; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002 ). However, the majority of educators in K-12 classrooms remain White, middle or upper-class females (Picower, 2009; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Walker-Dalhouse &
Dalhouse, 2006). It is easy to deduce that many students in their schooling career, particularly minority students, will not have access to a minority teacher (Dickar, 2008; Kohli, 2009; Picower, 2009). This creates a disconnect for African American students, as White teachers often do not understand the ethos of these students (Gay, 2002; Hyland, 2005; Lin & Lucey, 2010). This rift between students’ and teachers’ culture can cause turmoil for all involved (Ford & Kea, 2009; Richards et al., 2007; Skiba et al., 2008).

Since most of the teacher workforce is composed of White females, roughly 83% (US Department of Education Website, 2010) and 73% in Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.), the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of these teachers tend to perpetuate the ideologies of the dominate culture, leaving those outside of that culture at a disadvantage (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2002; Spring, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Picower (2009) contends, “The sheer number of White people in the teaching field in a country marked by racial inequality has implications for the role White teachers play in creating patterns of racial achievement and opportunity” (p. 198). Unfortunately, many White teachers are not skilled at creating culturally responsive classrooms, because they are unable to think outside of their awareness to understand the traditions and beliefs of their students to know and guide their instructional practices (Hyland, 2005; Picower, 2009).

Most educators often contend that they do not see race when educating their students, adhering to a colorblind approach. “Colorblind” educators just see children not race, and cultural differences are overlooked (Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006). While many educators feel being colorblind is morally sound, equitable, and politically correct, being colorblind disregards the histories of the different races and nullifies the impact of race insisting that all students are the same, when they are obviously not. As critical race theory maintains that, adhering to a
colorblind approach, perpetuates the practices and ideologies of the dominant culture and maintains the status quo (Dickar, 2008; Hyland, 2005). Not being attuned to who the children really are is detrimental to establishing rapport with, relating to, and understanding, and instructing the students (Hitchens, 2009; Hyland, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Richards et al., 2002; Talbert-Johnson, 2004).

Consciously or subconsciously, many White educators developed deficient ways of thinking as they relate to African American boys (Kohli, 2009; Kunjufu, 2011; Mitchell, 2009; Picower, 2009; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006). When African American boys are repeatedly unsuccessful at classroom tasks, many educators will blame the students, their truths, and their circumstances for their inability to achieve (Kunjufu, 2005a). These educators do not take the time to examine and reflect on their practices and how their culture and beliefs impact what they do in the classroom and how those practices may not be productive for minority students, particularly African American boys (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Often times, when African American boys attempt to be active participants in school, using the behaviors and practices that are common to them, they are met with harsh vocal tones and punishments to express disapproval of their behavior(s) (Hitchens, 2009; Langhout & Mitchell, 2007). Over time, this can lead students to believe that something is wrong with how they behave and act (Langhout & Mitchell, 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). This often causes minority students to disengage from school and the schooling process, leading minority students to feel that the schooling process is not for them (Gay, 2010; Langhout & Mitchell, 2007; Lynn, 2006; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). When students do not connect with the learning process they do not engage in their learning, and they perform poorly in the classroom setting; which can lead to decreased achievement (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lynn,
2006; Mitchell, 2009; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Lack of achievement is detrimental to the futures’ of these students; they are not afforded the opportunities to enter college and secure professional careers, or benefit from living in the middle to upper social class. This can lead to numerous other societal issues and a cycle that continues and becomes generational.

Why Culture Matters in School

Ladson-Billings (2006) details how culture plays a critical role in how we develop as individuals with regards to our socialization, attitudes, and behaviors. Culture forms our attitudes, beliefs, values, language, and communication styles, as well as, how we see others, how we view the world, and how we process and interpret information (Ford & Kea, 2009; Gay, 2002; Kunjufu, 2005a; Lynn, 2006; Mitchell, 2009; Neuliep, 2009). Culturally responsive teachers reflect and examine how their beliefs, attitudes, and cultures influence their practices in the classroom and perceptions about their students (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Teachers’ practices, beliefs, and behaviors are solely based on their culture, upbringing, and experiences (Artiles et al., 2010; Douglas et al., 2008; Dray & Wisneski, 2011; Gay, 2002; Gay, 2010; Lin & Lucey, 2010; Monroe, 2005; Picower, 2009; Spring, 2010; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Additionally, cultural discrepancies between teachers and students can cause turmoil and stress for teachers, students, and parents (Delpit, 2006; Douglas et al., 2008; Ford & Kea, 2009; Phuntsog, 2001; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Spring, 2010; Talbert-Johnson, 2004).

Spring (2007) purports that students with different cultures bring with them different “cultural capital.” He defines cultural capital as “the economic value of a person’s behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge” (Spring, 2007, p. 192). However, the cultural capital that is acknowledged and accepted in American schools is from the dominant culture, which is White, middle-class, and male (Artiles et al., 2010; Lynn, 2006; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2008;
Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011; Spring, 2010). Therefore, students who come into schools with a cultural capital that deviates from that of the mainstream culture could ultimately have problems in the school setting. The behaviors and attitudes of many African American boys do not give them much cultural capital in school environments. Because schools operate on the values, beliefs, and ideologies of mainstream America, African American boys are often at a disadvantage as soon as they enter school, and the inequalities they encounter continue throughout their school career. Schools are organized today, to determine who will have and who will have not. When students are unsuccessful in their schooling, they are less likely to be afforded future opportunities (Hitchens, 2009; Porter, 1997; Spring, 2007).

Two entities play a profound role in a student’s learning home and school, but if there is a discrepancy in the values between them, students often become confused. Brown (2007) asserts, “Historically, these students were expected to check their cultures at the school or classroom door and learn according to the norms of European Americans” (p. 61). Many students, particularly African American boys, are often unaware of the hidden rules and norms in play in the school setting and often behave and think outside of the dominant norms, precipitating disappointment and discouragement for them in the school setting (Langhout & Mitchell, 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Unfortunately for many minority students, the more a student behaves, thinks, and acts like those in the dominant culture, the more successful he or she usually is in school (Langhout & Mitchell, 2007; Villegas & Lucas 2002). Dray and Wisneski (2011) report, “… teachers are more likely to give a student the benefit of the doubt when clashes occur if the student behaves in a way that the teacher desires” (p. 31). Therefore, those students who do not behave in the way in which the teacher would anticipate or expect will more than likely be in trouble, which could be a reprimand, a behavior referral, or in-school or out-of-school
suspension. Culture matters because how individuals interpret information and behaviors and, how they perceive others and their intentions passes through their cultural filters. Interactions between students and teachers enter these cultural filters with each exchange made in the classroom. Although we like to think that teachers are fair and want what is best for all students they have in their classrooms, teachers bring into the classroom their own preconceived notions and partialities when they teach, interact with students, and perceive student behaviors. As Douglas et al., (2008) reports, “Teachers don’t think in neutral terms but according to or in terms of personal frames of references. These personal frames, biases ... guide ones intentions and their interpretations of presently occurring experiences, specifically what they see and think about Black people” (p. 57).

Boys and Education

In recent years, the decline in academic achievement of male students has become more apparent and a topic of alarm for concerned educators (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Hitchens, 2009; Holliday, 2011; Price, 2011; Whitmire, 2010). Boys are more often referred for special education, cited as having behavior problems, and a general lack of interest in school (James, 2007; Hitchens, 2009; Holliday, 2007; Holliday, 2011; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Whitmire, 2010). Neu & Weinfeld (2007) report, “boys are feeling less and less connected to their school experiences” (p. 14-15). These factors are exacerbated for African American boys in public schools across America. Most educators in American public school systems are White, middle-class females (Ford & Kea, 2009; Hitchens, 2009; Kunjufu, 2005b; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006; Whitmire, 2010). Therefore, it is no surprise that many of the activities, practices, and behavioral expectations in the classroom are more appealing and geared toward the interest and development of girls (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Davis, 2003; Gurian, Stevens, &
King, 2008; Hitchens, 2009; Kunjufu, 2005b; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Some female teachers often have a difficult time with how boys, especially African American boys, behave and think in the classroom and favor the character traits and behavior of girls in the classroom (Davis, 2003; Hitchens, 2009; Kunjufu, 2005b; Kunjufu, 2011; Webb-Johnson, 2002). Some educational researchers will concur that the feminine nature of school contributes to the lack of achievement of boys in school settings (Davis, 2003; Hitchens, 2009; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007).

**Boys in Crisis**

Since boys mature slower than girls, many boys are falling behind in reading and writing (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Gurian et al., 2008; Holliday, 2011; James, 2007; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Whitmire, 2010). Whitmire (2010) contends, “Without the reading and writing skills they need to tackle other course areas, either their frustrations come out in the classroom, they begin to shut down, or they drop out” (p. x). Reading and language skills are often more difficult concepts for the boy brain to obtain (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Gurian et al., 2008; Holliday, 2011; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Whitmire, 2010). There are strategies to assist boys in increasing their competency in reading (Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Whitmire, 2010). Aside from seeing other males reading, boys need to be given the opportunity to read anything that interests them, allowing movement during reading, and the opportunity to listen to books on tape to improve their reading skills (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; James, 2007; Kunjufu, 2011; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007). Establishing mentors and tutors to work with and read with boys is another strategy for working with boys, particularly African American boys (Davis, 2003; Gurian et al., 2008; Hitchens, 2009). In addition to reading, many boys find writing to be difficult (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Kunjufu, 2005b; Kunjufu, 2011; Whitmire, 2010). Boys can have a difficult time
organizing their thoughts to write sequentially or fluidly. The use of graphic organizers can be beneficial to help boys organize themselves and their thoughts. In addition to story starters, assistive technologies, i.e. speech-to-text programs, can benefit boys who are unable to hold thoughts in their head while they master the mechanics of writing (Neu & Weinfeld, 2007). Allowing boys to write about topics of interest and adding a level of competition can be beneficial in helping boys practice writing and develop an interest in writing (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Kunjufu, 2005a; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Whitmire, 2010).

Why Single-Gendered Classrooms Are Beneficial

In the United States, Title IX laws ensure the educational opportunities males and females receive are equitable in public schools. Recent amendments to the law have allowed for the implementation of single-sexed classrooms, if their purpose is to increase student achievement (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Holliday, 2007; Kunjufu, 2006). As a result, there has been an increase in the number of single-sexed classrooms in American schools (Bonner & Hollingsworth, 2012; Gurian & Stevens, 2005). In the Atlanta Public School system, there are four gender-based schools. Coretta Scott King Middle School and Coretta Scott King High School are empowering girls to pursue academic excellence by addressing the needs of female students. B.E.S.T. (Business, Engineering, Science, Technology) Academy Middle School and B.E.S.T. Academy High School are grooming young men to become leaders in a global world. Each school above uses gender-based strategies to develop productive students and future leaders in their communities. However, opponents of single-gendered classrooms are concerned about equity in education and the harm of encouraging students to characterize activities as male or female (Bonner & Hollingsworth, 2012). Nonetheless, many argue for the use of single-sexed
classrooms as a means of improving the academic engagement, participation, and achievement of male and female students.

In recent years, with the aid of image resonance scans and electroencephalograms, much has been discovered about the human brain. These technologies have highlighted the differences in the male and female brains (Gurian & Ballew, 2003; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Gurian et al., 2008; James, 2007; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Piechura-Couture, Heins, & Tichenor, 2011). Researchers and educators are becoming more aware of the impact that these differences have on student performance in the classroom for males and females. Naturally, boys are more active and have less-developed verbal and sensory centers in the brain, and more developed spatial-relation centers in the brain (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007). Many boys do not favor activities that involve sitting still and listening or reading and writing activities. Unfortunately, those are the activities that occur most in many classrooms across the country and often lead to boys being referred for special education services (Piechura-Couture, 2011). Boys prefer learning activities that involve movement and making use of manipulatives. Schools have done and continue to do a disservice to male students by not taking into account the differences in how males and females learn (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Holliday, 2007; Holliday, 2011). This has to change if teachers are to make an effort to educate all students. In efforts to improve the academic success of male students, single-gendered classrooms have been proposed as a viable option to increase the academic achievement of male students, particularly African American males.

Single-gendered classrooms allow educators to purposefully appeal to the behavioral and psychological traits and utilize instructional practices that benefit a particular gender (Holliday, 2007; Holliday, 2011). Single-gendered classrooms have proven to benefit both males and
females (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Holliday, 2011; Whitmire, 2010). Male gendered classrooms have reported a decrease in discipline issues, fewer distractions from girls, educators using high interest and relevant topics in instruction, boys being more engaged in the classroom, and an increase in boys participating in non-traditional courses and subjects, i.e. art, drama, and music (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Whitmire, 2010). Researchers have reported that boys and girls in single-gendered classrooms are often more active participants in the classroom, they improve academically, and they all feel better about school overall (Gurian & Stevens, 2005). Typically, educators in single-sexed classrooms create environments where students feel comfortable taking risks and stretching their knowledge, improving classroom performance.

In order for single-gendered classrooms to be successful, teachers must be trained in how boys and girls learn best (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Gurian, Stevens, & Daniels, 2009; Holliday, 2007). Educators must rethink their thinking on teaching and learning in order to match their teaching styles with the learning styles of the students they are teaching. If teachers are not trained in best practices for boys and continue with old traditional instructional practices in the new single-gendered setting, it is likely that there will not be a change in student engagement or achievement (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Holliday, 2007; Holliday, 2011). Just as culturally responsive educators must believe in their students’ abilities and form insightful relationships with students to garner best instructional practices; the same is true for single-gendered classroom teachers. Establishing relationships is critical, and teachers utilize what they know of their students to establish activities to engage and motivate them toward academic success.
While many educators will assert that most classrooms activities are geared toward females, advocates for male academic success have identified that classroom activities can be productive for male students:

Boys need more movement, more variety, and more stimulation. The movement not only helps boys to manage boredom and impulsivity, it actually stimulates their brains, allowing for better learning. Boys also tend to test the rules and tend to be more motivated by competition. (Neu & Weinfeld, 2007, p. 11).

Many researchers have declared that instruction for boys should appeal to the multiple intelligences (Hitchens, 2009; James, 2007; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007). Boys need to be able to discuss concepts with one another in order to make sense of them (Hitchens, 2009). Other strategies that may increase the academic performance and achievement of boys include the gendered classrooms, an increase in male teachers (primarily African American male teachers for African American boys), the use of visuals, phonics-based reading programs, allowing the manipulation of a small object during instruction, frequent brain and movement breaks, and an increase in relevant content (Davis, 2003; Gurian et al., 2008; Hitchens, 2009; Holliday, 2007; Kunjufu, 2005b; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Whitmire, 2010). Strategies recommended specifically for African American males are an increase in African American male teachers, curriculum programs designed specifically for African Americans, early intervention programs, culturally responsive pedagogy, smaller classes, and revisiting school structures and policies (Davis, 2003; Hitchens, 2009; Kunjufu, 2005b).
Education and African American Males

Over the years, educators and parents have seen a decline in the achievement of male students in schools across the country (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Whitmire, 2010). Specifically, many African American males have not seen success as it relates to academic pursuits and social competencies in classrooms across America:

The United States faces a crisis that threatens our future….this crisis originates from our own neglect. The crisis will continue to erode our social and economic well-being until us, as [a] nation, confront our shortcomings and remedy the disastrous effects. This crisis grows out of our unwillingness to educate all children and youth (Hitchens, 2009, Kindle, chapter 2, section 4, paragraph 1, sentence 4).

The academic achievement of African American males has been in a state of emergency, and despite education reform efforts, these students continue to rank lowest in academic performance, academic functioning, and academic achievement in schools (Davis, 2003; Delpit, 2012; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Hitchens, 2009; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). What impact will these facts have on African American families and communities? “America has made it clear that education remains the key to unlock our full potential and provide access to good jobs and to provide for our family” (Hitchens, 2009, chapter 1, section 3, paragraph 1, sentence 1). If, indeed, education is the key to a successful life, African-American males and ultimately, African American families are in trouble. Kunjufu (2011) asserts, “most school superintendents are aware, almost 60% of their African American male students in kindergarten will not graduate” (p.iv). In American schools, despite their varied proficiencies, African American male students often suffer the fate of overall academic disengagement, low academic achievement, poor socialization, severe disciplinary outcomes, and overrepresentation in special education
programs (Hitchens, 2009; Kunjufu, 2011; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Hitchens (2009) contends, “As [a] result of the decline in educational achievement among black boys, there is a decline in life opportunities as well” (Kindle, chapter 1, section 2, paragraph 3, sentence 2). Unless educational systems identify and rectify educational practices and beliefs that place African American males at a disadvantage, causing low self-esteem, and dismal academic outcomes, generations of individuals will be unable to provide the basic needs for their families or compete in a global society (Gregory et al., 2010; Hitchens, 2009). As Noguera (2009) eloquently states,

> Efforts to improve the academic performance of African American males must begin by understanding the attitudes that influence how they perceive schooling and academic pursuits. To the extent that this does not happen, attempts to help Black males based primarily on the sensibilities of those who initiate them are unlikely to be effective and may be no more successful than campaigns that attempt to reduce drug use or violence by urging kids to “just say no” (p. 27).

**Teachers and African American Males**

Teachers are responsible for ensuring that students are exposed to and master set state standards. This can be a daunting and impossible task for educators who feel they do not have the resources or skills to adequately prepare students for state, district, and national assessments. Teachers can be successful at educating students as long as they believe in the abilities of the students and are willing to discover and engage students in approaches that will help them learn. Despite the competencies of educators, many African American males do not respond to the instructional tactics of their teachers and are not performing or achieving up to par. In addition to how teachers engage, instruct, and assess student performance and achievement, teachers’
perceptions, beliefs, and expectations significantly affect student performance and success in the classroom (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; Richards et al., 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Weinstein et al., 2003). Mitchell (2009) asserts, “They [teachers] tell their students what they believe about the different cultures by the way they teach, their attitudes, and their assumptions about learning” (p. 11). Often White teachers have negative perceptions about African American students and their families, including low student achievement and motivation, behavior problems, and lack of parent involvement (Hyland, 2005; Mitchell, 2009; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006; Yosso, 2005). The perceptions of these teachers can often be detrimental to the educational experiences and pursuits of African American males.

A teacher’s perception of his or her students greatly impacts the students’ performances in the classroom (Chu, 2011; Gay, 2002; Gay, 2010). Teacher’s negative perceptions of African American male students are likely factors in the disproportionality these students face regarding low academic achievement, special education placements, and overall poor schooling experiences (Davis, 2003; Delpit, 2012; Kunjufu, 2005a; Kunjufu, 2005b; Kunjufu, 2011; Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; Smith, 2005; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Unfortunately, many educators’ negative perceptions of African American males often leads to these students being the target of unfair disciplinary sanctions in schools across the country (Gregory et al., 2010; Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Many White teachers, looking through their own cultural lenses, perceive African American males’ behavior’s as aggressive and threatening, prompting them to perceive these students negatively and as troublesome. At all academic levels, African American students, primarily males, have greater chances of receiving out-of-school suspension or expulsion for school offenses than any other group of students.
(Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011). Subsequently, many African American males do not have positive experiences in the classroom setting. Often times, the students that are causing many of the disruptions in the class are often the students that are struggling to access the curriculum and see little importance to what the teachers are attempting to teach (Delpit, 2012; Kunjufu, 2011; Porter, 1997). However, instead of attempting to ascertain ways to help students increase their skill levels and achieve, many schools prefer to address the discipline of the students rather than the issues of teaching and learning (Noguera, 2008). Decreased time in the classroom has a negative impact on the building of academic skills and competencies, widening the gap in achievement and leading many African American males to disassociate school as a place to secure present and future successes.

