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"NOW I HAVE MORE FREEDOM, BUT MORE WORK": AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS FOLLOWING THE TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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Dedication

To M, a 9-year old boy, who didn't need to know the word positionality to check me on mine.
I hope you are somewhere thriving.

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Acknowledgements

Without knowing it, my friend Chris' murder in 1996 would dictate the work I've dedicated myself to. The push among scholars of color and Indigenous scholars to view young people as more than their trauma or damage (in particular, Ginwright and Tuck, respectively) has been healing for me in reflecting on Chris' life and death.

Thank you to Relahn, Darren, Ralph, Chris, Malcolm, David, and Tommy for trusting me. To Audrienna, Laur'kee, Nancy, Tanya, Tymeika, LaTeea, Monique, Monique, Alejandro, and Juan, you all taught me more than any social work or adolescent development course ever could. Nancy and Tanya, you two gave me the hardest time. I love that I can say, "I told you so!," when I see how passionate you are in the work you do and the lives you lead.

To be completely transparent, the only reason I finished this dissertation is to honor the time and stories of the boys who allowed me to periodically interrupt their days during their freshman year in high school. Without them, I would have lost the thread of what this endeavor was even for. So many years later and certain experiences they shared still pop into my mind with such clarity - reminding me of the urgency to do better by young people - that it surprises me.

To my sister, Holly, and my brothers, Blake and Kyle, even though we didn't grow up in the same house, I have based so many of the important decisions in my life on whether they would be setting the right example for you all. I hope I've made you proud. My sister is the most giving person I have ever known and deserves only the best.

I am the daughter of government employees! Their experiences have taught me so much about how the world and systems operate. Without their love and guidance and support, I wouldn't be where I am today. Valarie, Kim, Linda, Bob, I love you! (Dad, sorry I didn't go to Harvard. 🙂) Either by name or the stories and sayings that play out in my mind, my grandparents and their

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A great deal of this dissertation is admittedly critical of how teachers interact with young people. I've known too many great teachers not to believe that when adults truly and deeply believe in young people, who a young person is and where they come from doesn't matter. I learned early on from two of the best (Sharon Gilchrist and Aljean Ivory) that you can't teach without first building relationships. And that includes the hard parts, like kicking me out of AP English when I wouldn't do the work, and helping me to learn how to advocate for myself, to get back in. There

is very real pressure on teachers to do and be everything. Like any good relationship, teachers, please make sure you are whole and healthy first.

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Abstract

This study takes an asset-based approach to understanding the academic experiences of African-American boys in their freshman year of high school in Chicago Public Schools. It uses both quantitative and qualitative methods, and professional development practices in the field, to explore the overarching question: *What factors are important for determining success for African American boys?* By de-centering outcomes that we know (based on national and local indicators) will describe African American boys as the lowest performers, we can learn about where (i.e. adult interactions) and if (i.e. are their perceptions of schooling any different than their peers?) they need support. To do this, I quantitatively examine academic engagement among a cohort of freshmen in Chicago with an explicit lens to see if African American boys are perceiving classrooms in a way that would lead to them having lower engagement than their peers of other racial-gender subgroups. The findings of the quantitative work suggests that while students' perceptions of classrooms are more important than their individual background or school-level characteristics, this relationship does not differ for African American boys as compared to other students. I also qualitatively explore the experiences of a subsample of African American freshmen boys to understand what influences notions of success for them. Adult relationships, especially with teachers, are an important factor in helping African American boys navigate their early high school experiences. Lastly, I conceptualize intentional teacher-student relationships that prioritize African American boys in a way that acknowledges societal views of this population and sustains them as learners.

Chapter 1: "Now I Have More Freedom, but More Work": African American Boys Following the Transition to High School

In this era of the prevalence of social media, it has become commonplace each spring (at least for African Americans) to see an abundance of news stories make their way onto our social media newsfeeds about African American graduating high school seniors, especially African American boys, who have been accepted to several colleges and with hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarship money. This year, a story about a boy in New Jersey who had been homeless for much of high school was one I personally saw (and 'liked') numerous times. In previous years, it has been twin brothers heading to elite universities and African American students accepted to all 8 Ivy League colleges. At the time of the qualitative data collection for this dissertation, both myself and one of the research participants (a 34-year old doctoral student, married, pregnant, from a middle class socio-economic background and a 14-year old boy from the south side of Chicago and a working class background, respectively) had seen the same story multiple times that spring on our Facebook newsfeeds of an African American boy accepted to several elite and Ivy League colleges.

While these stories are about celebrating the achievement of these young people, there is another motive to their "viral" sharing - to serve as a counternarrative to the persistent negative stories we encounter about African American youth, especially boys, on a regular basis. Just this year, in her attempt to provide nuance to the rising graduation rates for African American boys in Chicago, WBEZ public radio reporter Sarah Karp, perhaps inadvertently, but depressingly reminds us that the norm for the media we consume about Black boys is underachievement and even death ("Dissecting the Soaring Graduation Rate for Black Boys in Chicago," 3.19.2019, www.wbez.org). The annual stories of achievement serve as reminders that success is not foremost on our collective minds when we think about the academic experiences of African American boys.

The deficiency lens through which American society still views many African American communities, schools, students, and particularly African American boys deflects our ability to see and make meaning of success for this population of students. Drawing on DuBois's classic text, *The Souls of Black Folks*, Tyrone Howard (2013) challenges this deficiency lens with a direct question that illuminates our societal preoccupation with African American men and boys, "How does it feel to be a problem?" I imagine an exhaustive exploration of this question would lead one to confront not just news media, policymakers, and schools, but researchers as well. It is not uncommon for primarily Black academics, Howard included, to spend their careers proving, and reminding the various academic disciplines that study schooling, that African American young people are capable and worthy of learning. The titles of some of the most instructive (and often overlooked by mainstream academia) writing on African American student experiences give an indication of the framing used to counter negative and deficient portrayals of African American students: *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Students* (1994); *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement among African American Students* (2004); *Keepin' It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White* (2005); *Kids Don't Want to Fail: Oppositional Culture and the Black-White Achievement Gap* (2011); *Black Male(d): Peril and Promise in the Education of African American Males* (2013); *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (2019).

It is within this context of the incomplete narrative by which we typically discuss the academic experiences of African American boys[1] that I seek to understand success for African

[1] A tension exists between speaking to the experiences of African American boys, all African American students, and even other groups who experience marginalization in the United States. This tension is present throughout this dissertation and in the literature. It often shows up in the form of acknowledging that African American boys are not the only group vulnerable to stereotypes, implicit bias, and racist structures and policies present in American schooling. Or in the use of research and literature (typically quantitative in nature) that is topically aligned, but does not disaggregate data to show differences among racial-gender subgroups.

American boys and where one might look to find a lever to pull that can create meaningful change in the experiences African American boys have in school. In this dissertation, I examine the concept of academic engagement, African American boys' articulation of factors motivating success, and potential teacher reflections that might shift interactions between adults and students in an effort to find opportunities practitioners might focus on to generate change. I do this primarily by looking at the experiences of 9th grade African American boys as a site of exploration, knowing that the year following the transition to high school is a pivotal point for this student population.

The Trouble with Researching African American Boys' Academic Experiences

In many respects, the academic experiences of African American boys have been over-studied and subjected to numerous policy and programmatic initiatives. There are initiatives and task forces created by several entities, including schools and school districts (Oakland Unified School District, Newark Tech High), foundations (the Schott Foundation, the Heinz Endowments), and even President Obama's[2] White House My Brother's Keeper Initiative. The approach and success of these organizations vary, but they serve to put a spotlight on the experiences of Black boys in light of the many precarious outcomes they face.