**African American Male Disengagement in School**

The lack of engagement on the part of African American male students has come to be an issue and concern for many parents, educators, and educational systems and policy makers. There are many suggestions as to why African American males and males in general, disengage from the educational setting. Some suggestions include feminine classrooms, irrelevant curriculums and lessons, a lack of appreciation of different learning styles, behavior differences as a precursor to disciplinary dilemmas, and cultural mismatches (Davis, 2003; Hitchens, 2009; Kunjufu, 2011; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Whitmire, 2010). Researchers report that African American males often perceive school to be a White or feminine activity (Davis, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Since the majority of teachers in schools are females and White, particularly in the primarily grades, 83% White and 84% female (US Department of Education, 2010), they typically plan lessons and activities and utilize materials that interest girls, not boys (Kunjufu, 2011; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Whitmire, 2010). Not
wanting to appear unmanly, many male students will avoid engaging in school activities that they perceive as effeminate, which can negatively affect them academically and can lead to behavior challenges (Davis, 2003; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007). Regardless of the reasons for African American males disengaging from the school setting, disengaging from education can greatly influence prospects that will be afforded to these students in their near and distant future (Hitchens, 2009; Porter, 1997).

Just as teachers often have preconceived ideas about African American male students, many African American male students, operating through their cultural filters, also have a distrust of White educators (Douglas et al., 2008). African American male students, having had negative experiences with present or former White teachers, may perceive all White teachers as racist and not having African American male students’ best interests in mind (Delpit, 2012; Douglas et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2011). An African-American male who graduated from high school in 1973 shared,

I had both white and black teachers. However, the black teachers provided more personal attention to assist students to achieve course objectives. White teachers just presented course material and did not ensure that students understood the material.

(Personal correspondence, November 18, 2012)

Interestingly, generations later the perceptions were similar, an African-American male who graduated from high school in 2013 shared,

In my schooling experience, I felt the white teachers in high school were more focused on you passing their class. However, the black teachers were focused on you taking some real world knowledge away from the class. (Personal correspondence, May 3, 2013)
In addition to impeding the student’s academic success in the classroom, the lack of confidence African American students have for their teachers makes it difficult for a productive teacher-student relationship to be established (Delpit, 2006; Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; Noguera, 2008). African American males often have unique behavior styles that are often not respected or valued in the classroom setting (Davis, 2003; Kunjufu, 2005b; Kunjufu, 2011; Langhout & Mitchell, 2007; Skiba et al., 2011; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Schools typically value particular types of traits in students; however, many minority children, particularly African American males, possess the opposite of these traits, i.e. blunt, oppositional, assertive, and vocal. Typically, in schools, these traits are not seen as positive attributes (Ford & Kea, 2009; Kunjufu, 2011; Langhout & Mitchell, 2007; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Weinstein et al., 2003). When students are not able to express themselves in school using behaviors that are common to them, they began to realize their true character and personality is not valued or respected in that setting. This often leaves students with the perception that school is not a place that they can be themselves and be accepted (Gay, 2010; Langhout & Mitchell, 2007; Lynn, 2006).

**Achievement Gap and African American Males**

Although there is research that suggests that males battle many obstacles in the academic setting, overall African American males are even more marginalized, despite the socioeconomic level of their families (Noguera, 2008). The achievement gap between African American males and their White counterparts continues to be a persistent, frustrating, and troublesome issue for many schools, districts, and systems. According to research there are different factors that contribute to the achievement gap between minorities and their White counterparts. Achievement gaps have been linked to discipline issues, misguided referrals to special education, increased dropout rates for minority students, and fewer opportunities for gainful employment in
adult years (Gregory et al., 2010; Hitchens, 2009; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Schools should serve as a place to foster social advancement and opportunities for all; however, this is often not the case. Because schools operate and function on the values of mainstream America, schools intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate the social injustices of society. According to Villegas and Lucas (2002), “schools are far from being the impartial settings they are believed to be. Built into the fabric of schools are curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative practices that privilege the affluent, White, and male segments of society” (p. 22).

While student disengagement is a factor leading to the achievement gap, it is not the only one. How teachers feel about their ability to teach African American males is crucial. Many White teachers, and some minority teachers, engage in deficit thinking as it relates to African American male students (Douglas et al., 2008; Dray & Wisneski, 2011; Hyland, 2005; Porter, 1997; Yosso, 2005). All students are not comfortable or successful with the current method of teaching, instruction, and assessment. Many instructional and assessment practices consist of students regurgitating irrelevant information that was disseminated to them. Because many White teachers often misunderstand and have negative attitudes about African American male students, they are often not providing these students with the best instructional methods (Douglas et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Kunjufu, 2011). Teachers may subconsciously or consciously hold lower expectations or prejudicial thoughts about African American students and their academic capabilities or performance (Douglas et al., 2008; Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Kunjufu (2011) says it best: “I don’t become what I think I can. I don’t become what you think I can. I become what I think you think I can” (p. 44-45). In addition to teachers not having a keen understanding about the students they teach; many educators also lack the ability to interest and engage their African American male students.
Engagement in academic instruction is a key indicator of achievement in the classroom, and this factor often leaves many African American boys left behind from inadequate and irrelevant classroom activities and lesson plans (Hitchens, 2009; Skiba et al., 2011).

**African American Males Disproportionality in Special Education**

One of the known consequences of the achievement gap is the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, particularly African American and Native American students in special education (Artiles et al., 2010; Fiedler, Chiang, Van Haren, Jorgensen, Halberg, & Boerson, 2008; Kea, Campbell-Whatley, & Bratton, 2003; Porter, 1997). Disproportionate representation refers to the percent of a group’s representation in special education compared to their representation in the general education population (Artiles et al., 2010; Fiedler et al., 2008). African American students, primarily males, have been overrepresented in the category of Emotional Disabled (ED) (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006). It is often questionable how valid the referral processes have been in identifying the special needs of CLD students (Chu, 2011). The causation of disproportionate representation is varied, but often it is attributed to poverty, language differences, incorrect diagnoses, racial biases, and institutional inequalities (Artiles et al., 2010; Chu, 2011; Fiedler et al., 2008; Gay, 2002).

The Individual with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) attempted to address the issue of disproportionate representation of diverse learners. IDEA required states to utilize a system making the process of referring students to special education more objective (Fiedler et al., 2008; Harris-Murri et al., 2006). A required component of the new referral system entails implementing best instructional practices that are research based to improve student obtainment of skills. Implementation of these best practices gives students the opportunity to be successful
in the general education setting with available supports. Many districts have put into place a tiered approach, such as i.e. Response to Intervention (RTI) to the special education referral process (Bradley, Danielson, Doolittle, 2007; Harris-Murri et al., 2006). Typically, the tiered approach is viewed as a pyramid, and the bottom of the pyramid begins the first tier (tier 1), in which the general education teacher implements sound instructional practices in the classroom; this is given to all students (Fiedler et al., 2008; Harris-Murri et al., 2008). If students do not respond to the instruction given to all students, they are moved up to the next tier, where they will received more specialized research based instruction addressing their area of concern. On the second tier, students usually in a small group setting (Bradley et al., 2007). If students do not respond to the selected interventions, they are moved to the third tier. Students on the third tier receive more specific research-based strategies, usually generated by a core team of educators that work at a school, i.e. counselors, school psychologists, administrators, classroom teachers, parents, and support staff. If the student does not respond or improve academically, behaviorally, or emotionally, the student is then considered for a referral for a special education evaluation (Bradley et al., 2007). However, if educators employing a tiered approach do not take into account how culture influences education and learning, the process is still likely to inappropriately identify diverse students for special education (García & Ortiz, 2006; Harris-Murri et al., 2006).

At a greater rate than girls, boys are placed into special education classes (Davis, 2003; Whitmire, 2011), while, African American and Hispanic boys are disproportionately represented in special education and remedial classes and underrepresented in gifted classes (Artiles et al., 2010; Fiedler et al., 2008; Noguera, 2008). Researchers suggest those differences between African American male students and their teachers, usually White and female, often leads to
many of the disciplinary challenges and the referrals to special education (Monroe, 2005; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). It is interesting to note that often a student is seen as disabled in one class, but does not have the same challenges in the next (Kunjufu, 2011). It is imperative for educators and educational systems to make sure their practices and referral processes are culturally responsive and inclusive of all learners and learning styles.

**Why Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Should Be Used**

Culturally responsive educators utilize relevant persons, themes, and situations to teach and assess critical concepts (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2002; Gay, 2010; Richards et al., 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This not only engages students, but it increases students’ interest in participating in class (Brown, 2007; Gay, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Engagement and participation are significant elements of being a successful student in the classroom (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, Chen, 2012). Culturally responsive educators understand that learning is not just from teacher to student; they understand that learning is linear and that their students have knowledge to share (Ladson-Billings, 2009). They capitalize on the knowledge that students bring to the classroom and expand upon it: “students are allowed (and encouraged) to build upon their own experiences, knowledge, and skills to move into more difficult knowledge and skills” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 134-135).

Culturally responsive teachers establish relationships with their students and families, getting to know their students inside and outside of the classroom (Brown, 2003; Harris-Murri et al., 2006; Richards et al., 2007; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007). These teachers know not only their students and families, but they also familiarize themselves with the community in which their students live. Culturally responsive teachers use this knowledge to facilitate class discussions, instruction, and activities; to engage students in the learning process; and to
facilitate home and school connections (Ford & Kea, 2009; Gay, 2010; Harris-Murri et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Mitchell, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Because they know their students, culturally responsive teachers are able to make classroom instruction, activities, and assessments challenging, enjoyable, and relevant to their student’s lives and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Richards et al., 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). In culturally responsive classrooms, students are engaged, on task, and work not only for themselves, but to make their teachers proud (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Culturally responsive educators promote and celebrate diversity by creating a family of learners in their classrooms (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Weinstein et al., 2003). Culturally responsive classrooms (CRC) are very collectivist by nature, and students work cooperatively to complete learning tasks while helping and encouraging each other (Ford & Kea, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Students are encouraged to work together to ensure the success of each class member; furthermore, students in CRCs feel comfortable enough to take risks and chances, allowing themselves to go beyond their own expectations. Ladson-Billings (2009) asserts, “Culturally relevant teaching honors the students’ sense of humanity and dignity. … Self-worth and self-concept is promoted in a very basic way, by acknowledging the individual’s worthiness to be a part of a supportive and loving group” (p 82).

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and African American Males in the Classroom**

Historically, American educational systems do not value the knowledge and interpersonal skills that are brought into the classroom by African American boys (Knaus, 2009). Culturally responsive teachers make it a point to identify their students’ proficiencies and use them to guide their instructional practices. Ultimately, as Ford and Kea (2009) contend, “When teachers are culturally responsive they are student centered: they break down barriers to learning and, hence
provide keys that open doors to students’ success” (p. 1). Students yearn for a positive, productive, schooling experience that challenges them and is relevant to their experiences. To maximize students’ learning, they need to feel physically and emotionally safe and comfortable, but unfortunately, today many children do not have that luxury (Brown, 2003; Langhout & Mitchell, 2007).

African American male students need to feel comfortable and a part of their classrooms (Gay, 2002; Richards et al., 2007). These students should consider their classroom as a place where they can share and take academic risks without persecution or judgment. Culturally responsive educators know their students and can determine which instructional practices will be most engaging for their class; these teachers make sure their teaching styles match their student’s learning style (Montgomery, 2001). Unlike many traditional classroom teachers, culturally responsive teachers do not make the assumption that if students do not come into the class with a particular skill set they are unable to be taught or achieve to the same ability as those who come in with the ideal skills. These teachers operate under the assumption that all of their students have some sort of knowledge and abilities (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). What they know is acknowledged, valued, and incorporated into the classroom” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 95). African American boys need to be able to make connections between skills they are taught and their experiences (Durden, 2008; Ford & Kea, 2009; Hitchens, 2009; García & Ortiz, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Because their experiences are extremely real to them, they need to feel what they bring to the classroom and class discussions is valued and relevant (Durden, 2008; Gurian et al., 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Making classroom content relevant and real to African Americans boys is critical to increasing their participation and engagement in the classroom.
Summary

Through the years, it has become increasingly apparent that boys, despite their skills and abilities, are struggling to perform to the established criteria in the school and classroom settings. African American and Hispanic boys, particularly, have dismal statistics as they relate to academic success in schools (Noguera, 2008). At a greater rate than girls, boys are placed into special education classes (Whitmire, 2011), while African American and Hispanic boys are disproportionately represented in special education and remedial classes and underrepresented in gifted classes (Artiles et al., 2010; Fiedler et al., 2008). Most academic awards are going to female students (Hitchens, 2009; Whitmire 2011). Boys are being left behind at an alarming rate, struggling to meet state standards in reading, language arts, writing, math, and science (Hitchens, 2009; Whitmire 2011). Contributing to their poor performance in schools, African American boys do not feel that many of their teachers care for them, believe in them, or have their best interest as a priority (Douglas et al., 2008; Knaus, 2009; Noguera, 2008). With the majority of educators being White, middle-class, and female, the educational future of many African American males lies in the hands of White educators. What will it take to close the gender gap and adequately prepare African American males to achieve their academic potential? Teachers need to be given the tools and knowledge to reform education to ensure all students have promising academic possibilities (Richards et al., 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Townsend (2002) insists, “There must be an emphasis on culturally responsive teaching and assessment to achieve effective schooling for African-American learners” (p. 228). Unfortunately, there continue to be few culturally responsive educators to work with diverse students (Brown, 2007; Hyland, 2005; García & Ortiz, 2006; Roux, 2001). Change can only
come when those with the power to change school policy utilize their power for good and recognize the need to revolutionize school practices and processes.
Chapter 3
Methodology

Overview of Methodology

Most educators are aware of the incessant achievement gap that exists between African American males and their White counterparts. Much research has been conducted regarding the why’s and how’s: why the gap exists and a few suggestions as to how to close the gap. However, few studies look at this phenomenon from the student’s perspective or for ways to increase their motivation, engagement, and achievement. Considering the key participants in this saga are African American males themselves, it seems appropriate to seek answers from them on what can be done to increase their interest and achievement in school. The purpose of this study was to investigate what fifth grade African American boys felt they needed to be successful in school, how these boys perceive their teachers as impacting their performance in the classroom, and to examine the students’ perspectives on how they felt about their learning experiences in a single-gendered classroom. Students that connect with their teachers, classrooms, and school, feel more comfortable and are in a better position to learn (Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; Richards et al., 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Therefore, those students who repeatedly have negative schooling experiences are less likely to be motivated to learn and often develop negative feelings toward school. When students do not feel a part of the learning process and are taught from a monocultural point of view, they become disconnected from school, lack self-efficacy and self-
concept, and perform poorly in the classroom setting (Lynn, 2006; Richards et al., 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2004).

Qualitative research seeks to provide its readers with a comprehensive perspective and/or explanation of situations, events, or experiences. In efforts to increase the academic performance of African American boys, this qualitative research study utilized a case study approach to explore how these students felt about their gendered-classrooms, their teachers, and school in general. Case studies investigate people, events, or phenomena in a given system, situation, or setting (Creswell & Maietta, 2002; Merriam, 2009; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). This study allowed me to investigate fifth grade African American boys’ experiences in the classroom and the impact their experiences had on their performance in school. I wanted to elucidate how these boys perceive their teacher as impacting their performance in the classroom. Since the participants were in single-gendered classrooms, I also looked at their perceptions of how they felt about their learning experiences in a single-gendered classroom.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed:

1) What do fifth grade African American boys feel they need to be successful in school?

2) How do fifth grade African American boys perceive the benefits and challenges of being in a single-gendered classroom on their performance in school?

3) How do fifth grade African American boys perceive their teachers as contributing to their academic success or failure?
In the Beginning

At the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, Dr. Moore, the principal at Opportunity Elementary (names of county, school and people are pseudonyms), made the decision to implement single-gendered classrooms for third, fourth, and fifth grades. Dr. Moore shared during our interview,

Just studying the data from the time I was an AP [assistant principal] to the time I was principal, it was very evident that the boys were not doing as well. They had more discipline problems; they did not do as well in reading especially, so we decided to try it.

After this change, at the academic assemblies for third-fifth grades, it became blatantly clear: there were few boys on the stage to accept awards for academic excellence. As I looked into the faces of the teachers who had all-boy classes, I could sense frustration and even embarrassment. I wondered to myself, why? Why are the boys not performing as well as the girls? Why is the stage filled with girls, with few boys in their midst? What do we need to do as educators to help the boys succeed? At the end of the 2011-2012, the results were the same. In general conversations I heard teachers of the all-boy classes, grumble that the boys were extremely difficult to engage and that many of the students “just don’t care.” They complained about the behavior of the boys and often lament, “they just need to learn how to act.” Some of the teachers of boy classes could be heard disciplining their students in the halls and having a difficult time with classroom management in their classrooms.

At Opportunity Elementary, many of the African American boys were not performing to their academic abilities and were frequently engaged in behaviors that cause them to be sent to the office and out of the classroom. Subsequently, these students were not performing well
academically nor meeting state standards. Some were identified as students with special needs, some were identified as needing remediation in math or reading, and some were written off by many teachers as “just not giving a damn.” As I reflected on my observations and personal experiences, I began to notice that even my own son, as he started kindergarten, began to harbor negative perceptions about school, he would lament, “it’s the worse place, mommy I don’t wanna go. I hate it!” It was at this time, I knew that I wanted to research how African American boys internalize their experiences in school and how their experiences influence their performance in school.

I decided to concentrate my study on fifth grade African American boys. Fifth grade students are expected to be more independent and take more responsibility for their learning in preparation for their middle school years. Also, teachers have reported having a difficult time with classroom management with the fifth grade African American boys. Another reason I selected fifth grade was, if these students were at Opportunity Elementary since third grade, they had been in a single-gendered classroom for three years, giving them more experience with single-gendered classrooms. I also assumed that it may be easier to obtain information from these students, since they are older in age and have had more schooling experience. African American males are overrepresented in special education, underrepresented in gifted or talented and honors classes, punished more harshly in schools than their Asian, White, and Hispanic peers, and have higher dropout rates and lower test scores (Delpit, 2012; Hitchens, 2009; Noguera, 2008; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). The site of this study is an elementary school located in a suburban area of a southeastern state. Originally, I selected 16 students to participate in the study, but once I received informed consent from students and parents; only 12 students actually participated in the study. To garner the feelings, perceptions,
and attitudes of the selected fifth grade African American boys, I utilized interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and student participant journals. In addition to conducting an interview with the principal on what guided her decision to implement gendered-classes in third through fifth grades, I also administered two open-ended questionnaires to the teacher participants. Data analysis consisted of a methodical organization of data obtained from interview and focus group transcripts, field notes from classroom observations, interview and focus group memos, student participant journals, and teacher questionnaires.

**Research design**

For years, research about children has been filtered through the eyes of their parents and those that work with them (Barker & Weller, 2003; Danby, Ewing, & Thorpe, 2011; Irwin & Johnson, 2005; Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003). In order to gather the actual perspectives of students, it is necessary to allow students to participate in research studies. Because of its inductive nature, qualitative research is a preferred method of research when working with children (Irwin & Johnson, 2005). Answering the questions of whom, what, and why, qualitative methods provide a deep, holistic understanding of a phenomenon in which an individual has been involved (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; Merriam, 2009). This case study allowed me to investigate fifth grade African American boys’ perspectives on how they felt about their learning experiences in a single-gendered classroom, what they felt they needed to be successful in school, and how their teachers affected their academic performance. Since I sought to understand how the participants made sense of their world based on the their experiences, my data collection methods consisted of focus groups, interviews, observations, and student participant journals (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). I used inductive data analysis, using my research data as a source for generating themes
I established reliability by triangulating the data, articulating my positionality, spending extended time in the field, engaging in reflection through journaling and memo writing, giving detailed description of the methodology, and by member checking with the participants in the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Ely et al., 1997; Merriam, 2009).

**Setting and participants**

This case study was conducted at Opportunity Elementary located in a suburban area of a southeastern state. The school was located in a growing area with many businesses and business opportunities. Opportunity Elementary was fortunate to neighbor gracious businesses which afforded the business community different opportunities to get involved in mentoring and tutoring initiatives at the school. The school served mainly apartment homes, and the breakdown is as follows; 31 apartment complexes; 8 hotel/motel dwellings, and 7 neighborhoods that include townhomes, condominiums, or single family unit homes. Schools with a high frequency of free and reduced lunch students can qualify for Title I funding. Title I schools are schools in which the federal government will provide funding for increased instruction support in the core academic areas for students considered “at-risk” for low school performance or failure (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). During the 2012-2013 school year, Opportunity Elementary had a free and reduced lunch rate of over 80%, continuing the schools qualification as a Title I school.

This site was selected because the population of the school is of interest and suited the study objectives. At Opportunity Elementary, the classrooms in grades third through fifth are single-gendered. The school is very diverse, with a student body consisting of numerous cultural groups. The school serves students from many different countries including Africa, India, Russia, Germany, China, Korea, Brazil, Mexico, and America. The school makeup was 56%
Black, 26% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 10% White, and 4% Other. The majority of the teaching staff at the school are White middle-class females. The teaching staff demographics at Opportunity Elementary are 91% female, 9% male, 87% White, 11% Black, and 2% Hispanic. Although the majority of the students at Opportunity Elementary were meeting minimal standards for state mandated assessments, students had not met the same academic success of their on-grade level academic peers in other schools across the county. Students’ academic skills and academic performance, especially for African American males, could be greatly improved. Many intervention and instructional programs had been purchased and implemented with the entire student population, but had shown limited improvement in increasing student academic competencies, particularly African American males.

**Participant selection**

There were seven homeroom classrooms in fifth grade for approximately 140 students, and nine fifth grade teachers. There were four teachers that taught all-girls classes, with one homeroom class being an inclusion class having two teachers part of the day. Five teachers taught all-boy classes, with one of the homeroom classes being an inclusion class, having two teachers part of the day. Assigned to the four all male classrooms were approximately 65 male students, of which 46 identify as African American. Originally, I selected 16 students to participate in the study, selecting four African American boys from each homeroom class. In utilizing a purposeful sample, researchers attempt to identify and elucidate how people understand their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). My intent was to secure a purposeful representative sample of boys; therefore, I originally sought students that had been at Opportunity Elementary since the inception of gendered-classes as third graders. However, this was not the case for all participants in the study. Opportunity Elementary had various
programs available to students to assist them at their academic level. There was a gifted program (Target), which allowed students to work with the gifted teacher once a week and participate in activities and learning to extend and enrich them academically. The Early Intervention Program (EIP) was established to provide students who may have challenges with reading or math additional supports. Students qualify for the EIP program based on reading test scores and teacher checklists (Georgia Department of Education website, 2013). Students participating in the EIP program often received additional instructional supports from another teacher who works with them in a small group to deliver specific, targeted instruction in the student’s area of need. Special Education services with a special education teacher were also available to students with an individual education plan (IEP) for a qualifying disability, such as a learning disabled. It was my intention to include boys of varying school performance abilities, including those students labeled EIP students, gifted students, students with special needs, and general education students (those students who were not labeled EIP, gifted, or students with special needs). After International Review Board (IRB) was granted from Hope County for the study, I met with the original 16 African American boys to explain the study, answer any questions, solicit their participation, and administer the consent forms. Prior to meeting with the 16 boys, I had the opportunity to share the study with four of the boys’ mothers as they made impromptu visits to the school, and they were all receptive and readily signed the permission for consent when the forms went home. Obtaining permissions for student participation lasted about two weeks. One student never returned his permission to participate; I attempted to reach his parent numerous times, but was unsuccessful. Another parent sent the consent form declining for her son to participate. I was somewhat disappointed because he was one of two boys that were identified as gifted. I was never able to reach his mother to discuss his participation in the study. I spoke
with another mother about her son participating in the study, and she declined his participation, stating he was already doing too much, but she wished me well and saw the importance of the study. The third mother that declined her son’s participation in the study took offense to me singling out African American males as participants for the study. This mother asked that I call her immediately to discuss the consent forms that had been sent home. When I spoke with her over the phone, she was less than pleased with my topic of study, and she informed me that she would not introduce such things as race and prejudice to her son at such a young age. She stated, “I do not feel that it is appropriate to include kids in this study because they do not know what they want nor need as far as their education goes. Furthermore, I do not feel that race plays any part in education, and the difference in achievement has to do with parental involvement, not race.” This mother felt it would be more appropriate if I spoke with parents instead of students. I agree that parental input would provide another important element as it related to the academic success of African American boys, and I told her as much. However, my primary focus of the study was gaining the perceptions of the boys in efforts to improve teaching practices and their academic outcomes. I thanked her for her concern and tried to explain to her that I would not be speaking to the students specifically about race but rather getting the perceptions of the boys’, who happened to be African American, and their feelings on school, the schooling process, their teachers, teaching styles, and gender-based learning. Nonetheless, she was not happy with my plans and did not feel that the students were in a position to be able to assist me with this project. The counselor in me feels the exact opposite. Everyone has a voice, whether it is expressed verbally or nonverbally, and everyone deserves to be heard and most importantly listened to; so, respectfully, we agreed to disagree. In addition to the student participants, each teacher participant was given and returned a consent form for the classroom observations and the teacher
questionnaire. At the end, I collected 12 permission forms for participation in the study and five permission forms from teachers who would be participating in the study, as well as the principal’s permission form. The five teachers were actually the teachers of the fifth grade boy classes.

**Student Participants.** All of the participants were African American males in an all-boy class in fifth grade at Opportunity Elementary (see Appendix A). Of the 12 student participants, five of the students qualified for EIP services, meaning ideally that, for reading, math, or both; students receive additional supports. Two of the boys qualified for services as students with special needs; they received special education services from a special education teacher for various segments of their school day. One of the boys received both EIP services in addition to special education services for speech and language. Four of the boys were general education students; these students did not receive any additional supports. One of the boys was labeled gifted which meant he participated in the gifted program (Target) at the school with the gifted teacher once a week. It should be noted that one of the boys had to withdraw from Opportunity Elementary before the study was completed. While the primary participants in the study were fifth grade African American boys, a portion of the study was conducted in the classrooms. Therefore, it is necessary to describe the classrooms as they were pivotal to the study and the perceptions of the student participants.

**Teachers and classrooms.** When this fifth grade class was in third grade, Dr. Moore, decided to establish gendered-classrooms. There were five teachers that taught the four all-boy classes (see Appendix B). Each class had a theme that set the tone for the classroom aura.

**Mrs. Hall.** Mrs. Hall is an African American teacher that has been teaching for 19 years and has been at Opportunity Elementary for 14 years. I have known her since she has been at
Opportunity Elementary, and we have established and sustained a professional relationship, and over the years, we have become friends as well as colleagues. We have seen each other grow professionally over the years. Mrs. Hall admitted that personal experiences with her brother and cousins allowed her to see how the educational system had done a disservice to African American males. Furthermore, in working with the students throughout her career, seeing the behavior and emotional challenges and differences in the learning styles of African American boys led her to understand that these students were misunderstood and often misdiagnosed.

Taking it upon herself to research best practices for boys when Opportunity Elementary became gendered in grades third through fifth, Mrs. Hall made a conscious effort to do what was best for her students. Therefore, she decided to loop up with her students, she was their teacher for third grade, fourth grade, and fifth grade. At this point she felt she definitely had a better understanding of African American boys and was sensitive to their needs, but she, too, desired more professional development on teaching gendered classes. Mrs. Hall realizes that having knowledge about the cultures of her students helps not only her students and parents feel comfortable about her class, but sets a tone of acceptance in her classroom. From her teacher questionnaire, she indicated that she seeks to know each of her students on an academic level, as well as a personal level; this helps her develop rapport with the students and gain their trust.

Mrs. Hall had 21 students listed on her class roster; although not all of the students had been in Mrs. Hall’s class since third grade, approximately 75% of the students had. She was able to establish meaningful and lasting relationships with her students and their families. Gabriel stated, “I love my teacher, because she wants us to succeed.” The theme for Mrs. Hall’s class was H.I.T. Squad (Hall Institute of Technology). Her class consisted of general education and gifted students, and her class make up was 5% Asian, 50% Black, 25% Hispanic, and 20%
White, half of which were Brazilian. When one walks into her class room he or she would be greeted by the boys saying, “Gentlemen there’s a lady/ gentleman in the room, show your respect.” The students would then take a bow and then continue with their assigned activity.

The classroom was fitted with two exercise bikes, one Gazelle Edge, an electronic drum set she purchased this school year for the boys, and a TV/VCR cart with a Wii game system hooked up to it.

**Ms. Bling.** Ms. Bling is an African American teacher that has been teaching for six years and has been at Opportunity Elementary for three years. When she arrived at Opportunity Elementary, she brought a new style of teaching to her team. At her guided reading tables, she replaced chairs with exercise balls, had exercise equipment in her room, and drums. Her students learned chants and songs throughout the school year, to help them remember key rules and concepts, therefore, the class was rarely quiet. Needless to say, there were many teachers that did not welcome the way she taught her class and even now she has quite a few who would prefer if she were more traditional in her approach to teaching. Ms. Bling had 16 students listed on her roster and her class was considered to be an EIP class, the majority of her students received additional support in reading and/or math. Her class make up was 6% Asian, 50% Black, 25% Hispanic, and 19% White. Just as in Mrs. Hall’s class, when you walk into her class room you would be greeted by the boys saying, “Gentlemen there’s a lady/ gentleman in the room, show your respect,” the students would then take a bow and then continue with their assigned activity, actually this is a practice that Ms. Bling shared with Mrs. Hall. Ms. Bling is open to sharing and assisting others in developing their teaching practices and classrooms to engage students.
Mrs. Long. Mrs. Long is a White female and has been teaching for 12 years; she has been at Opportunity Elementary for six years. During her first three years at Opportunity Elementary she was a first grade teacher. She began working with fifth grade the first year that they went to gendered classrooms and she had an all girls classroom that she co-taught with another teacher. For the past two years she has taught an all-boy fifth grade class. Mrs. Long’s class was identified as a general and gifted education class, meaning the majority of her students were general education students, but she did have some students that were considered gifted and work with the gifted teacher. Mrs. Long’s had 17 students listed on her class roll, and her class make up was 12% Asian, 53% Black, 29% Hispanic, and 6% White. Interestingly, Ms. Bling and Mrs. Long have literally removed the wall that separated the two classes and for the past two years they have combined their classes into one large class. This year they had 33 students combined. The combined class consisted of general education, gifted, and EIP students and the two teachers worked with all of the students interchangeably. While Ms. Bling and Mrs. Long have seemingly different personalities, they work amazingly well together. With their collaboration, both of them grew professionally and maximized each of their strengths in the teaching and instruction. As in Ms. Bling’s class, when you enter the classroom, you would be greeted with, “Gentlemen there’s a lady/gentleman in the room, show your respect,” the students then a bow and continue with their assigned activity. They had a Gladiators’ theme, in the classroom. The classroom contained three drums, an exercise bike, a trampoline, iPads, and netbooks (the technology carts for the grade level were housed in this classroom).

Mr. Waller. Mr. Waller/Reid’s class had 21 students on their class roster, five of which were identified as requiring support through special education. The theme for the class was the Bulldog Scholars and the class make up was 6% Asian, 71% Black, and 23% Hispanic. Mr.
Waller is a White male teacher that has been teaching for three years, all of which have been at Opportunity Elementary. He is currently in graduate school pursuing his degree in educational leadership. From his teacher questionnaire, Mr. Waller indicated that he felt African American male students needed a lot of positive attention and admitted that he is continually learning and growing as it relates to working with African American male students. He felt that increased parental involvement would allow him to better understand his student’s lives outside of the classroom, helping him inside of the classroom. Mr. Waller understood that in order to meet the learning needs of his students, he must be aware of their cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. He stated, “He takes the time to know his students interests, values, and experiences so that he could use them to engage his students in and out of the class.” In his opinion, African American boys respond to explicit instruction rather than implied instructions/directions. Mr. Waller’s class was identified as an EIP class and an inclusion class. In his classroom there were students who required special education services for their academic instruction per their IEP; Mr. Reid was the teacher for students with special needs that provided support for these students in the classroom.

**Mr. Reid.** Mr. Reid is also a White male and has been teaching for six years and has been at Opportunity Elementary for three years. Mr. Reid is a product of the Teach for America program and that has garnered him experiences and training in utilizing culture, which influenced his instructional practices. From his teacher questionnaire he shared that he understood that diversity should be appreciated and embraced, this allowed him to learn from his students as well as them from him. Additionally, he felt his dialogue and collaboration with teachers from diverse backgrounds and teachers of the dominant culture helped mold his knowledge of instructional practices. Mr. Reid sought to learn strategies for when cultural norms
and educational requirements conflict. Mr. Reid admitted that ministerial trainings and home
visits have helped him to bridge cultural gaps. To aid in his understanding of his students and to
guide his instructional practices, he listened to his students and tailored word problems, reading
passages, and classroom activities to be more relevant. Additionally, he used sports, television,
and music to engage students in discussions. He realized that “public reprimand and power
struggles” do not work with African American male students. While Mr. Reid felt extremely
comfortable working with this demographic, he felt there was still a lot that he could learn. He
would love to be able to conduct more home visits, do related book studies, and even speak with
older African American male students about their experiences with white teachers that “just
didn’t get them,” to help him grow as an educator.

**Data collection and sources**

**Interviews.** To garner student’s perspectives and experiences, students participated in
student interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and student wrote in journals.
Interviews are one of the most common forms of data collection in qualitative research and are
extremely beneficial when conducting case studies (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). I
conducted three semi-structured interviews with each student participant over a 12 week period,
and each interview was recorded with a digital recorder for transcription. Open-ended questions
guided the interviews (see Appendix C), but I allowed the participants to expound upon any
issues or topics that came up during the interview process. Due to time constraints and the often
limited attention spans of student participants; each interview lasted at minimum of 15 minutes,
but no more than 25 minutes any given time.

The interviews permitted me to obtain an account of the participant’s feelings, thoughts,
and perceptions of school, their teachers, and being in a gender-based classroom. The
interviews also allowed me to garner information from each participant that I would not be able to observe in an observation, and it gave the student participants a platform to share their stories and experiences in their own words. During subsequent interviews, I was able to member check, verifying information that students shared in previous interviews; to make sure I had adequately interpreted their responses.

In 2010, Dr. Moore, the principal at Opportunity Elementary, decided to make the classrooms in third through fifth grades single-gendered. It was speculated that she separated the classes to keep the male and female students from being distracted by one another and enable them to concentrate more on their academics in hopes of increasing student performance and test scores. I conducted an interview with Dr. Moore to determine her intent and rationale for separating the girls and boys in third through fifth grades. I transcribed the interviews verbatim for analysis.

**Focus Groups.** During focus groups, participants are able to share their knowledge and experiences with others who are involved in similar experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). The focus groups allowed me to verify comments students made during previous interviews and assisted in data triangulation. During the study, I conducted two focus groups with each group consisting of three to four boys. Due to the seriousness of one of the focus group discussions, I conducted an additional focus group meeting for these boys. Each focus group consisted of no more than four boys, but often just three boys were present due to student absences. I have found in working with my counseling groups, with larger groups of children, it is easy to lose focus and harder to stay on task, so I kept the groups small in number. I identified each group as a lunch bunch group, and in order to adhere to scheduling and time concerns, each focus group was conducted during the student’s scheduled lunch block and lasted
around thirty minutes. Each focus group was recorded with a digital recorder for transcription. The use of focus groups allowed me to gather multiple views and perspectives of how these fifth grade African American boys felt about their gendered-classrooms, their teachers, and school in general (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In utilizing the focus groups, I gave the boys the opportunity to share their experiences in school and share what they perceived as necessary to be successful in school. During our focus groups, students and I discussed what students felt they needed to be successful in school and how they felt about being in a single-gendered classroom (see Appendix D). The focus groups allowed me to gather data, but also gave the boys the chance to see commonalities and differences in how they and their peers felt about their experiences in school (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). During our focus groups, students felt extremely comfortable being around their peers, this prompted them to share and reveal many of their thoughts and feelings regarding their experiences in their classrooms and their teachers. Focus groups were transcribed verbatim from the digital recordings and memos created for coding and analysis.

Observations. The observations gave me the opportunity to attain a visual picture of the students’ behavior and participation in the classroom. I was able to elicit a firsthand account of discussions I had with the boys during the focus groups and interviews and provided a background for additional questions for interviews or focus groups (Merriam, 2009; Mulhall, 2003). I was only able to conduct two: 30 minute observations of each of the boy classrooms. As the study evolved, an additional goal of the observation was to witness the teacher-student interactions and to get a feel for whether or not the student’s classroom environment provided them with the tools they felt they needed to be successful in school. Field notes and memos were constructed from classroom observations for coding and analysis.
**Student journals.** While this study included interviews, focus groups, and observations, I also wanted to determine how students felt about their ability to be successful in school through the use of journaling and journal prompts. In their journals, students were able to draw and write responses to journal prompts. I included the element of drawing because it is documented that many boys can formulate their thoughts and write better if they are initially able to create a visual, i.e. drawings or graphic organizers (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Kunjufu, 2011; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007). While drawing was not required of the participants, it was encouraged and welcomed. Student drawings are an opportunely way many children prefer to use to express their thoughts and feelings (Barker & Weller, 2003). This is especially helpful for those students who may not be apt at writing, but who can share by using a visual representation. Journaling allowed students to share feelings and perceptions that they may not have felt comfortable discussing in an interview or focus group setting. The journal allowed students to express themselves on their own time and in their own way. With the journals, it was my hope that students would feel at ease to share deeper thoughts and feelings about their experiences. At the start of the study, I inquired whether students wanted their journal prompts one at a time or all at once to work on throughout the study time. All of the boys preferred to have the journals with the all the prompts so they could work on them throughout the study. Therefore, I pasted each journal prompt (see Appendix E) throughout the journals and gave them to the boys. With numerous reminders and persuading, eleven boys turned in their journals by the end of the study period. Although it was an option, students did not draw. Journal entries were coded and analyzed to determine students’ feelings about what they needed to be successful in school.

**Teacher Questionnaires.** While the primary data sources were those from the student interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and student journals, I did feel it was
necessary to get a feeling of how the teachers perceived their African American students and culturally responsive pedagogy. “Teachers are largely responsible for what and how students learn” (Roux, 2001, p. 45). African American boys need teachers that understand them, or are willing to learn about them, and establish constructive relationships with them. Therefore, I distributed two open-ended questionnaires to the five fifth grade teachers of the all boy classes. The questionnaires (see Appendix F) explored the teacher’s feelings about teaching in a diverse setting, their experiences and beliefs about African American males, and how efficacious they felt in teaching these students. I also sought to understand how these teachers perceived and implemented culturally responsive practices when teaching African American males. Culturally responsive teachers are aware of their students’ interests and needs, and they use those interests and needs to facilitate classroom instruction, management, and assessment (Delpit, 2012; Ford & Kea, 2009; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Townsend 2002). I was interested in knowing what strategies teachers found productive or unproductive when working with these students. While I administered two open-ended questionnaires for each of the five teachers, I did not receive questionnaires back from Mrs. Long or Ms. Bling, but did receive two questionnaires each from Mrs. Hall, Mr. Reid, and Mr. Waller.