[2] President Obama himself has demonstrated the deficit view by which American society views African American males and fails to recognize their success. When President Obama announced the My Brother's Keeper initiative, it was under the auspices of "address[ing] persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color and ensure that all young people can reach their full potential." My Brother's Keeper has been a nationwide effort to communicate to, and create policy and programming for Black boys and other boys of color to show them that they "matter;" to rectify their lack of access to opportunities that lead to success. And still, when delivering his convocation speech to Morehouse College's 2013 graduating class, he chose to tell a group of young men whose institution already conveys to them a message of responsibility which he cited ("Excuses are tools of the incompetent, used to build bridges to nowhere and monuments of nothingness."), that "we've got no time for excuses…[because] nobody is going to give you anything you haven't earned. And whatever hardships you may experience because of your race, they pale in comparison to the hardships previous generations endured-and overcame." Many called it an unnecessary reprimanding of Black young men bound for success and already academically successful based negative stereotypes.

African American boys tend to have worse outcomes than other racial-gender subgroups. They are disproportionately disciplined and placed in Special Education classes (Morris & Perry, 2016; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Catalyst Chicago, 2009; Moore III et al., 2008; Adkison-Bradley et al., 2006). They have lower standardized test scores than most other racial- gender subgroups (Luppescu, 2011). And in cities like Chicago, they are the least qualified graduates for successful postsecondary attainment (Luppescu, 2011; Roderick et al., 2006). There are many sociological and psychosocial explanations that attempt to place these precarious outcomes in context. Most however approach the academic experiences of African American boys from a deficit perspective. Well known are theories such as Cultural Ecological Theory (CET) which suggest that historically oppressed groups have poorer academic outcomes as a response to the limited opportunity structure available to them. Because of the inherent stratification in society, African Americans adopt "survival strategies" in the face of under-resourced educational and job opportunities.

The work of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) is demonstrative of the cultural-ecological perspective and is frequently cited in practice settings and in mainstream media as representative of why African American students, and boys in particular, have worse outcomes. In their highly touted ethnographic study of "Capitol High" in Washington, DC, Fordham and Ogbu describe how they reconcile the differences in academic outcomes between white and Black students. The study identifies evidence that African American students adopt an "oppositional collective or social identity" to that perceived as the social identity of whiteness, as well as, an "oppositional cultural frame of reference" to protect their identity, or sense of self in a racist environment. This opposition is exemplified in Black students' resistance to "acting white." Because of their realization of the role of racism and the unlikely chance that they will be treated as equals to whites,

Black students malign what is considered most representative of whiteness: academic achievement. In their ethnographic work Fordham and Ogbu find evidence that many students at Capitol High are torn between wanting to do well like they are expected to by school staff, and maintaining cultural and group solidarity by rejecting the work of the school.

Theories such as CET tend to locate the problem solely within the culture of students and argue that Black students possess mindsets that "de-identify" with school in recognition of the limited opportunity structure resulting from oppression by white-dominated society. While the "acting white" thesis does not necessarily pan out academically, the effects of stereotype threat (or fear of confirming stereotypes about one's salient group) can have negative implications for students' academic mindsets and identification with learning (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2010; Farrington et al., 2012). However, a deficit-based conceptualization of culture and how it affects mindsets (such as CET), takes responsibility away from schools that are likely to replicate hierarchical or inequitable school environments found in society. It does not ask the school or classroom's role in fostering an opposition to education or framing education as an activity belonging solely to white people. Nor does it ask students how they perceive and strive for success in the face of limited opportunity structures.

In fact, others have suggested that conceptualizing culture as simply a deficit that African American students bring to school with them ignores the multitudinous ways in which students in the process of acquiring education utilize culture (O'Connor, 2001; Carter, 2005; Sellers et al., 1998). In her study of urban, low-income African American and Latinx teens in New York, Carter (2005) identifies ways that some young people of color are able to navigate school environments by being what she labels, "cultural straddlers;" the African American and Latinx teens she encounters who know how to use dominant and nondominant forms of culture in the appropriate

setting to help them succeed in school. These students are able to articulate the importance of education for their future and see their various cultural formations as compatible with pursuing their educational goals.

Major and Billson's *Cool Pose* (1992) concept attempts to explain coping mechanisms enacted by African American boys and men in the face of racism and oppression. Exhibiting a "cool pose" can protect African American males from stigmatizing views of black masculinity common in mainstream society. By outwardly appearing nonchalant and unfazed by societal expectations that one may not be able to achieve (i.e. academic success), it is hypothesized that Black boys are often complicit in their poor academic performance as a means of protecting their sense of self[3]. In the classroom this would manifest in Black boys not performing the behaviors that are consistent with academic achievement; namely, active participation, critical thinking, effort, etc. In the context of schooling, Major and Billson rely on Fordham and Ogbu's "acting white" assumption as the impetus for the cool pose, which has been challenged by several scholars (Perry, 2003; O'Connor, 2001; Spencer, 2001; Cook & Ludwig, 1997). This concept does however hold promise in thinking about gendered constructions of racial identity in terms of academic achievement. For instance, Carter (2005) reports that the young people in her study subscribe to varying (yet, not always consistent) views of gender socialization that account for gender differences among students of color. Carter's findings tell us that academic achievement is not itself "acting white," but gender socialization may prevent boys of color from exhibiting specific behaviors (i.e. asking for help) that are valued in educational spaces, but may be

[3] Anecdotally, in my own field experience, I was the counselor of a student that arguably exhibited a cool pose posture. He had previously failed Spanish I, and was inexplicably placed in Spanish I and Spanish II the following year. Additionally, his Spanish II class contained several of his friends. He frequently acted out in this class. The teacher typically responded to his behavior by telling him that if he didn't want to be in the class he should leave, which is what he did. However, because of our trusted relationship this same student would also ask me for help with his Spanish homework and would come to school as early as 7am to receive help.

considered less masculine. The perspectives of her interviewees suggest that at times boys of color may view "certain aspects of their education as feminine…" (p. 87). This gendered view is worth considering as Carter notes that the majority of young men in her study fell into the category that she defined as "noncompliant believers," or students whose aspirations and achievement do not align. Given what is known about the aspirations-attainment gap (Roderick, 2006), it is possible that these students do not seek out and/or are not being sought out to help translate their aspirations.

Swanson et al. (2003) theorize that environmental pressures present differentially affect African American adolescents. Normative adolescent development for African Americans is compounded by an increased awareness of racial status and societal norms that render much of Black life inferior (Oyserman, 1995). For Black males this is particularly salient as appraisals of self are made against a backdrop of structural inequality and stereotypes about black masculinity (Thomas and Stevenson, 2009; Stevenson et al., 2003). Black males in urban communities must contend with high levels of violence and risk that positions them as both perpetrator and victim, and affects how they make meaning of their surroundings and experiences (Patton, 2012). In her qualitative assessment of perceptions of opportunity among low-income African American students, O'Connor (1999) encountered a small subset of students who believed that African American males face "unique constraints" in society and in school. These students believed that Black males are often pressured to join gangs and participate in illicit activities. Many of these students also articulated that teachers assumed African American boys were involved in criminal behavior even when it was not true and were more likely to interact with Black boys out of fear. These students also raised concerns that stereotypes about Black men affected their life chances in ways that were different, and more precarious, than for others, including Black women. Thus, as adolescents come to understand their roles in society, appraisals of self manifest, and are then

confirmed by larger society differently for African American girls and boys, and even other students of color. For African American boys, it is likely that the possibilities of what they can become, and what it takes to get there, seem more restrictive (Oysermann, 2003; 1995).

Collectively, these sociological and psychosocial perspectives give us a way of thinking about how members of historically marginalized groups potentially view and present themselves in relation to academic success. However, rarely does this work does provide empirical data linking these perceptions to the experiences students have in classrooms. For instance, do African American boys view themselves as not capable of academic success or do signals in the school environment tell them so? Further, with the exception of O'Connor (1999), Carter (2005), Harper (2014), and others, most of the research attempts to explain the predecessors to failure among African American boys, instead of looking for signs of success.