My role as the researcher

When conducting qualitative research, the researcher often uses him or herself as an instrument, meaning that the researcher has a great deal of power and is a significant force in shaping and designing the study (Ely et al., 1997). Researchers bring their own experiences and histories to the study. The qualitative researcher selects the topic of inquiry, identifies the data sources, selects the data to be included in the study, analyzes the selected data, and interprets the
data through his or her own personal filter (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Ely et al., 1997; Merriam, 2009).

My intention during this study was not to contaminate the participants’ setting, but to obtain an authentic feel for the students’ experiences and how they typically behaved and interacted in their classrooms. I attempted to limit my involvement during the classroom observations; however, as a long-time school counselor at Opportunity Elementary, it was often difficult to do. I often was required to get involved during the classroom observations; still, I do not feel this affected the participants’ typical behaviors, nor did it contaminate the classroom setting. I have been privileged to establish productive rapports with the students and most of the staff at Opportunity Elementary. My role as a school counselor often involves me getting to know many of the students fairly well. Prior to the study and during the study, I visited classrooms and occasionally had lunch with the classes, most of the students, not only participants, felt comfortable with my presence in the room. In fact, my presence in the classrooms was not an out of the norm phenomena, part of my duties as a school counselor necessitates me being in the classrooms and interacting with the students. Frequently, the boys, those participating in the study and those who were not, asked for my assistance, and were eager to show me the work they created to show their learning.

**Positionality**

I am an African American female with two children: a son and a daughter. If I am to be honest, I worry greatly about my son, more so than my daughter. My young son, in a few years, will be viewed by many in our society as vile, untrusting, and menacing. Unfortunately, there is very little I can do to change or protect him from this fate. As a mother of African American children, I intentionally seek to provide them with the best education opportunities that I can.
Unfortunately, I cannot always guarantee that they will have the best educational experiences. My children attend schools similar to the ones I attended as a child - predominately White, middle-class. Since the world is so diverse and being globally conscious or competent is necessary in the 21st century, I would like for my children to be comfortable interacting with people from all walks of life. I like to expose my children to various cultures and experiences. Since Opportunity elementary has an extremely diverse student population, I involve them in activities there to increase their exposure to people of various cultures and backgrounds. I instill respect in my children: respect for God, respect for themselves, and respect for other people. In order to foster a sense of self-pride in my children, I consciously seek opportunities for them to associate with peers that share their race and cultural heritage; I involve them in activities and ministries at our church which is predominately African American. This allows them to grow in their spiritual heritage, gain a positive self-concept about their race, and interact with other African American people.

I grew up in an African American family. As far as I can remember, my first exposure to other cultures and races was when I went to school at age five. Prior to attending public school, I was exposed only to family and close friends who happen to share my culture and race. First, my family instilled a strong belief in God and His ability to care and provide for you if you believe in Him, and attempt to live a life that is pleasing in His eyes. Studying my faith has affected how I treat others, how I view and handle adversity, and how I go about my day-to-day activities. I have been taught to work hard because nothing will be given to you. I have always been told as a minority; I would have to work twice as hard to be recognized as even slightly competent compared to my White counterparts.
My extended family is filled with African American children. Some of them have done remarkably well having little or no problems going through the public school systems in America. Others have struggled, but with the continued support of family and that caring educator, they have made it through the ‘system.’ However, I have other family members, ‘little black boys’, who have not met success in the school systems in America. Unfortunately, they have been placed in alternative settings, referred for special education support, or have dropped out of school. This weighed heavy on my mind as I conducted this study and at times brought forth feelings of anger and empathy, with and for the student participants.

It is my belief that educators should be on a constant quest to hone their skills and improve their praxis. I view myself as a child advocate, and I think it is our responsibility as educators to do what we can to help all students achieve, regardless of what label may be bestowed upon them i.e. attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabled (LD), linguistically diverse, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), socioeconomically diverse, etc… . The plight of these young students is not far removed from my conscious. As I look into the faces of students at Opportunity Elementary, I see cousins, nieces, nephews, sons, and daughters. There is little to no way that I can go on without feeling a sense of urgency to examine the ills that lie in a broken educational system. As I grow older and have more experiences and exposures, the words of older and wiser family members reverberate in my mind, “things are not always equitable for black people” and “white people do not care about the well-being of black folks.” Could these statements possibly be true? All my life I have fought hard to believe this was a lie. However, as I look at many communities I understand that many of the social woes that plague African American communities have a root. That root stems from education and the educational opportunities (or lack thereof) that are afforded to African
American students. It does not seem coincidental that a lack of educational opportunities and societal ailments afflict many African American communities.

In qualitative research, the researcher often uses him/herself as an instrument in attempts to identify and explain how people understand their experience(s) (Bogdan & Biklen 2007; Merriam, 2009). I have both a professional and personal interest in this research topic. While I do have strong feelings on this topic, I had to make certain not to interject my personal thoughts and feelings during interactions with participants and in how I interpreted results. Journaling allowed me to express my feelings during the study and keep the data pure (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Ely et al., 1997; Merriam, 2009). My role as a school counselor and researcher was also a balancing act. As the students shared with me, I often wanted to jump into my counselor role which was not my place at that time. I had to make a concerted effort to not allow that to occur during my role as the researcher. Each day, I see how the schooling experience has failed and done a disservice to many students. Some educators and systems have made it difficult for African American boys to demonstrate the knowledge and skills they hold. Many of these boys are at a point where they have little hope of ever meeting academic success. While some students internalize this as failure, develop low self-esteem, and waddle in a pool of hopelessness, others act out with maladaptive behaviors that leave their teachers and parents unsure of what to do next! Did these students ‘fail’ or did ‘the system’ fail them? African American boys need our help. What can be done to assist this population in achieving their highest potential?

**Code of ethics**

Because I have such a personal and professional interest in this study, I conducted it with the highest level of integrity. No study elements were conducted until prior approvals had been
obtained. I followed the directives of the county and maintained the privacy and confidentiality of each participant. I, in no way, wanted my participants to be penalized or ostracized for their participation; therefore, I did not speak with teachers regarding anything that was discussed directly in our meetings. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, school, and county names; research information and documents were either stored on a password-protected personal computer or an audio recorder locked in my desk while at work. Journals and teacher questionnaires were stored in a locked desk drawer at my home.

**Establishing Credibility**

In qualitative research, the researcher brings his or her experiences and worldviews to the study. To assist in eliminating biases and establishing credibility, the researcher should be transparent, identifying his or her background, stance, and positionality as they relate to the research topic or issues surrounding the research topics (Bogdan & Biklan, 2007; Ely et al., 1997; Merriam, 2009). When seeking to establish reliability and credibility qualitative researchers articulate their positionality, spend extended time in the field, engage in frequent reflection, journal, write memos, give detailed description of their methodology, and conduct member checking (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). As suggested when working with student participants, I asked similar questions to determine if I received similar responses from students (Kortesluoma et al. 2003). All interviews and focus groups were recorded with a digital recorder for transcription. When transcribing interviews and focus groups, I made sure that I interpreted and understood what the participant shared, by verifying my interpretations with students during subsequent interviews and focus groups. This is of particular importance when dealing with students. As Barker & Weller (2003) contend, students do not always answer questions directly, but instead indirectly; students may “highlight issues and experiences
important to their own lives” (p. 47). Therefore, going over responses with each student participant to make sure I accurately understood what the student’s were sharing with me was important to establishing credibility.

I have worked as a school counselor for fourteen years at Opportunity Elementary, and during this time, I have been able achieve a certain level of comfort and connectivity with the parents, students, and staff. Many parents, students, and staff members have confided in me regarding issues they have had within the school and on a personal level. Knowing that I would maintain professionalism and their confidence made them feel at ease sharing with me. Additionally, students understand that I am genuinely concerned for them and their well being. Staff members know that I take my job very seriously and work diligently to work with teachers, parents, administration, and students to identify and remove barriers that may hinder the academic success of students. These things helped me establish trustworthiness with the participants. Because I have been a school counselor at Opportunity Elementary for some time, I have been able to get to know most of my coworkers and many of the students and their families. Just as with working with adults, building a productive rapport with participants is important for garnering candid responses from student participants (Barker & Weller 2003; Danby et al., 2011; Irwin & Johnson, 2005; Kortesluoma et al., 2003). I continued to build relationships with the students in the study and their classes, throughout the study I periodically went into the classrooms to visit and had lunch with the different classes. In order to build reliability, I triangulated various data sources: interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and participant journals. I triangulated my data with research literature on culturally responsive pedagogy, African American boys and education, and gender-based classroom instruction.
Data Analysis

Data analysis required methodical organization to analyze and decrease the data obtained from interview and focus group transcripts, field notes, interview and focus group memos, student response journals, and teacher questionnaires. In order to manage, maintain, and organize the information I acquired during this study, I utilized the Atlas.ti program. Atlas.ti is a qualitative data analysis software program that allows qualitative researchers to organize, arrange, mine through, and evaluate large quantities of data and information (Creswell & Maietta, 2002; Maietta, 2006; Muhr, 2009). In the Atlas.ti program, I was able to code data and create memos for individual codes and create memos for each document I analyzed. Atlas.ti allowed me to analyze, code, and create networks from my various data sources. This analysis allowed me to use open coding to identify general patterns and axial and selectively coding to categorize and examine the data more specifically. I was able to code the data from the interviews from individual students, and then I was able to look at codes that occurred over the different students. I centered my attention on differences and similarities in the students’ perceptions. Focus groups were coded and I was able to identify and arrange codes that were similar to the codes from the student interviews. I coded the field notes from the observations and the notes from the student journals. Atlas.ti allowed me to create networks as I grouped similar codes from my data sources. Once this data was analyzed, I was able to utilize a cross-case analysis to establish themes that ran across the interviews, focus groups, observations, and student journals. Utilizing the data from interviews, focus groups, observations, and student journals, I triangulated the data as it related to the research questions. This data gave a good indication of fifth grade African American boys’ perspectives on what they felt they needed to be successful in school, how they
felt about their learning experiences in a single-gendered classroom, and how their teachers affected their academic performance.

The principal interview allowed me to understand Dr. Moore’s rationale for deciding to implement gendered classes in grades third through fifth. While I did not code the teacher questionnaires, they gave me a background into the teacher’s practices. The questionnaires also helped me to connect the teacher’s practices that I observed in the classroom to the teacher’s beliefs and perceptions discussed in their questionnaires.

**Limitations**

During the study of the fifth grade African American boys there were limitations that I should note. A limitation I want to note was my conflicting role as a researcher and counselor. As the students shared with me, it was difficult not revert into my counselor role and delve in and address the concerns. I had to remain objective as a researcher and also as a counselor, while also making sure the students’ best interests were addressed. The findings were limited by the nature of the study and the type of school examined; Opportunity Elementary is a Title I school with a high African American and Hispanic population and gendered-classes for grades third through fifth. While most public schools do not offer gendered classrooms, results of this study could be transferable to settings with similar demographics. Quantitative researchers may find the small sample size a limitation, however, my purposeful sample of 12 students allowed me to garner a deeper understanding of the schooling experiences of these students (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

My initial thinking was that students may have felt information that was shared would be relayed to their teachers, preventing them from speaking candidly. I was pleased that the students felt comfortable enough to share their innermost thoughts and feelings regarding things happening in their classrooms. Students were not hesitant to share their genuine thoughts,
feelings, or perceptions. In fact, the students spoke candidly, often imitating the adults they spoke about. They also expressed their raw emotions, knowing that they would not be reprimanded or scolded for what they shared. I allowed the students to be themselves, and they did not feel guarded or stifled.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine fifth grade African American male students’ perspectives on what they felt they needed to be successful in school, how they felt about their learning experiences in a single-gendered classroom, and how their teachers affected their academic performance. There is limited research data on the experiences of young elementary aged African American boys. Therefore, I sought to gain a better understanding of how these boys internalize their experiences in the classroom and their teacher’s instructional practices. It was my objective that this study would give educators ideas on how they can motivate and better serve African American boys. Knowing how fifth grade African American boys perceive their experiences in the classroom and how teachers influence their academic performance can be the first steps to improving instructional practices when working with this population. Educators must be aware of the critical role the schooling environment and teachers play in developing African American males academically, socially, and emotionally.
Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate what fifth grade African American boys felt they needed to be successful in school, to examine the students’ perspectives on how they felt about their learning experiences in a single-gendered classroom, and how these boys perceived their teachers as impacting their performance in the classroom. Despite the discussion that surrounds African American males and their achievement in schools across the country, the statistics surrounding this demographic in schools remain perpetually dismal. This qualitative case study synthesized student interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, student journals, and teacher questionnaires to provide knowledge about what educators can do to appeal to and improve the educational outcomes of this student group.

This case study was conducted at Opportunity Elementary located in a suburban area of a southeastern state. At Opportunity Elementary, the classrooms in grades third through fifth are single-gendered. The school is very diverse, with a student body consisting of numerous cultural groups. All of the participants in this study were fifth grade African American boys assigned to an all-boy class (see Appendix A). Of the 12 student participants, five of the students qualified for Early Intervention Program (EIP) services, two of the boys qualified for services as students with special needs, one of the boys received both EIP support and services for speech and
language, four of the boys were general education students, and one of the boys was labeled gifted. There were five teachers that taught the all-boy classes; with one of the homeroom classes being an inclusion class and having two teachers part of the day (see Appendix B).

**A Vignette: Setting the Scene**

As I entered this classroom, I am greeted with “Gentlemen there’s a lady in the room, show your respect,” as the students take a bow, and just because I get a kick out of it, I instinctively give a curtsey. When I walked through the doors of this room, there was a feeling I instantly got, an energy that permeated the room. Typically, the room was busy, loud, and chaotic (but organized), high spirited, engaging, and hyped, all of which I sensed when I stepped through the doors. When I arrived students were working on a Holocaust project; they were charged with producing a rap, song, skit, PowerPoint, Prezi, model, or artistic creation regarding the Holocaust and children of the Holocaust. They had the option of working in groups, which is not uncommon in the Gladiator’s classroom, or they could work alone if they preferred. They had to include 50 facts about the Holocaust and the children of the Holocaust that they would present to their class. Mrs. Long and Ms. Bling were moving around the classroom providing assistance and guidance and allowing students to bounce ideas off of them. As I walked around the classroom to the groups, I heard my name being called from different areas of the room; each group wanting me to see their work. One group had built a concentration camp using boxes, toy cars and figures, and other everyday items (see Appendix G), another group created a mosaic of a concentration camp (see Appendix G). Yet another group had created a picture of an exploding bird (see Appendix G) to represent their understanding. A couple of the students worked alone; one created a mobile while another worked on a PowerPoint, adding sound to his pictures and text. Two groups created a rap, and
as they worked they insisted on telling the other group that their rap was better. It was interesting to see the way the boys interacted and “trash-talked” one another about whose rap would be the best. It was healthy banter and made the students want to bring their “A-game.” I was truly disappointed when I had to leave to teach my own class. When I left the room, I looked around, and I was amazed; every single boy that was present in that classroom was working, which is not always a typical occurrence in a fifth grade classroom. (Notes from Gladiators’ Classroom Observation, March 8, 2013)

**Emergent Themes**

As I examined the transcripts of interviews and focus groups, student journals, and observation field notes, it became apparent that students had an opinion about school and their schooling experiences. The boys welcomed the opportunity to talk about school and their teachers; giving me the impression that they do care about their education. Having emphasized during each meeting that students could share their honest opinions and views without repercussions, I noted how candid the boys were in their responses. Interestingly, at one point when Junior shared a story about how he felt things that his teacher said and did were, “not cool,” Jay asked, “What's the point of you recording this if you're not to share it with anybody?” I sensed in his response, body language, and expression that it was as if he wanted “justice” for Junior and for how his teacher was behaving. I explained that the information would be shared in some form, but in no way would I betray their confidence and disclose who shared what information. I assured students that nothing they told me would cause them to be in trouble with their teachers or administration.

This study was conducted for 16 weeks, from February through May, at Opportunity Elementary. As I reflected on the interviews, focus groups, observation field notes, and student
journals I was truly inspired by these young boys, and I considered it a great honor for them to have spoken with me about their experiences. This study elicited a range of emotions over the months, from pride, anger, sadness, joy, and empathy. Although students responded to open-ended guiding questions, I geared the questions for each student interview to address the research questions. Initially, I began by analyzing and hand coding the transcripts from student interviews and focus groups. I used sticky notes and chart paper to open code the transcripts from the student interviews and focus groups, grouping like codes on sticky notes together on the chart paper. As the data began to increase, I placed all the transcripts from student interviews, focus groups, field notes and memos from classroom observations and student journals into Atlas.ti. In addition to assisting with the organization for the data analysis, Atlas.ti allowed me to note and comment on codes and quotes throughout each document. I coded each student response as they related to things they needed to be successful in school and their overall schooling experience, gendered-classes, and their teacher’s practices in general. As I analyzed and coded the data from interviews, I looked at the three interviews between and across the individual student interviews. I then analyzed the codes I assigned across all first interviews for the boys; I did the same for the second interviews and the third interviews. I continued to determine, group, and analyze codes and that occurred across student participants. As I coded the focus groups, codes similar to student interviews were noted and grouped. While I hand coded field notes and memos from classroom observations and student journals, I continued to group similar codes together. I was able to upload my notes and memos from these documents into Atlas.ti. Notes and memos I made as I coded the individual documents guided me in developing themes as I analyzed the documents across the study. Atlas.ti enabled me to create
networks from the coded student interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and student journals, this assisted me in developing themes.

As I coded and analyzed the data from student interviews, focus groups, observations field notes, and student journals, the following themes emerged:

1) Student success in school depended upon the classroom environment, teaching styles, and family support.

2) Boys perceived benefits of being in a gendered-classroom were increased attentiveness, comfortability, and the teacher’s use of relevant and differentiated teaching practices.

3) Challenges of gendered-classroom included occasional strange feelings of being in a classroom with only boys and some unproductive behaviors.

4) Teachers that fostered the success of African American males possess certain traits; they created a comfortable learning environment, they held high expectations for their students, were encouraging, and engaged in teaching practices that related to and motivated their students.

Classroom environment. “My classroom is great!” – Gabriel

As the boys shared their thoughts and opinions regarding what they needed to be successful in school, they emphasized the importance of their classroom environment. Boys stated throughout the interviews, focus groups, and their student journals that their classroom was critical to their success in the school. In his student journal, Figure 1, Jacob illustrated his perception of Ms. Bling/Mrs. Long’s classroom. The classroom environment supports and nurtures the students, and the classroom has a major impact on comfort level, student participation, and student achievement, and its importance cannot be overlooked or
slighted (Langhout & Mitchell, 2007; Lynn, 2006; Skiba et al., 2011). I was impressed with the HIT Squad and the Gladiators, two of the fifth grade classrooms, who have classroom chants that built self-confidence. If a student had done something that the class or teachers deemed awesome, cool, or out of the norm, the class would do an EXPLOSIVE chant. Someone in the class would count off, “one, two, three,” and then the class would bellow in unison, “[student’s name] is explosive!” Ms. Bling and Mrs. Long’s class also had an “On Fire Chant”: “[boys name] is on fire.” In addition to discussing the classroom environment during his individual interviews, Figure 2 illustrates how SpongeBob felt about his classroom. He shared, during an individual interview:

SpongeBob: Well like sometimes we play the drums, so I can rap with somebody; like a classmate is on fire [this is one of the chants they do in the classroom]. Somebody else is on fire…

Milligan: What, that's a chant? How does it go ...like this girl is on fire?