Why 9th Graders?

In 2007, researchers at the UChicago Consortium on School Research reported on an indicator they created that could predict the likelihood of high school graduation based on students' 9th grade course performance (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Roderick et al., 2014). According to the On-Track Indicator, as it came to be known, a student who failed more than one core course in his or her freshman year of high school was four times less likely to graduate from high school four years later than a student who failed one or no core courses. Though all students are vulnerable in the transition to high school, the Consortium researchers found that African American boys were more likely to be off-track than virtually all other racial-gender subgroups.

The transition to high school presents a unique developmental challenge to adolescents. Developmentally, adolescents are searching for autonomy, choice, and exploring identities at the same time that they are entering school structures that are far more departmentalized and rigid than

the elementary schools they came from (Benner & Graham, 2009). This presents what Eccles et al. (1993) call a "developmental mismatch," where the environment and young people's needs are at odds. Given the new, larger structure of high school, where teachers have more students to attend to, we know that students lose the adult monitoring present in elementary school (Rosenkrantz et al., 2014; Benner & Graham, 2009). This may be related to the achievement loss that is also present following the transition to high school (Alspaugh, 1998).

Exploring African American boys' academic experiences at this point in time and with a lens on what leads to success for this student population has the potential to contribute to the research base that seeks to understand this population from an asset-based perspective.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation takes the form of three related, but independent papers. It is my intention with this work, and my larger body of work, that it be useful to practitioners. As such, it made the most sense to think about my overarching question for the project, *"What factors are important for determining academic success for African American boys?,"* in interrelated, but distinct ways.

I achieve that by first exploring student perception of what leads to engagement among the 2013-14 cohort of freshmen in Chicago Public Schools. When we think of successful students we often think of young people who are engaged in their work and learning. The concept of engagement is multidimensional (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive), definitionally fraught, and studied at various levels (individual, classroom, and school). The findings in this quantitative chapter suggest that African American boys do not perceive academic engagement differently than their peers and that classrooms are more important for improving academic engagement than individual or school characteristics. I then use my qualitative data to dig deeper into how a group

of African American boys across achievement levels in one high school think about what influences them to be successful. Consistent with previous findings, what comes across as salient, but the least well-defined for the boys in this study, are the adult supports available to them (Rosenkrantz, 2011). Based on the literature reviewed and the findings of these two methodological papers, I conceptualize how teachers and other adults in school buildings might go about reflecting on their practice with African American boys and other marginalized students in a way that demonstrates authentic care and responsibility for young people.

A Note on Positionality and Reflexivity

During winter break of my junior year in high school, I received a phone call that far too many youth of color receive - someone whose friendship meant the world to me had been murdered. In so many ways, Chris and I were never meant to be friends. He was in a gang, and though he was quite intelligent, that was not a side of him many adults in our high school ever saw. These many years later, one fact I still do not know is whether Chris dropped out or was pushed out or just stopped showing up to school the fall before he was murdered. It probably does not matter; it was clear to Chris and the adults who reluctantly interacted with him, school and academic success and educational attainment were not for him.

A decade later, as a counselor in a charter school on the south side of Chicago, a group of Black boys who I had overheard other adults say they hated were the reason I showed up to work everyday. The gulf between who and what I knew these young men to be and how other adults perceived them still seems insurmountable. Though growing up in a far more segregated - racially and economically - environment, these boys had not been involved in any of the things I knew

Chris to be involved in. Yet, one would never know that based on what some teachers had to say about them.

Although I could not have articulated this in 2008, much less in 1996, but these two experiences put me on a path to wanting to understand success from African American boys' perspective. These experiences have also pushed me to critique my own assumptions about what is happening in the field and how I am interpreting what I hear from the research participants in my qualitative study. In this study, I hold the tension of letting the boys speak for themselves, while knowing that I am responsible for data analysis and interpretation (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

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Chapter 2: Academic Engagement in a Large Urban School District: Do African American Boys Differ in Engagement from Other Students in Freshman Year?

In attempting to understand declines in motivation and achievement following normative school transitions, research often turns to the study of academic engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wigfield et al., 1998; Henderson & Dweck, 1990). Engagement has been described as an expression of students' commitment to schooling (Fredricks et al., 2004), or more specifically as "active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, focused interactions" with school environments (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), and is multidimensional. Following normative transitions experienced during adolescence, academic environments become less supportive and students experience declines in motivation and engagement (Eccles et al., 1993; Farrington et al., 2012; Farrington, 2014). Eccles et al. (1993) suggest these declines are the result of a mismatch between adolescent developmental needs and the characteristics of the social environment available to them. In other words, home and schools in particular do not offer developmentally appropriate experiences and ways of interacting with the environment for young people. The authors argue that responsive and stimulating environments that balance comfort and opportunities for growth are ideal for the developmental needs of adolescents – "teachers should provide the current level of structure for children's current levels of maturity while providing a sufficiently challenging environment to pull the children along a developmental path toward higher levels of cognitive and social maturity" (p. 92). Instead, academic environments tend to become increasingly competitive and less autonomous, leading to declines in motivation. Eccles and her colleague Wigfield argue that learning is facilitated socially (2000; 1998); it does not just consist of the transmission of information, learning also happens in the context of an individual's relationship with teachers and peers. Individuals are interpreting cues and messages in the social environment that impact their sense of competence, ability, goals, and interactions.

For African American boys, normative changes and involvement in schooling are made more precarious by societal messages that suggest they do not possess the characteristics necessary to be academically oriented (Howard, 2013; Swanson et al., 2003). Roderick (2003) found that African American boys lose needed support in the transition to high school in terms of relationships with adults in the school building, especially teachers (what she terms as "benign neglect"). And Holcomb-McCoy (2007) suggests that the issue may lie in school settings that convey the message that African American students are outsiders (i.e. stereotypes about African Americans persist, the school lacks cultural competency in interactions with students, students' racial/ethnic identity formation is viewed from a deficit perspective, etc.). In many large districts across the country African American boys have the lowest academic outcomes and face the highest discipline consequences (NCES, 2013; Schott, 2015; Noguera, 2009); and they are less likely than their peers to be viewed through a developmentally appropriate lens (A.A. Ferguson, 2000). In fact, in Chicago, where work to increase academic success in the 9th grade has taken off, African American boys demonstrated the highest on-track gains (a freshmen year predictor of high school graduation) between 2005 and 2013. In 2005, 43% of African American freshmen boys were on-track, and in 2013, 71% of African American freshmen boys were on-track. This intensive focus on 9th grade is not typical in American high schools however, where larger student populations and class sizes tend to make the experience more impersonal than elementary and middle school (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The push for on-track in Chicago has largely been driven by school administrators and leadership teams responding to district mandates. Organizations who work closely with schools in Chicago, like the Network for College Success, have begun to question what 9th grade academic performance could look like for the most marginalized students, in particular, if teachers are supported to create different learning environments for students.

Understanding academic engagement during this important year for a population that tends to be most marginalized can uncover critical areas to provide support. This article attempts to pinpoint which aspects of African American boys' experiences following the transition to high school have the greatest leverage for increasing academic engagement broadly and investigate if the needs of African American boys are different than those of other students.

Literature Review

Identifying the factors that influence engagement can create opportunities to improve education policy and practice. Despite the breadth of research examining engagement however, it remains a complicated concept to understand. It is conceptually multidimensional and literature examining academic engagement most often seeks to identify the student-level individual characteristics and school-level factors influencing engagement without much focus on classroom contexts that are generally influenced by teacher practice. And, in relation to African American boys, there is no clear sense of what unique factors contribute to engagement for this population. Below, I review research that seeks to define engagement and the most common factors researchers identify as important for engagement: student-level characteristics (demographic and prior achievement); classroom contexts (meaning, the environments created by teacher relational and academic support); and school-level characteristics (meaning, structural characteristics such as racial-ethnic makeup; school size; socioeconomic factors, etc). Lastly, I lay out the gaps in applying this literature to the academic experiences of African American boys.

Academic Engagement: Multidimensional (& Complicated) Conceptualization

It is commonly understood that 'engagement' provides a means to understand students' *commitment to or investment in learning* (Fredricks et al., 2004). Stemming from its root in

motivation theory, early definitions of engagement focused primarily on the internal processes of the individual, suggesting that engagement is a psychological response to academic work and environments[4]. This framing of engagement assumes that engagement is a fixed trait inherent in individuals and that academic environments are neutral spaces – work is provided and an engaged or disengaged student responds accordingly. Over time, however, research has evolved to understand engagement as a far more complex and context-dependent concept.

Current literature explores academic engagement as a multidimensional concept that is malleable, varies in intensity, and context-dependent (Fredricks et al., 2004; Jimerson et al., 2003). In this respect, engagement is not a trait that students possess or do not possess; students experience and display academic engagement behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively in response to academic environments.

Behavioral engagement describes how engagement manifests in students' observable actions, both socially and academically. Socially, the literature explores whether students engage in prosocial or antisocial behavior, such as following rules or causing trouble in class (Finn, 1993). Academically, the literature explores how students participate in learning by asking questions in class, putting effort into their work, or taking part in classroom discussion (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Finn et al., 1995; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Lastly, the literature on behavioral engagement explores how students participate as a member of the school community in extracurricular activities.

[4] Newmann's definition fits this mold: "the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (1992).

Emotional, or affective, engagement describes students' sense of belonging in their school, classrooms, and in their relationships with teachers and peers, or identification with school[5]. The research examines whether students identify with school in a range of possibilities, from feelings of boredom or interest in class to anxiety to the particular ways students value education (Finn & Rock, 1997; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

Cognitive engagement describes students' academic abilities and is perhaps most closely aligned with early definitions of engagement. Cognitive engagement takes two forms according to the literature: one, psychological, and the other, strategic. In the first, the literature here suggests that cognitive engagement is demonstrated through persistence and positive coping when faced with difficulty (Newmann et al., 1992; Wehlage et al., 1989). The other form of cognitive engagement describes what many education researchers call self-regulated and strategic learning, which consists of organizing and rehearsing work (Corno & Madinach, 1983) and implementing strategies to successfully complete work (Pintrich and De Groot, 1990).

On one hand, the multidimensional nature of academic engagement helps us to more clearly specify what is required to be committed to or invested in school and learning. Delineating between behavioral, affective, and cognitive forms of committing to learning allows researchers dive deeper into the antecedents and potential outcomes of each form of engagement, strengthening the evidence policymakers and practitioners can draw on in designing learning opportunities. On the other hand, such an elaborated concept has the potential to become murky and difficult to measure without consistency in explicitly laying out both conceptually and

[5] Belonging and identification with school comprise a separate field of study (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

empirically its multidimensional nature. Other well-researched concepts also describe and attempt to claim behaviors and attitudes that researchers describe as engagement or narrow aspects of engagement[6]. Despite these conceptual challenges, there is a robust literature that explores engagement among American high school students.

Empirical Analyses of Academic Engagement

Empirical analyses of academic engagement have primarily sought to clarify what factors influence engagement by investigating whether characteristics of the student, classroom, or school most affect this relationship. This section reviews literature examining these three characteristics – student-level characteristics (demographic and prior achievement), classroom-level contexts (typically, classroom environments influenced by teacher actions), and school-level characteristics (typically, demographic associated factors) – in an attempt to illuminate the factors that drive engagement.

Student-level characteristics. Many researchers have sought to understand the role students' background characteristics play in determining engagement. Gender differences in engagement are perhaps the most agreed upon differences. Across age groups and race, girls are more likely to have higher levels of academic engagement than boys (Wang, 2010; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2005; Saunders, 2004; Marks, 2000). Wang (2010) finds that among a diverse sample of students in Maryland, girls have higher rates of participation, belonging, and self-regulated learning than boys. In this longitudinal study, this finding held between the 7th and 11th grade. In similar studies of engagement using African American samples, both Sirin and Rogers-Sirin

[6] Much of the research I review in later sections of this literature review also uses different terminology to explain the same concepts that are captured in the literature on academic engagement.

(2005) and Saunders (2004) also found that girls had higher levels of engagement, or self-perception, than boys. Many suggest gender differences in engagement are related to the differences in how girls and boys are socialized in school settings (Oyserman, 1995). This may be especially true in schools where teachers may respond differently to boys and girls (Wigfield et al., 2007) and girls may have more emotional connections to school than boys (Bembenutty, 2007). Marks' (2000) finding that access to social support (as defined by authentic support for learning in the school, classroom, and from parent involvement) decreases the differences in engagement levels between boys and girls suggests that changes in the way schools interact with boys can improve their engagement.

Race is also a commonly studied background characteristic. While some have found no significant difference in levels of engagement between races (Marks, 2000), there are contradictory findings when looking at the individual dimensions of engagement. For instance, Wang finds that between Black and White students, Black students have higher emotional engagement (meaning, they feel more of a connection to school), but lower behavioral engagement (participation and attendance). Wang also finds no difference in cognitive engagement (self-regulated learning) between Black and White students. Meaning, Black students see the value in school and have appropriate learning strategies, but do not participate as much as White students. On the contrary, Johnson et al. (2001) finds that Black students are more behaviorally engaged and less emotionally engaged in school. They attribute this to Black students perhaps being more minimally behaviorally engaged than other students, which is a rather deficit-based explanation. It is more likely that these contradictory findings may be evidence of the difficulty in measuring a concept that has such a broad definition.

While other research findings suggest socioeconomic status has an effect on participating

in school activities (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998), few have explicitly examined the relationship between SES and academic engagement. One exception is Davis and Jordan, who found a small effect of socioeconomic status on engagement for African American boys (meaning, higher SES drives increased engagement). Finn's work broadly explores engagement among at-risk and high-risk students, which he defines as low-income and/or students of color. That definition is highly problematic given his findings (see 'school-level characteristics' below) that being poor and/or a student of color alone do not seem to determine one's level of engagement. Likewise, prior achievement is another student characteristic that has received minimal attention. Dotterer (2011) finds that the relationship between academic environments, engagement, and academic outcomes is not linear for students identified as having struggled academically in previous grades (see 'classroom contexts' below). Marks finds that while prior achievement in the form of test scores is important for an elementary-age population, it does not affect high school students. Her findings suggest that previous success, in the form of grades, has a significant effect on engagement for her high school sample.

Among student background characteristics, gender seems to have the most clear and consistent effect on engagement. Gender differences in academic outcomes are not well understood[7]; however, the different experiences girls and boys have in school are likely the result of differences in academic socialization (Oyserman et al., 2003; Oyserman et al., 1995). Importantly, there are few studies that explore the intersection of race and gender and their effect on engagement.

Classroom Contexts. Empirical analyses of classroom contexts focus on whether and how

[7] Nationally, across racial groups there is a .2 points GPA difference between girls and boys (Aud et al., 2013). Though I do not use grade data for this study, preliminary analysis demonstrated approximately this same difference.

classroom contexts, including instructional quality and quality of relationship between teachers and students, influence engagement (Hughes et al., 2008; Decker et al., 2007; Patrick et al., 2007; Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

Perhaps the most important aspect of classroom context is teacher involvement. Teacher involvement is measured by a variety of forms of support in the literature, including caring, understanding, providing resources, dependability, etc. (Marks, 2000; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Tucker et al., 2002; Blumenfeld et al., 1992). Both Skinner and Belmont (1993) and Tucker et al. (2002) found teacher involvement to be unique and significant predictors of student engagement. In Skinner and Belmont's study, teacher involvement predicted emotional engagement; further, students who perceived their teachers as involved and caring also rated them more positively in terms of other aspects of classroom context (for instance, providing adequate levels of structure and autonomy). In Tucker's study, using a sample of elementary and high school-age African American students from low-income households, teacher involvement remained the strongest predictor of student engagement at each stage of their model and across age groups. Other research shows that students tend to be cognitively engaged when they think their teachers are supporting them to understand challenging work and create socially supportive classroom environments (Blumenfeld et al., 1992). However, the research shows that teacher support and student academic engagement are reciprocal, with teachers providing different opportunities to engaged and disengaged students (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Also, drop out is more likely among students who perceive a lack of teacher support (Croninger & Lee, 2001).