SpongeBob: [student begins to sing this out] Gladiators are on fire, gladiators cannot be beat, we got that swagin' heat.

Milligan: Awesome

SpongeBob: And then we do this one time, two times, three times; now everybody dropped that beat [students take turns playing the drums during this chant while everyone else claps with their hands].
I witnessed these chants during classroom observations. These chants helped to establish classroom community and encouraged others to be and do their personal best. During a classroom observation, Mrs. Hall complimented one of the boys for going above and beyond on his homework; the boys in the class immediately let out “The Explosive Chant” for this student. He beamed with pride as his work was being acknowledged. When I witnessed the classes doing these chants, they were so excited and they did not limit the use of the chant to the classroom. At any time during the school day, the class may let out a chant when the situation was warranted. Mrs. Hall, Ms. Bling and Mrs. Long’s use of class chants added a level of ownership and community between the boys in the classroom. They always had their class chant as a way to represent themselves, the chants that the students and teachers created helped the students to feel a part of the class and proud of their accomplishments. This was further supported when Bobby from Mr. Waller and Mr. Reid’s class recited during a focus group, a chant his class created:

We do a rap sometimes, we are the dogs and when he [Mr. Waller] says let's transition to the next activity, we do this song…. [student sings this out] We are the dogs and we can make you holler ah..... We are the dogs and we can make you holler, you all know that we're the Bulldogs scholars.
Peers. “We all work together in order to figure something out.” – William

According to the boys, another important aspect of the classroom environment included their peers. The boys admitted that their peers in the classroom helped them to be successful and also could be a source of support. Gabriel from Mrs. Hall’s class shared,

My teacher lets us like share our ideas with people. Like when I share my project she lets us like show what we have so far. And then like the class will give comments on how we can correct it.

In Mrs. Hall’s class during an observation, I witnessed the boys going to the aid of those who were struggling as they were going over dividing decimals. Students helped one another, showing their way of arriving at the correct answer. A student’s peers can determine if a classroom will be conducive to learning. It was telling when William shared why he was able to stay focused and on task: “Well, I would say my a friends, because they want to learn too, so I want to be like them, and I just wanna, stay on task, and sometimes we have a little competition, like saying who can get the best grade on this paper or something.” Many researchers have suggested that both competition and teamwork should be used in classroom activities to motivate and engage boys (Kunjufu, 2012; Lahey 2013; Reichert & Hawley, 2009). Students really appreciated being able to work with one another; this not only encouraged participation but helped to establish a communal environment in the classroom. During an individual interview when I asked William to share some things he liked about his class, he stated, “We all work together in order to figure something out.”  Gabriel shared, “I like working in a group because it's faster, and then you have another person, if you don't know something and you're stuck, then they can come help you.”  Michael had this to say about working with his peers: “Because you know, when you work with others something that you don't normally know, they might know,
and they don't know I might know, that’s like a win-win scenario.” When students felt safe and supported, they were more apt to try, precipitating success in school. Tommy from the HIT Squad had this to say:

What I would tell people about my class we are hard working young men; we don’t just achieve, we try to exceed, if we can. And we’re all friends. Even if we are not we still act nice to each other.

Teaching styles. “When my teacher starts teaching, the kids get wild, because they love it so much!” – William

Analysis of the data from the various data sources demonstrated that a comfortable, productive, classroom environment was fostered by the teacher’s teaching style. Each student stated that a good teacher is necessary to their success. I posed a question to the boys in the individual interviews and focus groups of what constitutes a good teacher; 11 out of 12 boys mentioned a teacher that was fun. There is no denying that when students are engaged, they place themselves in a position to learn. Junior from the Bulldog Scholars had this to say about a good teacher: “Teachers that can be fun at the same time, well I mean, like strict like that makes you do work also, but also does fun with it, too. That makes you feel comfortable and stuff.” Darius stated,

What I like about our class is, most of the time, when we’re learning we have fun. We do like, raps and chants a lot; that's what I'm good at. … What makes it so much fun basically [is] the teachers; what they tell us to do; it's fun!

Ryan stated this of his old second grade teacher; “She was like fun to teach, she always made learning fun, she explained stuff out, and then, she would deal with the people who were having a problem.” Bobby, Darius, Gabriel, Dad, Junior, Jacob, and Jay agreed that a good teacher
helped them understand what they were teaching. Dad stated, “He’s a good teacher [Mr. Reid] and when you raise your hand, he listens to you and helps you out a lot.” Bobby shared, “when they’re [Mr. Waller and Mr. Reid] teaching a lesson, they always say, ‘do you get this?’ or ‘don’t you get this?’ or ‘do you know what this?’ or ‘do you know what that is?’” In Figure 3, Junior indicated in his journal why he held his former fourth grade teacher in high regard. The impact a teacher has on his or her classroom should never be underestimated. As I was speaking with Darius, I could sense how inspired he was to do his work because his teachers gave options. He shared,

Ms. Bling is cool also, and she pushes you to where you do your work, and at the same time, she likes to have fun. When we doing things, she will make it fun, like… in class right now we doin’ an assignment, you can either do a skit, or rap, or technology, or art.

But she makes it fun, like some, no other teachers do anything like that. They would just make you write, but their way, they make it fun.

Gabriel reported, “Our teacher makes learning fun, like I said before in the individual conference. She makes it easier for us that we can do hands-on experiments and things that she brings, like game programmers and people to teach lessons and things.” Gabriel continued, “There’s a lot of fun things that we do, Ms. Hall, last year, we went to a technical college, and we made our own video games.” Mrs. Hall had gone to great lengths to incorporate a great deal of technology into her curriculum. She worked with Southern Polytechnic University, and they
allowed her class to come to the university to create a video game and students from Southern Polytechnic came to the school and conducted classes with her students. Mrs. Hall was diligent in incorporating technology into class assignments, and the students had really taken to this and thrived. The students in her class often serve as “consultants” to other students and classrooms. It is not uncommon for other teachers to request one of the students from Mrs. Hall’s class to come into their class and instruct others on incorporating technology they have used in their projects.

The boys in Ms. Bling and Mrs. Long’s class were resolute and appreciative that their class was fun, and this made them want to come to school. William stated, “they [his teachers] get you excited about coming to school!” The excitement that seeped from Ms. Bling and Mrs. Long’s class during my observations was contagious and inescapable. As SpongeBob reported during one of our individual interviews of Ms. Bling’s class, “The activities, like, her class environment are fun!”

Familial Support. “My mom helps me at home, she is like a home teacher.” – Gabriel

Research has promoted the importance of family involvement and family support, as Barbarin (2010) notes, “the importance of mothers is indisputable” (p.85). It was apparent from the individual interviews and focus groups that seven of the boys respected and were encouraged by the involvement their families, primarily their mothers, had on their achievement and success in school. Michael shared,

You know he [Mr. Waller] helps me with a lot of my work, and if I need help, I know I can always go to my mother or him. So, like, it’s nice to have someone in the class and someone outside the class to help me with anything I need help with.
Despite what many may assume, most African American families care deeply about the education of their children and success of their children in school; however, many times, they are unaware of how to be involved, or many of them are unable to be involved as mainstream educators would want them to be involved (Allen, 2007; Hilgendorf, 2012; Matuszny, Banda, & Coleman, 2007). The boys in this study attributed their success in school to family support. During their interviews, William and Tommy spoke about how their siblings helped them study and helped them with homework. They spoke of how their mothers insisted that they complete their homework, class work, and do their best in school. For these students, support took different forms, such as reinforcement of class work and homework.

Ryan: Well I was… I used to be, like, not doing my homework the one who’s always, like, so talkative, but now I'm like cooling down. So I'm buckling down.

Milligan: What do you think caused that change in you?

Ryan: Well, pep talks with my mom and teacher and stuff.

Some familial support came with words of encouragement or recognition. Michael explained, “I heard my mom say this ‘the best teacher is you.’” Darius told me, “But my mom says, ‘don't do your best do the best.’” Other boys understood that their parents held high expectations for them and knew they were capable of school success. Jay shared, “At the very end of the year, I get nervous when it’s close to CRCT. I might get nervous that I might fail. I don't; I want to make my mom proud, not sad or mad that I failed a grade.” Gabriel appreciates the values his mom instilled in him:

Milligan: So you think it's your teacher that helps you feel successful?

Gabriel: Yes and my mom and me.
Milligan: Tell me about you and your mother.

Gabriel: My mom she is very strong she's very strong; she just don't reward you for doing the right thing, because I tell her I'm not suppose to get rewarded just for doing the right thing. It's something I'm suppose to do anyway; she’s suppose to reward me when I exceed or beyond the standards that are expected.

Parental interest greatly impacts student performance and success. The mothers encouraged their boys to work hard, behave, and do their best, and that helped them to work to succeed in school. I think Michael said it best as he explained what he needs to be successful in school: “My family, my mom, my sister, and me. That's all I have right now.”

Benefits of gendered-classes. “It feel better being with boys.” – Dad

As I analyzed the data from interviews, focus groups, and observations, the boys openly spoke of their perceived benefits of being in an all-boy class. Eight of the boys enjoyed being in an all-boy class, while the others had mixed feelings, most of the boys, with the exception of three (Bobby, SpongeBob and Jay) did see benefits of being in an all-boy classroom. The benefits the boys noted were increased attentiveness, comfortability, and the teacher’s use of relevant and differentiated teaching practices. The boys stated that it was easier to relate to their classroom peers, making them more comfortable in the classroom. Students realized that they often had thoughts and feelings in common with one another, making students more willing to share and contribute. Ryan said, “Well, because you don't have to worry about people being so different because you're in an all boys’ class, you’re sure that everybody thinks alike, sometimes they think alike; you won't have to worry about them thinking way totally off scale.” Junior added, “When you're in class, like, if you're talking about something, you wouldn't be as much
scared to tell them as if it were girls.” The boys have a certain level of comfort being around other boys, and were willing to take more risks when they are around other boys as opposed to being around girls. Darius interjected,

  Cause when, everybody messes up and when you mess up in front of a girl is hard to like see them laugh at you. But when a boy, they give support to other friends though. It's far more better to have friends that’s boys than girls.

Dad shared, “Because it's like it feel better being with boys. Cause I don't like girls in the class. It feel better with boys not girls.” The boys found being in an all-boy class less distracting, allowing them to focus and concentrate on academic tasks. Boys were in a better position to stay focused on their studies and attentive to their work without entertaining distractions: girls.

During an interview Michael stated, “You know, girls can be a little distracting by the way they look. And distractions can really, can distract you and your work, and how you do you work.” Tommy added, “We still get distracted, but not as much. And mostly, all boys are the same; most of them know what they like… so it's easier to cooperate with boys.” Dr. Moore also reported the students’ interest in one another was one of her reasons for separating the boys and the girls,

  Third and fourth seem to be more apt to tell you they love it [gendered-classes] than fifth, cause they're getting to that age that they want to be around each other. Which in lies some of the problem, cause they're not focused on learning.

Dr. Moore shared her rational for implementing gendered classes in grades third through fifth:

  In doing my research for my doctorate, I looked specifically at minority boys, minority boys, and the issues that they were having. I knew that our school is made up of minority boys and girls, and we could see that our boys were not succeeding the way we knew they could. You know that we did not see as many problems with girls as we did boys.
Although there was limited professional development prior to the implementation of the
gendered classes, Opportunity Elementary went to all gendered-classes for third through fifth
grades during the 2010-2011 school year. It was Dr. Moore’s hope to improve the academic
success of all students, but primarily, she was hoping to see a sizeable improvement in the boys’
achievement. Unfortunately, that did not happen the first two years of implementation. Dr.
Moore added,

We've been looking at the data now, this is our third year, and we're hoping; we have
seen some growth but not as much as I would like. I'm hoping this third year, we'll see
the end of this third-year; we will look at the data and see even more growth.

Exceptional growth with the girls, but not as much as we really want to see with the boys.

During the 2012-2013 school year, the boys in grades third through fifth did perform better than
in previous years (see Appendix H).

**Benefits of gendered-classes. “Teachers understand what you like.” – Gabriel**

In addition to being more comfortable and less distracted, Gabriel, Ryan, Darius, and
William felt their leaning differences were addressed more readily since they were in a class with
all boys. Gendered classes allow for teachers to really facilitate the learning of boys or girls
utilizing tools, activities, topics, and materials that appeal to the specific gender (Holliday, 2007;
Holliday, 2011). During a focus group with Darius, William, Bobby, and Gabriel; Gabriel
explained, “That's why it's good to have all boy classes; the teachers understand what you like.
The teachers understand what you want, so they do it.” Ryan, Darius, Gabriel, and William
agreed that, their teachers engage in activities they knew boys would enjoy. Gabriel shared how
the Wii was used in Mrs. Hall’s class,
We have game day, and this week I've earned it! There's a chart, and like Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday; if your name is on there zero times, you get to play the Wii. But if it's on there once, you get to have game day but you don't get to play the Wii, but if it's on there twice, you don't get to have game day.

“Single-gender classrooms in which teachers have boy-friendly lessons that allow for greater physical movement, elevated noise levels, and direct teacher talk have proven successful for many students” (Piechura-Couture et al., 2011, p. 261). During a student interview, it was enlightening when William pointed out,

Because the boys have their own style of learning and the girls have another style of learning. And the boys like to move around a lot and be talkative and girls aren't that talkative, and they don't, they just sit down and do their work. We [boys] have to get a visual and a demonstration of ... and they [girls] just do it when the teacher says to do it.

Kunjufu (2005b) agrees, “Girls come to school to learn. Boys have to be driven. Many girls will work at a subject they dislike” (p.115). Some boys also felt girls may not be receptive to their ideas, so they preferred to work with boys, William noted, “Because I wouldn't really enjoy doing a project with a girl because I have a feeling she would disagree with my ideas a lot.”

**Challenges of gendered-classes. “Fighting and arguing!” – Jacob**

While Junior and Jacob found some positives in being in an all boy class, SpongeBob, Bobby, and Jay saw no benefit to being in an all-boy classroom. It is often reported that boys have more aggressive behaviors than girls (James, 2007; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Piechura-Couture et al., 2011). Some boys may not do well in an all-boy class due to the common exchanges of bantering and teasing. Boys who may lack emotional control or are not
accustomed to or well-versed in aggressive “play” may have a difficult time feeling comfortable in a classroom full of boys. Dad shared in his student journal (Figure 4) some of the behaviors he witnessed in his classroom. Unproductive behaviors was one of the main disadvantages the boys acknowledged about being in an all-boy classroom, even those who overall enjoyed being in a gendered classroom. Jay and Junior had an interesting exchange during one of our focus groups:

Jay: Boys, you hear a lot of cursing in boys' classes, because of boys you'll, you have to hear the teacher yell to make us quiet.

Ryan: Sometime they [boys] talk too much

Junior: Well, like Jay said, you get yelled at every time to be quiet and stuff, and you won't get as much work done because they'll be trying to like tap on you and tell you some stuff, then he'll get in trouble, and then you'll get in trouble for no reason.

Justifiable or not, the behavior of boys may lead them into trouble, even those who may be innocent. Jacob declared, “Some boys are picking on other boys, saying mean things to them, and if they have a group of boys, then if the other boy has a group of boys, then it will start a fight. That's the worst, getting in trouble, punishing the whole class.” Jacob, Jay, and Junior were negatively impacted by the behaviors they said occurred in their classrooms. Jacob shared what he felt was a disadvantage of being in an all-boy class, all the fighting and arguing. Jay,
Junior, and Jacob were clear that they are unable to be their best because of the behaviors in the classroom. While they enjoy being in an all-boy class, William and Gabriel agreed that being in an all-boy classroom brought out a competitive spirit. Some boys vied to be the best, smartest, and most awesome. Gabriel shared during a focus group that boys can be heard saying, “I'm better than you at this, I'm better than him at that.” I want to note that, although the boys discussed these behaviors during our focus groups and interviews, during the classroom observations, I did not witness arguing or fighting between the boys. I did witness the groups maintain that they had the best rap for their Holocaust projects. Jacob, SpongeBob, and Bobby shared that they just did not feel right being in a class with all boys, and instead of making them feel comfortable, they felt strange.

**Challenges of gendered-classes.** “It makes me feel a little bit weird.” – Bobby

For socialization reasons, Jacob, SpongeBob, and Bobby reported just feeling uncomfortable being in an all-boy classroom. In Figure 5 Jacob shared in his journal how he felt about having separate classes for girls and boys; he did not understand the purpose. SpongeBob stated on more than one occasion, “It's just that I don't like being with all boys ‘cause, like, it's just weird or something.” Bobby shared, “Because in an all-boy classroom, it just feels a little off; you can't be with girls.” To these boys, being in an all-boy class was just not normal, especially at Valentine’s Day. Others alleged they were unable to do their best. Jay, Bobby, SpongeBob, and Junior felt they would actually do better in a classroom with girls. Bobby declared, “I can just look around and feel confident when
I'm with girls.” SpongeBob also shared his feelings about being in class with girls: “Maybe you could get a chance to work with other people and maybe they will have more ideas than boys or something.” Interestingly, Dr. Moore’s perspective was different, in our interview she stated, 

I talked to some boys just this past week and they said “Well, sometimes girls have better ideas.” And then I said, “Sometimes boys don’t always think about those ideas,” and they said, ”Yeah the girls thought for us.” Yeah, they [the girls] looked out for them so they weren't having to be independent and think for themselves, which is one of the problems, so …

Dr. Moore felt instead of working collaboratively having the girls and boys in the same classroom, often lead the boys to not think for themselves and allow the girls to think for them.

*Teacher impact. “My teacher is awesome!” – Tommy*

The conversation below occurred during one of the focus groups. The discussion centered around whether the students felt they were the best students they could be in their classrooms and why or why not?

Milligan: Do you think your teacher helps you to be the best student you can be in your classroom?

Junior: No, cause sometimes like if you're working and stuff like Mr. Waller will come, remember it's an all boy class right. You can't blame us if we're talking, what else do you expect. And so if like, let's say if Ryan was in my class and we were talking, and for instance for instance he [Mr. Waller] will come over there and say like boys you can do that dating and stuff after class. That is not cool! … How is he going to make us be our best if he's always talking about us and then not having fun? Like the way he works like, I mean does the
class and stuff, and like he doesn't have like high expectations for a student and stuff.

Teachers who are not encouraging, do not create an environment of comfort, and do not hold high expectations for students; negatively impact students and their performance in the classroom. Jay had this to say about how he felt about his classroom, “Like sometimes I'm trying to be good but like they just made me stop from being good and then I just go completely...... lunatic! They do that because they don't like, they don't expect me to be good or anything.” As I analyzed the interviews, focus groups, and student journals, and observation field notes; students identified teacher traits, teacher expectations, and teacher practices as attributing to their success in school. Teachers that contributed to the success of these African American males fostered caring environments in their classroom and held high expectations for the students. They engaged students in high interest and highly motivating lessons and activities.

**Teacher expectations. “She pushes us to excel.” – Tommy**

Students felt their success was fostered by their teacher’s encouragement. During a focus group, Tommy shared why he felt his teacher was encouraging:

Well the thing that gives me the feeling is not just because she says ‘do your work or if you don't you don't get recess’ or anything. It's the fact that you can see it in her body language and her expression of how she'll encourage everyone to do their work, and with the incentives and everything else.