The amount of structure, or information about how to succeed in class, is a strong predictor of student behavioral engagement especially (Woodward et al, 2012; Raphael et al., 2008; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Structure provides students with clear and reliable interactions with teachers.

In Skinner and Belmont, teacher structure was a strong predictor of behavioral engagement. Again, in Marks' study of student engagement, what she terms social support but partially defines as high expectations for achievement, she finds that differences in engagement between girls and boys decrease when boys are provided with high levels of this type of support.

Though a solely elementary-age population, Dotterer and Lowe's (2011) findings are illuminating. They find that classroom context (climate, instructional quality, and student-teacher conflict) is important for students' behavioral (attendance, paying attention) and psychological[8] (effort, belonging) engagement and that both forms of engagement mediate the relationship between classroom context and academic achievement (current test scores); thus, a directional relationship, where classroom context affects engagement, which in turn affects academic outcomes. However, this is only true for students with no prior achievement problems. The relationship for struggling students was far more complex. For students with prior achievement problems, classroom context was positively and significantly related to behavioral engagement, but not psychological engagement; meaning teacher-driven factors influence struggling students to do what is required of them, but not necessarily feel a connection to the classroom or put effort into the work. This is defined elsewhere as compliance (Smyth, 2006).

Yet, when looking at the next step in the hypothesized directional relationship, the relationship between engagement and achievement, the opposite is true for struggling students; psychological engagement had an effect on achievement, but behavioral engagement did not. Struggling students' effort or sense of belonging affected their grades, but their classroom academic behaviors did not affect grades. Dotterer's findings suggest that engagement may work

[8] Measuring both cognitive and emotional engagement.

differently for academically struggling students. It seems that teacher behaviors can get students to participate, but not feel a connection to school, yet that connection to school is what translates into higher grades. She notes that there may be unobservable differences in struggling students that cannot be quantified or that the method of instruction needs to change for this population.

Lastly, peers also have an influence on engagement. Similar to teacher relationships, engagement is likely reciprocal among peers, but in slightly different ways (Ladd et al., 1999). In naturally formed peer groups, students tend to socialize with peers who have similar engagement levels. In terms of acceptance and rejection, students who feel more accepted in school exhibit more academic engagement than students who are rejected. And students who dislike school are likely to view peers as not supportive. Outside of naturally formed peer groups, researchers find that teachers can impact cognitive engagement by structuring the academic environment to emphasize peer interaction through course work (Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000). Peer groups intentionally constructed by teachers allow students to learn a variety of strategies and approaches for understanding the work from their peers.

The literature examining the environments within classrooms consistently finds the structure and organization of classrooms and how meaningful students find the work are important factors in influencing student engagement levels. However, the literature does not provide the nuance of how racial-gender subgroups of students perceive classrooms and whether these perceptions differ from group to group.

School-level characteristics. Several studies using large-scale nationally representative datasets investigate the link between school-level characteristics and engagement. Common among them are attempts to determine whether global demographic factors affect student

engagement. In their cross-racial study of high school students, Johnson et al. (2001) found small school-level effects. They find that racial/ethnic composition of a school affects attachment, but not engagement; for racially marginalized students this means though they may not always feel they belong or are a part of the school, this does not stop them from participating academically. Johnson et al. attribute these differences to demographic differences and the likelihood that students may feel more comfortable in schools with other students from one's own racial or ethnic background. Finn & Voelkl (1993) also find an effect of school composition among a nationally representative study of students deemed "at-risk". Like Johnson et al., the racial/ethnic composition of school matters for engagement; specifically, Black students have a greater sense of community in schools with more students of color and White students in schools with a larger population of students of color believe the environment to be less supportive and warm. Additionally they find that school size does matter for engagement in terms of lower absence, greater in-class participation, and believing that classes are warm and supportive environments. The association between school regulations and the enforcement of rules had little effect on engagement for the students deemed "at-risk" in the study.

Stewart (2008) finds evidence that one particular school-level factor is important for achievement (i.e. grades) when controlling for engagement. Like Finn, using NELS data, Stewart found that of the school level variables she examined as contributors (including school poverty levels, school cohesion, proportion of students of color, discipline, and total enrollment) to student outcomes (grades) only school cohesion (global measures of positive interactions, trust, support, etc.) had a significant effect on grades when she controlled for students' level of engagement. Stewart also tests the direct relationship between engagement (though she defines it as effort, measured by student attachment, extracurricular involvement, and commitment to school) and

grades. Two of her indicators of effort (attachment and commitment to school) are positively and significantly related to academic achievement. There are some differences; her sample is mostly White 10th graders. It is likely that these findings may be different among a sample of African American students who are more likely to interact with teachers and other school professionals who do not look like them (Aud et., 2013; Dee, 2004). However, Stewart's finding suggests that relationships (which manifest in school cohesion) are more likely key to engagement and grades than structural characteristics of schools.

In one of the only studies of engagement among African American boys using a large-scale dataset, Davis and Jordan (1994) are interested in the school level factors that affect academic outcomes for this population in middle school and high school. They look at the relationships between numerous variables using NELS data: the effect of variables such as urbanicity, attendance, percentage of Black teachers, discipline, a variety of teacher measures (cooperation, preparation, morale, locus of control, etc.), and student background characteristics on student achievement (test scores), course grades, engagement, and locus of control. Despite the large number of variables they analyze, they find that once in high school very few significant relationships exist between contextual/structural factors and outcomes for African American boys. Higher levels of engagement were associated with high attendance rates, small class sizes, fewer suspensions, and boys from higher socioeconomic backgrounds; African American boys in urban schools were found to be less engaged. These findings suggest possible areas for practitioners to focus interventions for this population. However, given the prevalence of African American boys in urban schools systems and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, research must further investigate what factors affect engagement for this specific, but large, part of the population of African American boys in high school.

Hypotheses that rely on primarily demographic factors (i.e. percent poverty, percent students of color) seem to assume that poverty and race predict engagement rather than academic environments that are responsive and stimulating. Stewart's finding that school cohesion (a measure she defines as "the extent to which there is trust, shared expectations, and positive interactions among students, teachers, and administrators" (p. 190)) primarily matters for achievement points to the importance of interactions fostered in the classroom.

Gaps in the Literature

Several gaps exist in the engagement literature broadly, and specifically, in relation to African American boys in the transition to high school. One, there is a need for greater specification of the multidimensional nature of engagement across conceptual and empirical research. The broader literature likely demonstrates conflicting findings as a result of the myriad conceptualizations of engagement that are not operationalized consistently across studies. For instance, most empirical studies of engagement exploring the factors that affect engagement do not rigorously take up the definitional issues of engagement. Two, while compelling, the engagement literature is not meaningful and actionable in terms of creating initiatives that increase academic engagement. More work is needed to translate the robust research on engagement into actionable policy and practice.

Third, while many studies of engagement examine the effects of race and gender, consideration of engagement for racial-gender subgroups of students will do more to contribute to policy and practice. While the intricacies of the various dimensions of engagement may not lend to improved policy and practice, identifying the needs of racial-gender subgroups may prove worthwhile. In particular, engagement research could speak more concretely to the needs of

African American boys. Fourth, there is a dearth of research using the transition to high school as a leverage point for increasing engagement among students. It is known that normative school transitions are periods of academic decline for all students, particularly African American boys. It would seem that this is an opportune time period to study. Overall, the current study seeks to address some of these gaps by exploring engagement across contexts for racial-gender subgroups of students (with an eye toward Black boys' experiences) following the transition to high school.

Research Questions

The empirical literature seems to demonstrate that while background characteristics and school-level factors definitely influence engagement, more meaningful and actionable influences can be found in classroom contexts. Meaning, the environments teachers create and maintain in classrooms are more telling of students' academic engagement than demographic characteristics of individuals or schools. Given the literature does not provide much indication as to how students perceive engagement across racial-gender subgroups, simple descriptives were run to guide the hypotheses of this study. The mean engagement scores of the racial-gender subgroups (Table 2) in this study suggest that African American boys perceive more engagement than do their peers. As a result, this study hypothesizes that:

- Students' perceptions of classroom conditions will have a greater impact on their academic engagement than individual or school-level predictors of academic engagement.
- There will be no significant difference in the relationship between African American boys' perceptions of classroom conditions than students of other racial-gender subgroups.

To test these hypotheses, this study asks: *1) Do classroom contexts predict academic engagement? 2) Is this relationship different for African American boys than other racial-gender subgroups? 3) And do classroom contexts predict academic engagement, above and beyond, individual*

background characteristics and school-level characteristics? 4) Similarly, is this relationship different for African American boys than other racial-gender subgroups?

Methods

Sample

The data used in the analyses are administrative data collected on Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students and survey data that represent the perceptions of students in CPS as surveyed by the annual UChicago Consortium on School Research survey, 'My Voice, My School'(MV,MS). The MV,MS (originally called Student Connections) survey began in the early 1990s. Its purpose is to understand how students perceive their schooling experiences; the survey responses in part contribute to an indicator[9] of whether or not schools are organized for improvement (Bryk et al., 2010). Meaning, the climate and relationships within schools are drivers of successful outcomes (UChicago Consortium Internal Technical Report, 2018).

Chicago Public Schools is the third largest school district in the country. There are currently 95 high schools in the district and over 112,000 high school students. The district's student population is largely made up of African American and Latinx students, 39% and 45% of total student population, respectively. Eighty-six percent of students in CPS are considered economically disadvantaged.

[9] This indicator is known as the "5Essentials." The five essentials of a "good school" are: 1) school leadership as a driver for change, 2) parent-community ties, 3) professional capacity, 4) student-centered learning climate, and 5) instructional guidance.

The analyses are based on first-time freshmen students in district-run high schools[10] during the 2013 – 14 school year. In all, there were 21,187 first-time freshmen during the 2013 – 14 school year. However, because African American, Latinx, and White students make up the majority of students in CPS, other student populations have been dropped from the analyses[11]. The student population considered for analysis includes 7,942 African American, 9,662 Latinx, and 2,050 White students (n=19,654). The overall student response rate for the 2013-14 MV,MS survey was 78%. Due to missing administrative data and/or survey responses for some students, the final analyses include 12,752 students.

Measures

The outcome variable, Engagement, is based on student responses to a survey measure that captures how much interest they have in the class in question and how committed they are to the work in that particular class. The items for this measure are: *I usually look forward to this class; I work hard to do my best in this class; Sometimes I get so interested in my work I don't want to stop; The topics we are studying are interesting and challenging.* The items that make up this measure broadly capture the multidimensional nature of engagement conceptualized by Fredricks et al. (2004). The first and last item pick up the affective nature of engagement demonstrating the ways in which students identify with the class in general as well as the subject matter. The second item explores the behavioral nature of engagement as it captures student effort. The third picks up the cognitive psychological aspects of engagement in capturing students' persistence. The mean engagement score among the sample was 1.1.

[10] This excludes charter schools and alternative schools.

[11] Students who identify as Asian, Multiracial, or Other, totalling 1,533 students, were excluded from the analysis.

Racial-gender subgroups, prior achievement, and measures of socioeconomic status are used as individual-level independent predictors. Dummy variables were created to represent each racial-gender subgroup in the sample. Prior achievement is determined by a metric (latent8) that combines all elementary standardized test scores for reading. The metric provides an estimate of latent student ability without the bias of individual test scores (UChicago Consortium Internal Technical Files, 2018). Initial analyses included standardized test scores for math in addition to reading. However, including both measures added no value to the model. Socioeconomic status is measured by the concentration of poverty and social status of the census block group in which students live. Concentration of Poverty (CON) is a measure of "the percent of adult males employed and the percent of families with incomes above the poverty line." Positive values mean a greater concentration of poverty. Social Status (SS) is a measure of the "mean level of education of adults and the percentage of employed persons who work as managers or professionals." Positive values mean higher levels of social status.

Four survey measures were turned into a composite predictor variable, Classroom Contexts (Cronbach alpha=.83). They are: Course Clarity, Classroom Personalism, Academic Press, and Rigor[12]. These measures capture students' perceptions of the academic and relational contexts found within their classrooms and schools. And finally, the variable, School-level Prior Achievement, was used as a school-level independent predictor. Initial analyses included an indicator of school-level socioeconomic status; however, further analyses of the level of segregation in CPS suggested that the school-level SES predictor added no value to the model. Correlations for the variables in this study are shown in Table 1.

[12] See Appendix for a description of the items in each measure.

Table 1

Table of Correlations for Main Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Engagement	--	0.61***	0.61***	0.53***	0.54***	0.11***	-0.07***	-0.07***	-0.02*	-0.02*
2. Clarity	0.61***	--	0.68***	0.63***	0.64***	0.16***	0.09***	0.02*	0.01	0.08***
3. Personalism	0.61***	0.68***	--	0.55***	0.63***	0.14***	0.02	0.05***	0	0.02
4. Academic Press	0.53***	0.63***	0.55***	--	0.59***	0.18***	0.12***	0.04***	0.04***	0.14***
5. Rigor	0.54***	0.64***	0.63***	0.59***	--	0.2***	0.16***	0	0.03**	0.15***
6. Classroom Conditions	0.11***	0.16***	0.14***	0.18***	0.2***	--	0.25***	0.01	0.06***	0.4***
7. Prior Achievement	-0.07***	0.09***	0.02	0.12***	0.16***	0.25***	--	-0.19***	0.21***	0.62***
8. Concentrated Poverty	-0.07***	0.02*	0.05***	0.04***	0	0.01	-0.19***	--	-0.31***	-0.27***
9. Social Status	-0.02*	0.01	0	0.04***	0.03**	0.06***	0.21***	-0.31***	--	0.27***
10. School-level Achievement	-0.02*	0.08***	0.02	0.14***	0.15***	0.4***	0.62***	-0.27***	0.27***	--

Note: p*<.05, p**<.01, p***<.001

Analyses

Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was used to estimate the fixed effects of individual and academic and relational factors found in schools on academic engagement. This technique is advantageous, given the nested nature of students in schools. Hierarchical linear modeling takes into account student clustering within schools and distinguishes the variation among schools from the variation among students within schools by partitioning the variance of the dependent variable (in this case, academic engagement) found in each level (Bryk and Raudenbush, 1992).

The analysis for this study uses a two-level HLM though it explores individual, classroom, and school-level predictors. A two-level HLM that aggregates students' responses about classroom predictors to the school-level is preferred to a three-level HLM, in this case, given the construction of the survey being used for analysis. On the MV, MS survey, students are given instructions to respond about a "target" class. Each student's "target" class is identified by asking the student completing the survey to choose the first day of the week and what period they have a particular core subject class. Once the core subject class is established, it becomes the "target" class students are directed to respond about when completing certain survey measures (including the four that comprise the Classroom Contexts composite variable). In a three-level HLM, the randomization of students to classes would be problematic in that there would be too few students responding about each classroom, and thus not enough variation to constitute a three-level HLM. While this presents a challenge for nested modeling seeking to understand the predictive value of individual versus classroom versus school-level characteristics, the specific measures used to create the classroom-level variable are reliably capturing students' perceptions of classrooms[13].