SpongeBob felt his teachers deeply cared for his future: “She doesn't let us fail or anything. She wants us to go to sixth grade and get a good education, so we can have a good job.” Jacob had this to say of his teachers: “Sometimes I want to give up, and they don't want me to give up; they keep on trying and trying until I get it right.” Students believed that when teachers believed in
them and encouraged them, they were able to be successful. Gabriel added this of his first grade teacher, “She always strived for me too, she always help me, she always wanted me to do my best, get A's, and I would.” Tommy shared of his teacher: “My teacher, well, she pushes us to excel in what we do, and she wants the best for us; she set a goal for us: she wanted at least almost every student to be an advance class, and that's what we did!”

**Teacher traits.** “*They care about your future, it's someone who works with you, kinda lika a mother.* “ - Michael

From the students, I discovered teachers that contributed to their success displayed certain characteristics. Students felt comfortable being in these classrooms. SpongeBob shared about Ms. Bling: “She's funny; she makes jokes a lot! It makes me feel like I can get more comfortable knowing that she can be silly sometimes too.” Being comfortable is crucial to learning, Darius pointed out: “If we’re not comfortable, then we'll be thinking about the things were not comfortable about and we wouldn't be focusing on our work.” Darius also had this to say about how Ms. Bling and Mrs. Roberts may handle a problem that the student may be having: “Like when they talk to us they.... I don't know how to explain it. When they talk to us, they try to make us feel comfortable as they can and help us get through the problem.” Teachers helped students believe in themselves and work hard to overcome obstacles.

Teachers who were able to establish productive relationships with their students demonstrated to the boys that they cared and had the boys’ best interests at heart. Mrs. Hall made this point in her teacher questionnaire:

If another teacher tried to challenge him, demand that he show respect, and/or not give him a chance to speak, it proved to be rewarding when I came to his rescue just by listening to the entire dilemma and giving him the opportunity to speak. Even though the
student may have been wrong, I could see in his body language that he knew I was on his side.

The behavior of many African-American males is often misunderstood by American society and school systems (Davis, 2003; Kunjufu, 2005b; Kunjufu, 2011; Langhout & Mitchell, 2007; Skiba et al., 2011; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Often times, when African-American boys are redirected or corrected, they feel the need to explain themselves; however, in schools, many teachers do not provide that opportunity, and when students persist, they are considered rude and disrespectful, but from the student’s perspective, the teacher is unfair and mean. This fact was brought to light during a focus group with Jay, Junior, and Ryan. Although all of these boys were in different classes, they each had negative experiences with Mr. Waller (Junior’s teacher) that caused them not to like him and feel that he was “out to get them.” Below is an exchange from one of the focus groups:

Jay: Yeah cause, I mean what am I doing, I didn't do anything wrong; you [Mr. Waller] say that I am talking back, but you want to put something on me that I was talking back to you, but I wasn't. I'm saying, what did I do? And he said, ”I can't stand your attitude! Let's go to your teachers.” So we went; we went to Ms. Bling and Mrs. Long and Ms. M [student teacher], and out of nowhere he just says I was talking back to him and I need to come to his class to write an essay.

Ryan: That's the same, the exact same thing that happen to me! This boy got in trouble and I was like oooooooooohhh you gon' get it because I know your mom. And then he [Mr. Waller] goes, “Come here, come here.” And he's like “Why you laughing at him?” And I'm like, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm
sorry. He was like the cops and everything. And then, he's like, “Drop down give me 10 push-ups.” And then all my friends were laughing at me, and I'm like, I just look up and he's like “What are you doing?” And he says, “Come outside, come outside.” And then he's like, “Are you being disrespectful?” And then he was like, “I can get you suspended, but I won't.” He gave me a pink slip [a discipline report] and I was like, I can't believe that he did this to me. And then when I read it, it said, Ryan was being disrespectful, yelling at the teacher and slammed the door.

Junior: I remember that. Well, some advice that I can give you to is that when you talk to him, don't get a high voice or squeaky voice and stuff, ‘cause then yeah he'll say that you're trying to talk back to him and stuff like.... when you try to explain yourself, he doesn't let you. ‘Cause any time if I get in trouble for doing something I didn't do, and he'll assume it's me, and then he'll say, “Come here,” and he'll start talking and then I'll say, “but I didn't, but when I say but I”... then he'll say “Be quiet!” Then I'll try to explain myself again and he'll just say, “I'll write you up, or give you a discipline report, or you have to write an essay,” and then that's when I really get mad because I didn't do anything! I have this thing that I do if he doesn't let me talk back then I just shut down with him.

I could tell that these types of interactions between Mr. Waller and the boys caused them to harbor negative perceptions of him. Mr. Waller probably perceived these boys to be troublemakers. Interestingly, Mr. Waller shared on his teacher questionnaire, “The most effective method to making teaching meaningful is taking the time to understand who my
students are on a personal level. If I know their interests, I will better relate to their individual perspectives.” From the interactions shared during the focus groups it does not appear that he had an understanding of Jay, Junior, or Ryan. Unfortunately, neither Jay nor Junior were able to establish a positive relationship with their teachers; they even went as far as to say their teachers may be racist due to behaviors they observed and deemed unfair. I honestly do not feel Mr. Waller is a racist; however, there were definite misunderstanding that occurred between him and Jay, Junior, and Ryan. During a focus group Jay shared, “I think Mrs. Long always prefers, like, other colored people, besides you know, black people. Cause like she always treats like her color different .... I mean the same but, like, the people that aren't her color; she treats like... dirt.” Jay at times struggled with issues of non-compliance and had difficulties accepting responsibility for his behavior. Just as the case with Mr. Waller, I do not feel Mrs. Long is a racist, but she and Jay were unable to establish a trusting relationship in the classroom. When the students felt a teacher really cared about them, they worked with that teacher to ensure their own success. Darius made a profound statement when he shared in a focus group,

If they [teachers] don't understand them then they don't know how they feel. If they don't know how they feel, it's hard for kids to learn. If you don't understand someone you can't teach anyone, cause you don't understand them, and they may not understand you.

*Teaching Practices. “Ms. Bling is a hyper teacher… she teach fun and exciting!” – Jacob*

Many of the boys referenced that how their teachers taught and conducted class greatly impacted their success in the classroom. It was very evident during my observations of the classes that teaching styles determined engagement and motivation of the students in the classroom. During a focus group, Ryan shared:
Ryan: I like that teaching style that ... makes, that lets you feel that it's not only just writing its like different things like; you can make a song, you know how they do the raps and beats, and ....

Milligan: .... skits and artistic creations.

Ryan: Yeah, and all that stuff. Instead of just the old-fashioned way.

William shared about his teacher, Ms. Bling, and her style of teaching,

Well, she likes to get up on the tables and make a song about it, or if we don't do that, we get to get on the laptops and the I Pads. We get to use the Internet to find information instead of, like, books.

Darius wrote in his journal (See Figure 6) and stated of his teachers, “Both of the teachers, they both fun, and they make learning fun for us. Most of the time, when we do stuff, we make a song about it and it’s easier to remember, and it’s like fun and you learning at the same time.” Consistent with research on African American students, Gay (2010) feels that African American students are more engaged and perform better with learning activities that involve music and movement.

Gabriel appreciated how his teacher used all resources to help students: “She makes everything fun. Like, she'll have people come in and help us. Let's see, like when we were into like, science so she got us like some people from Southern Polytechnic. They helped us to made video games based off of our own themes.”

During a classroom observation, I noticed that Ms. Bling and Mrs. Long connected learning to the real world during a writing assignment. During a classroom observation, I was
able to witness the students Skype-ing with representatives from Central Michigan University (CMU). The teachers created an assignment that combined research, writing, and communication skills with students exploring the college world. Students were required to research and then contact a college to gather information about the universities. During their interview with the university students could ask that the universities send a pendant or item to represent their colleges. The students would then be able to display the item when they shared the information about the college with their class. This particular day when I entered, I did not get my normal greeting; the students were gathered around as a student spoke with the CMU university officials via Skype on an IPad. Another student was recorded the experience as it unfolded in real time on another IPad. The student that was speaking had contacted CMU, and obviously made a great impression, because representatives contacted Ms. Bling and informed her that they had sent some items for the class and that they would like to Skype with the student that contacted them when the items arrived. The room was abuzz, and even the assistant principal dropped by to share in the excitement. While still Skype-ing, the student opened the boxes that were delivered. The class roared with excitement as he pulled drawstring book bags, pencils, a pendant, and a t-shirt out of the boxes. CMU had sent drawstring bags for each student in fifth grade. Both the CMU representatives and the students were so excited, and everyone got to witness everything in real time, thanks to Skype. Upon the big reveal, the students went into their class chants for Central Michigan University: “CMU is on fire, CMU cannot be beat, CMU’s got that swaggin' heat,” and someone began drumming a beat on the drums. The class then went into another chant: “one time (they clapped once), two times (they clapped twice), three times (they clapped three times); now everybody drop that beat.” They then clapped a syncopated beat and some of the boys instinctively began to play on the drums. The CMU
officials were shocked and amazed at the energy and excitement; it was a positive experience for everyone involved. The energy in the room was overwhelming. After the big unveiling and the Skype interview, the boys were excited about continuing to contact colleges and universities in hopes of another box of treats. As I walked around, some students were on the net books working on their phone scripts for when they would call their university of choice. Other students were outside of the classroom on the teachers’ cell phones making calls to their selected universities. Other students were working on their written letters, explaining their assignment and how and why they selected their universities. The students, who may had been less inspired, were now busily researching the college or university they wanted to contact on the IPad or net book. Students were on task, although they may have been at different stages of the assignment. Ms. Bling and Mrs. Long were going around checking in on students and providing additional support for those who needed it. Students were very self-directed and guided. I felt very fortunate to have caught this observation, but then again, I had a feeling most of their days were filled with excitement and new experiences. The teachers that the students say positively impacted their success made learning exciting and meaningful, and students wanted to do well in their classes.
Chapter 5

Discussion

Ms. Bling’s class rowdily enters the Science lab classroom. The teacher informs them that they will not be making the silly putty due to their behavior the last time they visited the lab.

Darius angrily shouts and proceeds to throw his head on the desk, “You think we the dum part of the class too, don’t cha’? That’s why we don’t get to make the silly putty; you just think we dum’ like everybody else!”

The teacher was upset and disturbed by his comment. She had never witnessed this behavior from Darius before and was not sure of where this was coming from. As she pulled Darius to the side he shared that he overheard it being said that Mrs. Long had the smart part of the class and that all of Ms. Bling’s students either had problems or didn’t know English. (Personal correspondence, May 2, 2013)

What impact would the above interaction have on you as a student? Your own child?

How does this belief affect your performance in school? If you experience this feeling over and over, year after year, what does this say to you? What impact does that have on you as an educator? Do educators truly understand the impact they have on students? It is frequently reported that educators have lowered expectations of minority boys, particularly African American boys (Delpit, 2012; Hucks, 2011; Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; Noguera, 2008; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). How do these daily expectations and interactions manifest themselves into the psyche of students?
Introduction

This chapter summarizes the findings of this research study and its implications for educational practice. Research often cites high infant mortality rates, low birth rates, subpar prenatal care, high poverty, and homeless rates of African Americans as factors that contribute to the low achievement of African Americans (Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Kunjufu, 2012; Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko, & Stuczynski, 2011). While those social issues are critical factors and need to be addressed, I chose to investigate factors that educators and educational systems can regulate. Focusing on the aforementioned factors allows educators and educational systems to tout there is little they can do to change the outcomes for this demographic, which is of no benefit to these deserving students. My primary goal was to seek to understand the experiences of fifth grade African American boys’ in the classroom and the impact their experiences had on their perceptions of school and their performance in school. This study sought to find out what they felt they needed to be successful in school and how they perceive their teachers as impacting their performance in the classroom. Since the participants are in single-gendered classrooms, I also sought to ascertain their perceptions regarding the impact of single-gendered classrooms on their performance in school.

In chapter four, I shared an analysis of the findings of my investigation with these fifth grade African American boys. I answered the research questions through student interviews and focus groups, classroom observations, student journals, and teacher questionnaires. In giving these young African American boys a voice, I sought to provide insights into how schools and systems can meet these students’ needs and improve their academic outcomes for African American boys. I triangulated my data from the study sources with the research literature on
culturally responsive pedagogy, African American boys and education, and gender-based classroom instruction, to answer the research questions.

**Discussion of Findings**

**Research Question One: What do fifth grade African American boys feel they need to be successful in school?**

**Classroom environment and peers.** The boys in this study admitted that their success in school was dependent on their classroom environment and their peer group. Information obtained from speaking with each boy, made it obvious that students were more comfortable in environments where they felt safe and were willing to take risks, leading to engagement and learning. Learning is about taking risks and growing from mistakes and not being ridiculed for getting information wrong. Students who are engaged and attentive and participate in classroom activities and lessons will have more positive academic experiences in schools and classrooms (Fantuzzo et al., 2012). How students internalized their class environment determined how they function in the classroom setting. This was obvious from my observations in the classrooms, particularly Mrs. Hall and Ms. Bling/Mrs. Long’s classes. When students felt comfortable and good about their classrooms, they wanted to be in school and learn. Gurian & Ballew (2003) contend,

> In elementary school, education is a group process more than an individual one; brain development and social development are intertwined. … The brain learns because it is part of group learning. It depends on the group for help in processing as well as for reflection on what it is accomplishing (p.169).

Sociocultural theory focuses on socialization with peers and how those we interact with influence our learning (Schunk, 2008); therefore, it is no surprise that the students in this study
discussed the impact of their peers on their classroom environment and ultimately their success in school. Boys learn better when they work with their peers (Gurian & Ballew, 2003; Kunjufu, 2005b; Kunjufu 2011). This coincides with sociocultural theory and culturally responsive pedagogy practices. As many of us can recall from when we were young, the influence and perceptions of our peers are held in high regard. Even while I was doing classroom observations in the classrooms, I was able to witness the boys frequently working in groups in Ms. Bling and Mrs. Long’s class. As educators, if we want to ensure the success of African American students in school, we must actively seek to build community in the classroom and establish classrooms that are engaging places where students want to come and learn. Gay (2010) reports, “By building an academic community of learners, the teachers responded to the sense of belonging that youths need” (p. 33). Tommy from Mrs. Hall’s class shared, “Well, if I'm comfortable I can learn a lot. Usually, when I'm uncomfortable, I get stressed out and I don't understand a lot of stuff. But since the teachers and people make me feel like home, I'm able to learn easily.” Students must feel content to do their best in school and meet academic success.

Ultimately, the classroom is the place that students spend the majority of their time during the school day; it is no wonder why its impact is so potent. It is imperative for teachers to create classrooms that mimic small communities. As culturally responsive pedagogy contends that culturally responsive classrooms (CRC) are very collectivist by nature, students work cooperatively to complete learning tasks, while helping and encouraging each other (Ford & Kea, 2009; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Students are encouraged to work together to ensure the success of each class member. When educators are able to create fun, safe, and community-driven classrooms for African American boys, the boys thrive. The boys in this
study confirm that when they felt comfortable and when they had a sense of community with their teacher and peers, they were able to perform successfully in the classroom.

**Teaching styles.** In conjunction with classroom environment and being a successful student, the boys in my study emphasized the importance of teaching styles on their ability to succeed in school. African American boys often do not thrive in traditional classrooms where they are required to sit quietly at their seats and listen to a teacher lecture in a monotone voice and then work on worksheets quietly at their desk. Ryan (Figure 7) and Tommy both mentioned a teacher they considered to be boring, because she just talked at them in the class. This type of instruction did not engage them and caused them to tune out and not connect with the class or their learning. It is often reported that boys, primarily African-American boys, lack engagement behaviors, such as paying attention, staying on task, problem-solving skills, and participating, leading them to be detached from classroom lessons and, ultimately, unsuccessful in the classroom (Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Taylor, 2012). Findings from this study led me to believe that when paired with a good teacher and a comfortable classroom environment, this can be rectified.

Overwhelmingly, the boys in this study echoed that a class where the teachers made learning fun and that made sure students knew the material helped them succeed. According to Gurian & Ballew (2003), boys thrive in a class that is not boring and elicits lot of stimulation. Learning must be fun! Let’s face it we have lost this one. In the 21st century, there is too much competition: videos, computer games, tablets, and high-paced movies and cartoons. Kids will not—maybe cannot—tolerate a boring classroom. Disengagement is sure to occur. The sole charge for making sure the classroom and the teaching styles are productive for the students in the classroom belongs to the teacher (Kunjufu, 2005a; Phuntsog, 2001; Richards et al., 2007). Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) emphasizes that, in order to appeal and reach your
students, a teacher must know them. What the teacher finds exciting and engaging may not be fun for the students; teachers have to know their students to construct lessons that will engage and motivate them to participate. Culturally responsive teachers, because they know their students, are able to make classroom instruction, activities, and assessments challenging, enjoyable, and relevant to their student’s lives and experiences (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Richards et al., 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). A boy’s brain is stimulated by games, excitement, and fun. Since boys are typically competitive, making games out of learning activities will increase their interest and participation (Kunjufu, 2011; Gurian & Ballew, 2003; Lahey, 2013). In order to appeal to boys, educators have to gear instruction to activities that will appeal to them. Boys thrive on hands-on activities that allow them to move and interact with their learning (Gurian & Ballew, 2003; Holliday, 2007; James, 2007; Kunjufu, 2011; Kunjufu, 2012; Neu & Weinfeld, 2005; Price, 2011). Mrs. Hall, Ms. Bling, and Mrs. Long engaged their students and their students were highly appreciative of their teaching styles.

When students feel they are capable of being successful in the classroom, more than likely, they will make a concerted effort; reinforcing engaged and attentive behaviors on the part of the student. Knowing that the environment plays a pivotal role in working with African American boys, educators can foster positive and productive environments for these students.

**Family support.** Many racial or ethnic minority families, regardless of their socioeconomic level, maintain a strong family bond, despite what outsiders may perceive.
Regardless of how families choose to encourage their student, it was apparent that the majority of the boys held their families, primarily their mothers, in high regard and did not want to disappoint them. They understood that their families wanted the best for them, and that inspired them to want to do their best. While I do not want to focus on factors that schools have little control over, I believe it is worth mentioning that schools can help facilitate familial involvement by having school-wide events that parents are able to get involved in (Allen, 2207). I value the expertise that families have regarding their students and the support that they are able to give their students. In education we often forget that, that while we know the child as a student, parents know the student as a child. In order to educate the child, we must be aware of the whole child, not bits and pieces of who he or she is.

Teachers can also utilize this high regard the students have for their mothers and families to promote appropriate behavior and academic success. Regardless of the family dynamics, all families have strengths and ways that they are able to foster the educational growth of their students (Dettmer, Thurston, Knackendoffel, Dyck, 2009; Hilgendorf, 2012; Matuszny et al., 2007). As educators, we must establish relationships with not only the students, but the families to ascertain what those strengths and supports are in order to form productive family-school collaborative partnerships (Allen, 2007; Dettmer et al., 2009; Matuszny et al., 2007). Mr. Reid seemed to understand this when he shared his ideas about being a culturally responsive educator:

Someone who takes cultural differences seriously…. An educator should seek to understand, to learn, and to embrace cultural diversity with the humility that allows him or her to learn from his students…. Being willing to engage with culturally relevant examples; seek to be a learner from my student’s families.
Culturally responsive teachers encourage forging relationships with parents as a means to better educate the students (Ford & Kea, 2009; García & Ortiz, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Montgomery, 2001; Saifer et al., 2011). Mrs. Hall agreed, on her teacher questionnaire she shared her feelings about including families and being a culturally responsive educator:

Every educator may not be able to become acquainted with every culture listed in the world, but the educator assigned to educate a group of children should become knowledgeable to that student’s culture. This will help the student and parents feel welcomed and comfortable in the classroom as well as help the classmates welcome and accept diversity.