[13]The construction of Consortium measures creates a unique work-around utilized in this study. The Consortium uses Rasch analysis to calculate the scores for each measure. Rasch analysis is used to combine individual survey

Equation:

$$ENGG_{ij} = \pi_{0j} + \pi_{1j}(Black * Female) + \pi_{2j}(Latino) + \pi_{3j}(Latina) + \pi_{4jk}(White * Male) + \pi_{5jk}(White * Female) + \pi_{6jk}(Prior\ Achievement) + \pi_{7jk}(PA * BF) + \pi_{8jk}(PA * Lo) + \pi_{9j}(PA * La) + \pi_{10j}(PA * WM) + \pi_{11j}(PA * WF) + \pi_{12j}(Concentrated\ Poverty) + \pi_{13j}(Social\ Status) + \pi_{14j}(Classroom\ Conditions) + \pi_{15j}(CC * BF) + \pi_{16j}(CC * Lo) + \pi_{17j}(CC * La) + \pi_{18j}(CC * WM) + \pi_{19j}(CC * WF) + \pi_{20j}(School\ Prior\ Achievement) + \pi_{21j}(SPA * BF) + \pi_{22j}(SPA * Lo) + \pi_{23j}(SPA * La) + \pi_{24j}(SPA * WM) + \pi_{25j}(SPA * WF) + e_{ij}$$

Where, individual student = i; school = j.

Results

Table 2 presents a descriptive look at the subgroup means for first-time freshmen students in the sample during the 2013-14 school year. As noted elsewhere in the literature, the boys in each racial-gender subgroup have lower GPAs than girls in the same group (NCES, 2013). The girls in each racial-gender subgroup also have higher incoming achievement than boys in the group, as measured by incoming reading test scores. Interestingly, African American boys have a higher mean engagement score on the MV, MS survey than other students. Socioeconomic status is only presented across racial groups as it does not differ within racial groups by gender. African American students live in areas where a greater concentration of poverty exists than Latinx and white students. Whereas, Latinx students live in areas with fewer adults who have finished college or work in management level positions. Though seemingly counterintuitive, due to a history of

items into measures about a particular concept. This is advantageous in that a small number of questions about a concept can be asked and still receive a valid indicator of students' perceptions about the concept in the survey measure. Further, Rasch analysis "provides a standard error for each individual, which reveals how reliable the person's responses were" (UChicago Consortium Internal Technical Report, 2018). While this is not traditional nesting, the measures asking student to respond about "target" classrooms are reliably picking up students' perceptions about the classroom conditions present in the target class.

racial and economic segregation in Chicago, the socioeconomic picture of African American and Latinx students in this sample is consistent with students in the school district as a whole.

Table 2

Subgroup Means for First-Time Freshmen in the 2013-2014 School Year

Subgroups	Mean GPA	Mean Reading	Mean Engg	Mean SES (Concentrated Poverty & Social Status)	
AA boys	1.9	241	1.25	.70	-.24
AA girls	2.3	249	1.22		
La boys	2.2	245	1.05	.07	-.83
La girls	2.6	250	1.13		
W boys	2.7	259	1.01	-.56	.24
W girls	3.1	264	1.09		

Several predictive models (Tables 3 and 4) were then estimated to examine whether students' perceptions of classroom contexts are predictors of academic engagement, whether students' perceptions of classroom contexts are more important for academic engagement than individual or school-level characteristics, and whether these relationships are different for African American males than their peers of other racial-gender subgroups. In all models following the unconditional model, African American boys are the reference group. In the predictive models the individual background characteristics variables are grand-mean centered, meaning the outcome can be interpreted as the average level of engagement across the sample.

The unconditional model (Model 0[14]) suggests the mean level of academic engagement across the sample is β=1.2. The variance components of the unconditional model suggest that variation in engagement is primarily among students within schools, meaning, variation between

[14] Model 0 (Unconditional Model): B=1.2, SE=.04, t=33.24***

schools is small. The intraclass correlation, which is the amount of variance in the outcome that exists between schools, is 4% in the unconditional model.

Model 1 (Table 3) looks at whether the variable, Classroom Contexts, predicts academic engagement for students in the sample. Again, the predictor variable, Classroom Contexts, is a composite variable that captures students' perceptions of how teachers structure work and support in classrooms. A unit change in students' perceptions of the contexts in their classrooms shows a .17 increase in their level of academic engagement; this relationship is highly significant. Students' perceptions of their classrooms is predictive of academic engagement for all students in the sample. Model 2 (Table 3) suggests that other racial-gender subgroups do have higher levels of academic engagement based on their perceptions of classroom contexts. Virtually none of the relationships are significant however. In this model, interactions were created to show racial-gender subgroup differences in perceptions of classroom contexts between African American boys and other groups. Interestingly, the only difference that is significant is between African American girls and boys.

Table 3

Do Classroom Conditions Predict Academic Engagement? (Models 1 and 2)

	Model 1: Conditions			Model 2: Conditions by R-G		
	b	SE	t	b	SE	t
Intercept	1.19	0.03	37.73***	1.19	0.03	37.56***
Classroom Conditions	0.17	0.03	5.43***	0.1	0.04	2.32*
CC-Black Female				0.1	0.04	2.35*
CC-Latino				0.06	0.05	1.2
CC-Latina				0.08	0.05	1.7
CC-White Male				0.04	0.08	0.49
CC-White Female				0.12	0.08	1.54

The third model (Table 4) compares the effects of students' perceptions of classroom contexts, individual background characteristics, and school-level characteristics on academic engagement across all students in the sample. This is done to parse out which of these factors has the greatest effect on students' academic engagement. In this model, students' perceptions of classroom contexts has the largest effect on academic engagement (β=.21). It is not the only significant predictor in the model. Individual student prior achievement and concentration of poverty (yet not social status) also have highly significant effects on academic engagement; though the direction of these effects are somewhat counter intuitive. Individual student prior achievement has a negative relationship with academic engagement, suggesting that students with higher incoming achievement may not be as engaged in their 9th grade classes. Also, students from more heavily concentrated low-income communities appear to be more engaged in their 9th grade classes. School-level prior achievement is not a significant factor affecting academic engagement.

In the final model (Table 4) interactions for all of the predictive variables are included to understand how African American boys differ from their peers of other racial-gender subgroups across each predictor of academic engagement. Similar to Model 3, in this model, the main effects for classroom contexts and concentrated poverty have highly significant effects on academic engagement. Individual student prior achievement also has a significant effect on academic engagement. Individual student prior achievement again shows a negative relationship with academic engagement. The only significantly different interaction term is the difference in students' perceptions of classroom contexts between African American boys and girls (also observed in Model 2). All other interactions are insignificant in this final model. The main effects for social status and school level prior achievement are also insignificant.