Ryan shared this during one of our interviews: “Yeah, she [Mrs. Hall] emails, like, everyday things, like texting, parents calling her over the weekend and stuff, telling us homework assignments.” Mrs. Hall texted parents, and parents texted her whenever they had a question or a concern. From my experience as an educator and in witnessing the partnerships Mrs. Hall established with her students and their families, when parents become cognizant of how much the teacher is vested in their child’s success, it galvanizes them to increase their involvement and willingness to work as a team to ensure their child’s success.

**Research Question Two: How do fifth grade African American boys perceive the benefits and disadvantages of being in a single-gendered classroom on their performance in school?**

**Benefits of gendered-classrooms.** There are inherent differences in the brains of boys and girls and the development of the brains in males and females. There are differences in how boys and girls see, hear, feel, and process information (Gurian & Ballew, 2003; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; James, 2007; Kunjufu, 2011; Kunjufu, 2012; Piechura-Couture et al., 2011). Boys and girls perceive visual input differently, girls’ hearing is more perceptive than males,
boys are more apt to use the flight or fight response when challenged or stressed, and girls’ verbal language centers develop sooner than boys, all of which impact schooling and learning (James, 2007; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Piechura-Couture et al., 2011). Boys have a difficult time listening and do not process auditory information well. However, they are better at receiving and processing information visually and they tend to require tactile input for learning (Hitchens, 2009; James, 2007). It is argued that because there are differences between the development and brains of males and females, these differences will dictate how students learn and perform in the classroom (James, 2007; Neu & Winfield, 2005; Piechura-Couture et al., 2011). Therefore, it has been suggested by educational researchers that boys benefit from being in gendered classrooms (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Holliday 2007; Kunjufu, 2012; Piechura-Couture et al., 2011; Price, 2011; Whitmire, 2010). The benefit is said to be greater for African American boys (Kunjufu, 2012; Piechura-Couture et al.,2011).

While many educators and researchers have endorsed the benefits of gendered classrooms for male and female students (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Holliday, 2011; Whitmire, 2010), I was interested in garnering the feelings of the boys in my study on having been in a gendered classroom for the past three years. Researchers have discovered a student’s comfort level is a precursor to learning (Brown, 2003; Gay, 2002; Langhout & Mitchell, 2007). I remember Darius sharing that he did not want to look bad in front of girls in case he made a mistake in the classroom. It could be that many boys and girls in co-taught classrooms feel the same way and do not give their all when they are in coed classrooms. They fear being embarrassed by the opposite gender. The boys perceived that since they were all boys, that they shared similar thoughts and feelings, lessening the chance of being embarrassed by each other. Interestingly, boys are emotionally fragile and sensitive, especially to shame (Kunjufu, 2005a;
One of the most pivotal findings from the students regarding the benefits of being in a gendered-classroom was the boy’s belief that teachers were better able to address their learning styles and needs in a class with all boys. Ryan, Tommy, Gabriel, Darius, and William, all revealed during their interviews, focus groups, and student journals that their teachers utilized activities that they knew boys would like and be interested in doing. I recall Ryan sharing in an interview about Mrs. Hall:

At the beginning of the year, she put everything in there, and she told us that she had everything in there because she knew that we were boys and we would like everything. But if she had girls in the classroom, it will be all different. That's why she chose to put like fun things like Wii and all that other stuff in the classroom.

It is obvious from Ryan’s statement that his teacher took the time to get to know her students. She applied what she knew about her students to guide how she set up her classroom, her classroom management system, and her instruction of the boys. As culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) suggests, teachers should utilize what they know about their students to guide and drive instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Gay, 2010; Townsend, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Gendered-classes allows for teachers to target their instruction to benefit boys and their learning preferences and behaviors (Holliday, 2007; Holliday, 2011). Students found the boy-friendly activities and lessons, projects, skits, raps, songs, use of technology, and games a benefit of being in an all-boy class. What does this tell us as educators? It is imperative to know one’s students and what makes them excited and engaged, and use this knowledge to guide classroom management, instruction, and assessments of students. These findings also indicate that African
American boys need and crave a variety of instructional activities that address their different learning styles. Regardless of whether a teacher is teaching in a traditional coed classroom or gendered classroom, they should be mindful of activities and assignments that may appeal to the boys as well as the girls.

**Challenges of gendered-classrooms.** The major disadvantage I heard most from the boys was that of behavior. Ironically, this is the same complaint I heard from adults as it related to the male students in their classes or their fear of having an all-boy class. There is no denying that boys behave differently than girls, and in the classroom it is no different. Gabriel and William revealed that boys in their class were competitive and constantly rivaled to be the best. The boys tended to vie for that top spot in the classroom. Hitchens (2009) declares, “In the classroom, boys are very conscious of developing a special persona; toughness, durability, and unyieldingness ready to withstand any challenger in the classroom” (Kindle, chapter 2, section 3, paragraph 2, sentence 13). While competition can have a negative side in the classroom when students vie against one another, this competitiveness can have positive place in the classroom and can be used to promote task completion and engagement in the classroom (Kunjufu, 2012; Lahey, 2013; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Reichert & Hawley, 2009). This was the case with William and his friends when he shared that they often try to see who can get the highest grade on an assignment. However, students will be against one another unless the teacher has established a community in the classroom where everyone’s strengths are recognized and acknowledged. Challenges of an all-boy class stemmed from boys fighting and teasing other boys, which is a classroom management issue. While I did not witness the fighting and misbehavior during my observations, I do not doubt they occurred.
Often behaviors that most teachers may deem inappropriate may not be atypical behavior for a boy of a certain age. “Behavior happens for a reason and is a form of communication” (Rappaport & Minahan, 2012, p. 18). There are two ways to look at the issue of inappropriate behavior in all-boy classes. First, it is imperative that teachers understand boys and their way of behaving and then implement classroom management procedures accordingly and effectively. Secondly, in an all-boy or girl classroom, to eliminate bullying behaviors, it is imperative for a sense of community to be established and fostered; this relates back to the importance of classroom environment that the students identified as contributing to their success in school. It was obvious that Mrs. Hall had created an environment where her students felt a sense of community and responsibility for one another. Mrs. Hall was able to accomplish this; Tommy from her class had this to say: “Well, the other students, they are like my family. We're all, we're all in the same class, even if we don't like each other, we still have to help each other to get out of fifth.” When the class feels a sense of community, they may utilize competition as a way to increase their skills, but they are not going to put down one another out of malice.

From this study, understanding how to reach and teach boys is a definite area of growth for teachers at Opportunity Elementary. Unfortunately, prior to the implementation of gendered-classrooms, there was very little professional development on gender and education. I do believe all teachers at Opportunity Elementary would have benefited from professional development on education and gender, prior to implementing gendered-classrooms. Dr. Moore shared during our interview,

The boy teachers [teachers teaching boy classes] seem to be a little over their heads the first year….. Teachers continue to teach boys like they taught whole group. Which is
really how we teach girls, and it’s very evident when you’re in an all-boy class that you weren’t just teaching kids, you were teaching to the girls.

While the teachers the boys referred to in this study had a keen understanding of boys and what they needed to help them be successful, many teachers do not. Some teachers at Opportunity Elementary cringe at the thought of teaching an all-boy class, and many of the specialist teachers (art, music, physical education, etc) do not appreciate the days in which they have the all-boy classes. Since substantial professional development was absent prior to the schools implementation of gendered-classrooms, this may have indirectly, negatively impacted students and teachers. As Dr. Moore laments, “We're still working on learning how to teach boys in a different way.” Teaching them in different ways includes understanding behaviors and how to eliminate or avoid negative classroom behaviors. Knowing and understanding your students is imperative to teaching them.

**Research Question Three:** How do fifth grade African American boys perceive their teachers as contributing to their academic success or failure?

Teachers who contributed to the success of these students were able to create productive learning environments. Students had already confirmed that classroom environments were contributors to their success in school; teachers played a critical role in creating that environment. Teachers who know their students are able to utilize this information to build community and increase a positive culture in the classroom. Classrooms that fostered student success were student-centered: activities, materials, and practices were geared toward the interest of the students in the classroom. Teachers play an integral role in the lives of their students. Some even allege that teachers are paramount to the success of a student (Davis, 2003; Delpit, 2012; Hitchens 2009, Kunjufu 2005b; Kunjufu, 2012; Peters, 2006; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009).
The relationships that teachers are able to establish with their class and each student has a great bearing on whether students will be successful in the classroom (Peters, 2006; Price, 2011). To my surprise the students in this study were delighted and eager to speak about their teachers; the good and the bad. According to the boys in this study, the teachers that fostered their success created comfortable learning environment, held high expectations for them, were encouraging, and engaged in teaching practices that motivated them. While these traits do not come as a surprise to most, it was interesting to hear the boys describe the teachers they felt possessed these traits. The results and findings of my study with the fifth grade African American boys are consistent with those of Ladson-Billings’ (2009) investigation, which found that teachers who were thriving in educating African American students possessed certain qualities and beliefs and engaged in distinct teaching practices, she branded these teachers “culturally responsive.” Culturally responsive teachers form relationships with their students where they are able to utilize what they know of the students to guide their instruction, classroom management and procedures, and assessments. These teachers are committed to forming a community in their classrooms that facilitate comfort, learning, and risk-taking. Teachers that are effective in working with African American boys are able to create relationships that demonstrated they genuinely care for the students and their well-being (Noguera, 2008). Unfortunately, Jay, Junior, and Ryan did not feel that Mr. Waller demonstrated a genuine concern for their well-being, and this was illustrated in their comments during our focus groups. In analyzing the data from this study, Mrs. Hall and Ms. Bling seemed to instinctively do this more readily than their colleagues. Students repeatedly spoke of how these classrooms and teachers were engaging and kept them wanting to learn and come to school.
**Teacher traits.** The boys in this study believed teachers that contribute to their success in the classroom never gave up on them and encouraged them until the end. “For the African-American male, the highest value in a relationship is encouragement” (Hitchens, 2009, Kindle; chapter 5, section 1, paragraph 1, sentence 1). Additionally, these teachers also held high expectations for their students: “Many of our children of color don’t learn from a teacher as much as for a teacher. They don’t want to disappoint a teacher who they feel believes in them” (Delpit, 2012, p. 86). This caused the boys to work up to and often past their assumed potential. Since their teachers cared so much and held them in high regard and expected great things, the students attempted to live up to these expectations. This was illustrated when Junior and Jay stated they could not be or do their best in their classes because their teachers did not expect them to. When I hear them say this, I am reminded of the self-fulfilling prophecy, which states that people behave or perform the way we expect them to (Gay, 2010; Schunk, 2008): therefore, what a teacher expects of their students in the classroom is what they get.

**Teaching practices.** According to the boys in this study, the teachers identified as contributing to the success of students engaged in innovative teaching practices, not the standard; teacher talk, students sit quietly and work. Teaching practices that engage the students made them want to participate and learn. Gabriel shared this about Mrs. Hall: “That's what my teacher does sometimes we get on the drums, we make raps and stuff about what we need to learn.” Just as culturally responsive researchers argue when a teacher knows her students he or she can construct activities that will make students want to come to school, contribute, and be taught. Gurian & Ballew (2003) contend that boys need a variety of activities in the classroom to keep them focused and on task. It was very apparent during my observations, interviews, and focus groups that students are very enthralled with technology assignments and utilizing various
learning activities, i.e. technology, songs, visuals, including visual artistic creations. African American students require learning activities that are stimulating, appealing to the senses, and allow them to participate and be involved physically and emotionally (Gay, 2010). William shared how his class responds to his teacher, “To be honest when my teacher starts teaching, the kids get wild! Because they love it so much, they start like doing [student starts making huffing noises here].” Darius added, “They don't… people don't expect to have fun in class, people expect to always be working. But when, the teachers make it fun then they go wild.” This is the type of classroom that gets African American boys excited and engrossed. Teachers that engage in traditional classroom practices are not as likely to have success with African American male students. It is hard for some teachers to see how their practices impact their students, because many students, particularly White females, will adjust and assimilate. This gives teachers a faulty perception that their practices are effective. African American boys will have a more difficult time in classrooms where the teachers are lecturing and doing paper and pencil work, and students are sentenced to work in silence. Mrs. Hall seemed to understand, she stated on her questionnaire, “The educator shouldn’t make life easy and convenient for oneself.”

Understanding that it is not about what we like to do as educators, but what is best for our students, has to be paramount if we truly want to do what is best, especially for African American boys that may challenge our normal way of doing things. As educators we have to become more culturally responsive if we want to impact the education of these students.

**Significance of the Study**

One day during the study the following exchange occurred between me and a colleague:

Milligan: The energy in Ms. Bling and Mrs. Long’s class is unbelievable. Every time I go in that classroom, while it may seem like chaos, it is definitely
organized. Students are working with their groups on assignments, even when they are working independently, they are on task. The students have these chants that just electrify their space.

Colleague: Yeah, I love how they greet you when you walk in, they are quite lively. Yeah they are doing well now, but I wonder.

Milligan: What do you mean?

Colleague: I wonder what will happen to them next year when they go to middle school. You and I both know the teachers over there are not going to allow them to do raps and stuff. I love how excited they are, but I don’t know if that is good for the kids.

Milligan: I can only hope the boys take what they are learning now and build on it, remembering what they have been taught here—their strengths and how they learn best. I don’t know what will happen.

Is she right? Are we doing the students a disservice? While I believe our teachers are doing what is best for their students, it was at that moment I realized that I did not have the answer to that question of what would happen to them, or maybe, I did not want to face the real answer. The same boys that were engaged, yearning to come to school, participating in class, doing their class and homework, and working hard to impress their teachers would somehow be turned off and may become totally different students. Why does this have to be the outcome for so many African American boys? This is why the results of this study are so significant.

For many African American boys, the classrooms in schools across America are a precipice, where many are trying to hang on, but slipping, and others have fallen, never to be
rescued. The statistics regarding African American boys in education are dismal and sickening. In Hope County, the graduation rate is 52% for Black males compared to 77% for their White counterparts (Schott Foundation report, 2012). In Hope County, the suspension rate for Black students is 59% compared to 22% for White students (School Districts Statistical and Demographic Data, 2009). This is typically true for districts and states throughout the country. The most unfortunate factor about this is that it has been this way for over 30 years. I was reading a report published in 1992 entitled Empowering Young Black Males, written by Courtland Lee, and I was in awe that he was stating almost the same statistical data from the late 80s and early 90s as we still have in the year 2013. For decades, African American boys have had higher drop out and, suspension rates, they have been most likely to be placed in special education classes and least likely to be placed in gifted classes than any other demographic (Fantuzzo et al, 2012; Hucks, 2011; Lee, 1992; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). A blog post highlighted on Education Week, titled “Reports Focus on Closing Achievement Gap,” spoke of a research study that examined the achievement gaps that exist between African Americans and Latinos and their White peers in New York and across the country. The study concluded that state policymakers are eagerly willing to make changes when White students have low graduation rates, but the same is not true when African American students have low graduation rates (Morones, 2013). It is amazing that, despite technological advances, educational reform, and improvements that have occurred over the past 30 years that the outcomes for African American boys remain in a state of disarray. Instantly, I am reminded of tenants of the critical race theory (CRT); America is inherently racist (Knaus, 2009; Lynn, 2006; Ortiz & Jami, 2010; Su 2007; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Throughout history I have been made aware of countless attacks on young African American men. It appears that people who perpetrate egregious crimes
against them walk free and continue to live their lives as if nothing has happened. If America has such little regard for the lives of these individuals, could those in power truly be invested in the future of young African American boys in a schooling system that fails them decade after decade? The answer is evident! Noguera states,

> All the evidence shows that unless we change the culture of schools, nothing, changes. That is – no matter what curriculum we introduce, or how many structural changes we make to the organization- if we do not transform the beliefs, the norms, and the relationships…. nothing will change (as cited in Saifer et al., 2011, p.1).

The CRT tenant of interest convergence states that those in power will only embrace the idea of equality for all as long as it does not minimize or infringe on the privileges received by the dominant class (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Knaus, 2009; Lynn, 2006; Su, 2007). Interestingly, America has moved toward a quasi acceptance of everyone and the strengths they bring forth; we encourage everyone to be themselves and celebrate diversity. We celebrate and embrace differences in sexual orientation, religion, race, national origin, and ethnicity. However, we also need to make sure we are blatantly clear, no matter what, if one does not embrace and live by the beliefs, behaviors, or values of White middle-class, heterosexual, Christians, he or she will not benefit from privileges afforded to those individuals. Therefore, the more students behave and act like White, middle-class, students, particularly girls (girls tend to make greater gains in education), the better they will fare in educational systems in America. Maintaining the status quo keeps things how they are and poses no risk to the dominant culture, and there is “institutional resistance to altering curricula or teaching styles for the purpose of meeting the needs of Black children, specifically boys” (Kunjufu, 2005a, p. 93). No matter how inclusive we say we are, interest convergence will not allow the dominant culture to give up any power or
control. Again, I ask, is the dominant culture really interested in the education or future of African American boys? If so, productive change for this demographic would have occurred long ago.

Second order change is a change that is not only an aesthetic change, but a change that involves a change in thinking, reasoning, and feeling—a change in the core, a paradigm shift, and a change in how and why things are done (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). In order to improve the educational outcomes for African American boys, there needs to be a second-order change that rattles the beliefs and ideologies that most mainstream Americans hold as truth regarding education. A deep change that examines why we educate the way we do and the expectations we hold for education in this country. While we may not get the second order change in our educational system, I do remain optimistic. I do believe that, as individual educators, we can make a difference for the students we are privileged to work with and educate.

I do not feel the majority of educators purposefully search for ways to disadvantage their African American male students. However, I do believe most systems and practices in education do not benefit African American boys. It will take school leaders, teacher leaders, and educators to begin doing what they know is best for their students. Like my colleague asked, are we putting the kids at a disadvantage by having engaging strategies and innovative teaching practices? The answer is no; we have to start one teacher at a time—just one year of a good teacher can have tremendous benefits. I believe as more teachers see the benefit to the students and even to themselves, they will begin to want to change.

While gendered classes may be a viable option when working with minority boys, it would not be the only feasible solution. Teachers need extensive training in how both girls’ and boys’ minds grow and develop. Educators need to understand that there are differences in how
boys and girls receive and process information in the classroom. Many educators are just bothered by the boys and their behaviors in the classroom, often leading boys to be punished for just being boys. Is it that teachers expect and want boys to inherent the traits of girls—particularly White girls: long attention span, quiet, sitting still for long lengths of time, and obedient (Kunjufu, 2005b; Lahey, 2013; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009)? Boys are typically more impulsive, not always aware of personal space, more competitive, louder, play around a lot more, more active, and more physical than girls, even in the classroom; it is just in their nature (Gurian & Ballew, 2003; Holliday, 2007; James, 2007; Monroe, 2006; Piechura-Couture et al., 2011).

Once teachers are aware of how to engage boys and girls, they can then incorporate practices that benefit both girls and boys, regardless of whether the class is single gendered or coed.

I believe one of the biggest revelations from this study is the influence of classroom environment and teachers on student success. The importance of these two factors is often underestimated and overlooked as teachers, educators, and systems grapple over curriculum, test scores, and school rankings. Regardless of whether a school or classroom is gendered or not, it is essential for educators to establish classrooms that foster a community of acceptance, respect, and achievement. Illustrated in the opening vignette of this chapter, teachers must be cognizant of the power they have in influencing the lives and achievement of their students. Culturally responsive practices are the only way educators can establish productive classroom communities and engage in instruction that will engage, motivate, and inspire African American boys.

Building relationships, knowing the students, identifying their needs and wants, and teaching them through their cultural lens are critical to the success of students, particularly African American boys. If we indeed want to impact the trajectory of African American boys, it is necessary for culturally responsive practices to be understood and implemented, professional
development must focus on these objectives. Hope County has adopted the 3 R’s, Relationships, Rigor, and Relevance, as a means to improve the achievement of students throughout the county. They realize the importance of making lessons that are not only meaningful, but that foster critical-thinking skills and application to engage and educate students. County curriculum and instruction departments speak to developing relationships with students to foster teaching and learning. These principles are in line with culturally responsive practices; and as an educator, it is easy to put these tenants into practice when we share a culture and experiences that are similar to the student population we teach. Advertising and displaying the 3 R’s looks very good in print, discussions, and in conversations, but now it is time to see it in practice to ensure the success of all students. Everyone has a part: teachers, administrators, district administrators, and state education departments. One educator, one school, one district, and one state at a time, we can do this!

**Limitations of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to investigate what fifth grade African American boys felt they needed to be successful in school, to examine the students’ perspectives on how they felt about their learning experiences in a single-gendered classroom, and to determine how these boys perceive their teachers as impacting their performance in the classroom. There is limited research on elementary African American boys and their perceptions of their school experiences. As educators, we need to listen to the voices of students and do what is right to help them become successful students. Research of this nature will determine best practices to implement early in the academic careers of these students, increasing their academic engagement and changing their current trajectory. Pre-service teachers need to be taught that teaching is not something they can learn in a classroom, but something that must be practiced in order to gain
skill and competency. Students should guide practices and instruction, not material in textbooks (Kunjufu, 2011). Inservice teachers need to be aware that years in the business also do not make you proficient, nor effective, especially those teachers who are doing the same activities and conducting the same practices they were when they started teaching. All educators must be vested in students and doing what is best for them. I hope this study will encourage educators to be more deliberate and reflective as they construct learning environments, lessons, and experiences for African American boys.

There were limitations that I should note for this study. Though there were scheduling constraints that I had to adhere to, I was not able to take the students away from their instructional time. I worked around these constraints by meeting with students during non-instructional times, i.e. recess, lunch, and after school. I enjoyed my observations from each of the classrooms, and they provided insights to the participants’ settings. However, it should be noted that these observations were just moments in time. The findings are also limited by the nature of the study and the type of school examined; most elementary public schools do not have separate classrooms for boys and girls. Nonetheless, the results of this study could be transferable to a setting with similar demographics. Qualitative research seeks to understand participants’ experiences in their authentic setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). My sample size of 12 students was purposeful and each student was able to provide information on the topic being investigated. A smaller sample size allowed me to delve deeper and obtain meaningful data regarding school experiences of fifth grade African American boys at Opportunity Elementary (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). Although purposeful, limiting this study to only fifth grade African American male students further confines the sample.
Implications for Future Research

While it was very insightful to garner the perceptions of these fifth grade African American boys regarding their schooling experiences, it is just a precursor for future research. The school at which I conducted the study was an elementary school, and it would be interesting to repeat this study in middle school and high school to determine how the students’ responses change or stay the same. When the students enter the feeder middle and high schools, they will have a more exposure to White students and teachers that will have a variety of teaching styles. Another facet of the study could include the students’, parents’, and teachers’ perceptions of how to improve the academic success of African American boys in the classroom. Additionally, possible research could focus on African American male students at schools in which the student population is predominately White; I have seen limited literature with these demographics. It would be interesting to garner these student’s perspectives on how successful they feel in school and how their teachers affect their academic performance. I often feel that when the students in a predominately Black school setting may have an “advantage” over those African American males that are in predominately White schools. The students in predominately Black schools at least have one another to empathize, relate, and share experiences with, while African American males at a predominately White school may be the only African American student in the classroom, leaving them to feel alone and isolated regarding their experiences in the classrooms. Comparing the two, it would be interesting to see if the results are similar or different in what they feel they need from schools and their teachers.

Implications for Practice

Making sure students are achieving academically should be paramount as a goal of schools and teaching. Results from this study could be used to inform professional development
for inservice teachers on best practices for working with African American male students (see Appendix I). The probability of schools guaranteeing that all students have equal access to a quality education will rely upon how teachers are able to construct many learning environments to satisfy the various experiences and needs of culturally diverse students (Phuntsog, 2001). It should be noted that, as educational systems seek to establish best instructional practices for student achievement, gender differences and learning styles should be taken into account. Accountability falls on teachers of minority students who must be prepared and equipped to make sure that their students are achieving to established standards. In order to improve the learning of African American male students, policies and systems in education must address the issues of educating male students, eliminating biased disciplinary practices, creating productive learning environments for African American male students, and educating teachers on the impact of cultural and racial differences in schools (Gregory et al., 2010).

Constructivism seeks educators to employ reflective teaching. Reflective teaching involves the educator keeping a journal or even video-taping their classrooms in order to look at his or her practices and note how these practices align or do not align with his or her beliefs about teaching and learning and student performance (Schunk, 2008). Teachers should use what they know of their students and reflect on how students are receiving their instruction and whether their practices contribute to their students’ learning (Schunk, 2008). When educators take a conscious and critical look at their instructional practices, they are not only able to grow professionally and expand their knowledge and skill set, but they are able to transform and adjust their instruction to best meet the needs of the students they serve (Schunk, 2008; Shandomo, 2010). Reflective teachers are purposeful in their teaching; they have a reason for the instructional practices they utilize: increased student learning (Shandomo, 2010).
Implications for Special Education Practices

There remain a disproportionate number of African American boys referred to and placed in special education classes. Many factors contribute to student behavior and learning. When teachers are considering placing an African American boy (or any student) on the response to intervention (RTI) process, it is necessary to consider the influence of culture on how students behave and receive, process, and conceptualize classroom content. Harris-Murri et al. (2006) contend, “Without consideration of culturally responsive instruction, discipline, and interventions within all stages of the RTI decision making model, there is continued possibility of misinterpretation of student behavior and emotional well-being as disordered” (p. 781). Therefore, the problem does not always lie with the student, but rather with systems or educators. Educators need a level of cultural competency and an understanding of the effect of culture on behavior, attitudes, and beliefs of African American male students. How teachers interpret, react, and respond to student behaviors is filtered through their cultural filters and may have little to do with students’ academic skills (Gay 2002; Gay 2010). “Teaching activities… are based on one’s cultural perspectives. Likewise, students’ learning and behaving are influenced by their cultural perspectives” (Gay, 2002, p. 617-618). Therefore, culturally responsive practices should be utilized throughout the RTI process to garner a more accurate account of whether or not African American male students are truly in need of special education services (Fiedler et al., 2008; Harris-Murri et al., 2006).

Since general education teachers are typically the educators initiating the RTI process, it is important for teachers to have knowledge of the different cultures represented in their classrooms (Harris-Murri et al., 2006). Often misidentification of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students placed in special education is a result of cultural norms between home
and school being at odds and incongruent (Chu, 2011; Gay, 2002). The perceptions and attitudes of the referring teacher influence how they view African American student behavior and student learning (Chu, 2011; Harris-Murri et al., 2006; Kea et al., 2003). The student demographics in many schools are vastly different from the demographics of the teaching force in schools, many educators could benefit from training and professional development regarding culturally responsive practices and cultural awareness (García & Ortiz, 2006; Harris-Murri et al., 2006). Harris-Murri et al. (2006) state, “By recognizing the culture is central to leaning, students may become more responsive to interventions grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy thus impacting the growth and progress of all learners” (p. 794). This could decrease the number of unwarranted referrals to special education for African American boys and increase their success in the general education setting.

**Implications for Leadership**

Education in the 21st century is centered on accountability; schools, teachers, and students; therefore, it is necessary that all students be afforded a quality education, where they are able to acquire necessary skills to perform successfully on state tests and become analytical thinkers and productive citizens that are able to compete on a global level. In theory, schools are institutions created to ensure secure, encouraging, and effective learning environments for all students—a place where all children feel accepted and respected. Although the policies and practices of old have been successful for some students, primarily students of the dominant culture, those types of practices do not help to ensure the success of the diverse population of students we are required to educate. Culturally responsive pedagogy seeks to ensure the success of all students by incorporating a multitude of thoughts, viewpoints, and experiences brought by the students in the assessments, curriculum, and instruction of students. This requires a complete
change in the thinking, assumptions, and beliefs of educators in how they deliver instruction and how educators interact with students. Leadership’s attitudes and behaviors often dictate how staff members will receive educational programs and practices. Leadership can foster culturally responsive practices by supporting the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy and building relationships with both parents and teachers that help them to become proactive in improving the student’s academic, emotional, and social development (Johnson, 2007).

Administrators must be cognizant of the pervasiveness of gender, race, and culture in the classroom and how these constructs shape teaching and learning. The role of administration in implementing, fostering, and supporting this type of learning environment is paramount. It is critical for educational leaders to identify staff members who are open and willing to collaborate and bring change to the way things are done in the school building (Hitchens, 2009). In order to improve the achievement of African American males, educational leaders must take a critical look at achievement data and behavioral data to determine how African American males develop and advance in their schools. Once the data has been analyzed, educational leaders can acquire a better understanding of African American male students, where the breakdown or disconnect may be occurring with these students and where to begin in implementing change to address the needs of these students. This can be the first steps into implementing best practices for working with this population. Professional and staff development opportunities, collaboration, and mentoring activities can be established to assist the staff in the implementation of culturally responsive practices and practices that are effective for addressing the learning styles of African American boys. Utilizing a distributive leadership approach, staff members who have success working with African American male students should be employed in providing best practices to fellow educators for working with these students.
Guiding schools into an understanding and implementation of culturally responsive practices and gender-based instruction is an excellent opportunity to employ distributive leadership practices. Distributive leadership (DL) is a perspective in which leaders, followers, and situations interact and influence one another on a continuum, and the roles of those individuals can change depending on the circumstance(s) (Spillane, 2006). Leadership is fluid and various educators can serve the leader role when the opportunity arises, leading to increased teacher efficacy and, ultimately, student achievement (Mayrowetz, 2008). Distributive leadership is the idea that many members of a staff in a school carry a certain level of expertise and knowledge that they can use to help the school perform at its optimal level (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006; Mayrowetz, 2008). Distributive leadership fosters the leadership of others, creating an atmosphere where educators work and learn together and reflect on their ways to achieve a common goal. Distributive leadership utilizes educators who can share their skills with others to improve instructional practices and, ultimately, student achievement.

From a distributive leadership analysis, teacher leaders are experts in teaching; they have knowledge to share with others to help them to develop into better educators. Teachers serve as mentors and coaches because they know their environment and what is needed to help teachers and students become successful. Teacher leaders lead by example, displaying their practices and influencing other teachers and other educators (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). During the process of becoming more culturally responsive, systems and schools can utilize teacher leaders to assist in implementing change. The role of teacher leaders as change agents is necessary to serve as advocates for children, especially those who have no one to advocate for them, by bringing the urgent need for change to the attention of colleagues.
Conclusion

Despite the desires and abilities of African American males to learn, their performance in schools has not been an indicator of their true aptitude. If America is indeed embracing the idea of inclusion and success for all students, educators and systems must do their due diligence to improve the academic achievement of this demographic. In efforts to inform and transform professional development and teaching practices, this qualitative study investigated what fifth grade African American boys felt they needed to be successful in school, examined the students’ perspectives on how they felt about their learning experiences in a single-gendered classroom, and determined how these boys perceive their teachers as impacting their performance in the classroom. Upon investigation, I discovered that these boys felt their success in school was dependent on classroom environment, teaching styles, and familial support. I also gleaned that the boys believed the benefits of a single-gendered classroom were increased attentiveness, comfortability, and the teacher’s use of relevant and differentiated teaching practices. However, it was also discovered that negative behaviors i.e. aggression, teasing, yelling; were seen as disadvantages to being in a single-gendered classroom. I also discovered from student participants that teachers that foster the success of African American males create a comfortable learning environment, hold high expectations, are encouraging, and engage in teaching practices that relate to and motivate their students.

Teachers must be mindful of the power they have in shaping the lives and achievements of their students. Educators hold the key to improving the educational outcomes for African American males. It is necessary for inservice and preservice teachers to be knowledgeable of effective teaching practices when working with African American males. Educators must establish classrooms that foster a community of acceptance, respect, and achievement. Culturally
responsive practices are the only way educators can establish productive classroom communities and engage in instruction that will include, motivate, and inspire African American boys.
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2013%20EIP%20Guidance%20April%202013.pdf


http://ocrdata.ed.gov/


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Appendix A

School Days: The perceptions and experiences of African-American boys in the classroom.

Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Classroom Teacher</th>
<th>Coded Performance Level</th>
<th>Years at Opportunity Elementary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bobby</td>
<td>Mr. Waller/Reid</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning Disabled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>Mr. Waller/Reid</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning Disabled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darius</td>
<td>* Ms. Bling/ Mrs. Long</td>
<td>Early Intervention</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>Mrs. Hall</td>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>* Ms. Bling/ Mrs. Long</td>
<td>Early Intervention</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>* Mrs. Long/ Ms. Bling</td>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Mr. Waller/Reid</td>
<td>Early Intervention</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Mr. Waller/Reid</td>
<td>Early Intervention</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Mrs. Hall</td>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SpongeBob</td>
<td>*Ms. Bling/Mrs. Long</td>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>Mrs. Hall</td>
<td>Gifted Education</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>* Mrs. Long/ Ms. Bling</td>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* denotes the teacher’s roster that the student is officially assigned.
Appendix B

Teacher Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Bling</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Hall</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>19 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Long</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Reid</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Waller</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Individual Student Interview Guiding Questions

Guiding Questions for Student Interviews

**Interview #1**

1) How long have you been at this school?
2) Do you like school? Why or why not?
3) Do you like Brumby? Why or why not?
4) Do you want to learn? Why?
5) How successful do you feel in school?
6) What is a good student?
7) Do you complete your class work and homework? Why or why not?
8) Who is your favorite teacher(s)? Why?
9) What teaching styles or classroom activities help you learn in class? (lectures, discussions, working in groups, projects, visuals, etc…)
10) What do you feel you need to be successful in your class? School?

**Interview #2**

1) How would you rate your participate in class?
2) How would you describe your relationship with other students?
3) What do you like best about your class?
4) What do you like least about your class?
5) What classroom activity(ies) do you enjoy most?
6) Which classroom activities do you not enjoy?

7) Do you like classroom activities that you do on your own or with others? Why?

8) Do you like being in an all boy class? Why or why not?

9) What is the best thing about your class?

10) Do you think you perform better in this class or in a class with boys and girls? Why or why not?

**Interview #3**

1) How do you feel about your teacher? Why?

2) How would you describe your relationship with your teacher(s)?

3) How does your teacher help you learn?

4) Does your teacher create a classroom environment that helps you feel comfortable? How or what makes you feel that way?

5) Tell me a little about your experience this year so far in your class?

6) Do you feel your teacher creates an atmosphere that allows you to be your best and do your best work? Why or why not?

7) What could your teacher do to help you be the best student you can be?

8) Do you feel your teacher cares whether or not you are successful in class? Why or why not?
Appendix D

Focus Group Guiding Questions

The following questions will guide focus groups discussions…

1) Do you like Opportunity Elementary (Brumby)? Why or why not?
2) What do you like most about school? Least?
3) What makes a good teacher?
4) What makes a good student?
5) How do you think your teacher feels about teaching?
6) If you had a choice whose class would you want to be in? Why?
7) Why is school important?
8) Why do you think Dr. Moore decided to have all boy classes for 3rd-5th grades?
9) What is the best thing about being in an all boy class?
10) What is the worst thing about being in an all boy class?
11) Does your teacher make learning interesting or fun? How?
12) How do you and your classmates respond to your teacher’s teaching style(s)?
13) What teaching styles or classroom activities help you learn in class? (lectures, discussions, working in groups, projects, visuals, etc…)
14) Are you able to be the best student in your classroom? Why or why not?
15) Are you treated differently in school than other students? Why do you feel that way?
16) Do your teachers have a good understanding of Black boys? Why or why not?
17) Do you think school is easier for other students? Why or why not?
18) Refer back to what students feel makes a good teacher…. does your teacher qualify as a good teacher?

19) How does your teacher help you be your best in the classroom?
Appendix E

**Student Journal Response Prompts**

Journal Response Prompts (students are encouraged to draw and then supply a written response to prompts):

1) In your reflection journal, tell me how you would describe your classroom?

2) In your reflection journal, tell me how would you describe your homeroom teacher? How would you describe your favorite teacher in the school? How would you describe your least favorite teacher in the school?

3) In your reflection journal, share how you would describe yourself as a student in the classroom? How would you describe yourself outside of your classroom?

4) In your reflection journal share what your goals are for the school year?

5) In your reflection journal share what you like and dislike about school. Don’t forget to share why you feel the way you do.

6) In your reflection journal, answer this question…. do you feel school does a good job of preparing you to be successful in your class? Why or why not? Do you feel school/class does a good job of preparing you for your future? Why or why not?
Appendix F

**Teacher questionnaire questions**

Teacher Questionnaire #1

1) How long have you been teaching?
2) How long have you taught in a culturally diverse setting?
3) What personal experiences have influenced your beliefs about teaching and learning concerning African American male students?
4) What professional experiences have influenced your beliefs about teaching and learning concerning African American male students?
5) How competent do you feel about teaching African-American males?
6) What could help you improve in your instruction (or increase your efficacy) in working and teaching African-American male students?

Teacher Questionnaire #2

1) What does it mean to be a culturally responsive educator?
2) How do you demonstrate the values you believe regarding culturally responsive instruction and practices?
3) How do you build upon students‘ prior experiences and cultural backgrounds in your teaching and lesson development? How do you relate learning to their lives?
4) What strategies do you use in working with African-American males that seem to be successful? Unsuccessful?
Appendix G

Ms. Bling/Mrs. Long’s Classroom

Students working collaboratively to create their Holocaust mosaic.

One group’s visual interpretation of the Holocaust.
Students working diligently to diagram a concentration camp for their Holocaust project.
Appendix H

Opportunity Elementary 3rd - 5th grade CRCT scores (Reading)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>2010 Before gender classes</th>
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<td>Exceeds</td>
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Data taken from Opportunity Elementary Title I Plan for 2012-2013 & 2013 CRCT reports from GADOE
Opportunity Elementary 3rd - 5th grade CRCT scores (Math)

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<th>2011 1st year gendered-classes</th>
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</tbody>
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Data taken from Opportunity Elementary Title I Plan for 2012-2013 & 2013 CRCT reports from GADOE
Appendix I

Quick Fact Sheet

Best Practices for Teaching African American Boys in Elementary School

1) Above all form relationships with your students and get to know them. Be genuine- students should know that you care for them and about them.

2) Utilize activities and topics that are of interest to students to facilitate teaching of content standards and skills.

3) Allow students to be involved in creation of classroom management practices.

4) Build a sense of community in the classroom where everyone is respected for their uniqueness and what they bring to the classroom.

5) Allow students to work with their peers as much as possible.

6) Hold high expectations for students; expect the best from them and get the best out of them. Do not allow subpar work or behavior.

7) Allow students to demonstrate their knowledge by utilizing different learning styles/activities and creating an end product/project.

8) Use technology whenever possible to hook and engage students.

9) Listen to them and allow them to express their concerns even when there is a conflict involved.

10) Be consistent and firm.

* The above list was derived from the interactions I had with the boys in my study during individual interviews and focus groups.