Table 4

Do Classroom Conditions Predict Engagement Above and Beyond Individual and School-level Characteristics?(Models 3 and 4)

	Model 3: Cond, Prior Ach, SES, & School Ach			Model 4: Cond, Prior Ach, SES, & School Ach by R-G		
	b	SE	t	b	SE	t
Intercept	1.18	0.03	41.15***	1.16	0.03	40.88***
Classroom Conditions	0.21	0.03	7.03***	0.14	0.04	3.21**
CC-Black Female				0.13	0.05	2.75**
CC-Latino				0.05	0.06	0.89
CC-Latina				0.07	0.05	1.33
CC-White Male				0.04	0.1	0.4
CC-White Female				0.09	0.1	0.89
Prior Achievement	-0.14	0.02	-7.81***	-0.09	0.04	-2.04*
PA-Black Female				-0.07	0.06	-1.22
PA-Latino				-0.1	0.06	-1.84
PA-Latina				-0.01	0.06	-0.25
PA-White Male				-0.13	0.1	-1.37
PA-White Female				-0.02	0.09	-0.22
Concentrated Poverty	0.07	0.02	3.21**	0.09	0.02	3.88***
Concentrated Poverty (Latinx)				-0.06	0.05	-1.26
Concentrated Poverty (White)				-0.16	0.09	-1.88
Social Status	0.01	0.02	0.66	0.01	0.02	0.24
Social Status (Latinx)				0.01	0.04	0.38
Social Status (White)				-0.1	0.1	-1
School Achievement	-0.03	0.03	-0.86	-0.04	0.05	-0.68
SA-Black Female				-0.07	0.06	-1.15
SA-Latino				0.06	0.07	0.95
SA-Latina				0.01	0.06	0.19
SA-White Male				0.1	0.11	0.93
SA-White Female				0.09	0.1	0.88

Discussion

The literature on academic engagement tends to examine this phenomenon from a broad perspective, theoretically exploring its multidimensional nature or empirically identifying student- and school-level characteristics that influence engagement across many grade levels and student populations. This study applies what is known about academic engagement to one freshman class in an urban school district with the intention of understanding the factors affecting academic engagement for African American boys across individual, classroom, and school contexts in comparison to their peers of other racial-gender subgroups. While much of the empirical literature has looked to individual background and school-level characteristics that influence academic engagement, this study can be situated in the smaller strand of the literature that asks, what about the classroom? Prior research has found that the structure of classrooms and the quality of support and instruction are important factors in determining students' level of academic engagement (Marks, 2000; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Tucker et al., 2002; Blumenfeld et al., 1992).

For African American boys classrooms are often unsupportive and places of disconnection (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). This study asks several questions that attempt to understand whether classroom contexts stand apart from other factors influencing academic engagement and if these relationships are different for African American boys than their peers of other racial-gender subgroups.

The results of the analysis suggest that each stage of the modeling process students' perceptions of classroom contexts play an important part in explaining academic engagement. The main effect of classroom contexts remains significant throughout. Prior to including interaction terms, classroom contexts demonstrates the largest main effect on academic engagement broadly,

β=0.17. This finding suggests that academic environments in which teachers create meaningful and clear work, have high standards for students, and encourage supportive relationships are crucial spaces for academic engagement to thrive.

The introduction of racial-gender subgroup interactions with classroom contexts in the second model alters the main effect of classroom contexts (though it is still significant) on academic engagement; it decreases to 0.10. The interaction terms provide more nuance to the racial-gender subgroup differences in the model. There are positive, but not significant effects for all groups in comparison to African American boys, except African American girls whose perceptions of classroom contexts have a positive and significant effect on academic engagement as compared to African American boys. Overall, the results of this interaction model suggests that African American boys do not perceive their classrooms significantly differently than most other students in terms of academics. The difference between African American boys and girls is puzzling. Further investigation could possibly explore whether in heavily segregated school districts like Chicago Public Schools students within racial groups are experiencing classrooms in different ways. However, these outcomes also highlight the need for more in-depth study of classroom experiences for African American boys, given that we know classrooms are highly contested spaces for African American boys.

Looking at the second set of questions (in Model 3) exploring the effect of classroom contexts in comparison to individual student characteristics and school-level characteristics, the results show that classroom contexts do have a larger effect on academic engagement than both individual student characteristic and school-level characteristics. This is an important finding in terms of understanding which aspects of a student's experience can be leveraged to increase engagement, and in turn, possibly academic performance. In other studies of student experience in

Chicago Public Schools, the Consortium has found that a student's current context is more important than their prior achievement (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Only two predictors of individual student characteristics – prior achievement and level of concentrated poverty – are highly significant predictors of academic engagement in this model. The model suggests that accounting for other individual background characteristics, schools, and perceptions of classroom contexts, higher prior achievement has a negative effect on academic engagement. It may be that students with higher prior achievement feel less challenged in their freshman classes than other students. The findings also suggest that students from areas of heavily concentrated poverty find their classes more engaging, controlling for all other factors, but curiously, the other measure of individual student socioeconomic status (social status) does not predict academic engagement at all.

The final model is consistent with previous models. Only the main effects are significant in addition to perceptions of classroom contexts between African American boys and girls. All other interactions that demonstrate a difference in academic engagement between African American boys and other students were not significant. Given the importance of perceptions of classroom contexts demonstrated in the findings and that with little exception African American boys do not differ from their peers in terms of the factors that affect engagement, more research is needed to understand the day-to-day experiences and interactions African American boys are having in schools, particularly at such a crucial transition period.

This study has limitations that should be addressed. Overall, the concept of academic engagement would be strengthened by more consistency between theorizing its various dimensions and operationalizing the dimensions as constructs under study. Research design that is more tightly aligned to tell us where actionable relationships exist between the concept and the factors that

affect academic engagement are necessary. For instance, if we know that classroom contexts have a larger effect on academic engagement broadly, more research can be done to understand what this means for each of various dimensions of engagement. Few quantitative studies, including the current study, are using primary data sources and survey measures. As such, new studies of engagement are attempting to match a definition of engagement with data and survey measures that already exist. While the survey measure used here to capture academic engagement is made up of items that are inclusive of Fredricks' definition of engagement, it is not comprehensive. Broadly in the literature, there is little commonality between the survey items used to measure engagement across studies. Johnson et al. (2001), for instance, specify a list of actions they consider a basic level of engagement[15], of which African American students displayed at greater levels than Latinx and White students in their study. The implication being the research is not capturing a deeper level of engagement that other students presumably have that African American students do not possess. Based on the findings of the current study, I would argue that deeper academic engagement is embedded in the classroom environment that teachers create; hence, the finding here that classroom contexts have the largest effect on academic engagement for all students. Still, the current study is limited in its reach, as it too uses a predefined set of engagement survey items.

Also, like much of the empirical research, this study prioritizes engagement across individual, classroom, and school-level contexts and does not look within the concept of engagement to explore how the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement differ between African American boys and other students. As discussed above, a limitation of this

[15] "In the past school year, how many times the adolescent had skipped school, had trouble paying attention in school, and had trouble getting homework done."

study is that it uses a predefined measure of academic engagement. Understanding the nuances of the dimensions of engagement is an important line of research for the field to explore with further study.

Another potential limitation of this study is the use of Chicago Public Schools as the site of data collection. The extreme racial and economic segregation found in Chicago is replicated in its schools. While the findings here can be applied to students and African American boys, in particular, across the district, the current study is likely not capturing the experiences of African American boys in different types of schools. Further research should attempt to capture the nuanced experiences of African American boys across schools that are more or less segregated and at different achievement levels.

Another potential limitation here is that the most current conceptualizations of academic engagement hypothesized by researchers are not culturally relevant or responsive. There is the possibility that, as defined, academic engagement measures are not capturing a critical element of classroom interactions that would provide greater clarity as to why Black boys have more contentious classroom experiences. We know from Thomas & Stevenson (2009), Noguera (2009), and Ferguson (2000), among others, that classrooms tend to be spaces where Black boys do not experience the same level of support as their peers. Uncovering other elements of classroom dynamics that ultimately influence academic performance beyond student perceptions of engagement is needed to have a more robust understanding of what affects Black boys' experiences.

Definitional and sampling issues notwithstanding, the current study suggests that across a sample of 9th grade students in a large, urban school district, academic engagement is largely

dependent on the classroom contexts teachers create for the students in their classrooms. Further and more importantly, the findings show that there is minimal difference between African American boys and other students in terms of the factors that affect their academic engagement when considering prior achievement, socioeconomic status, and students' perceptions of the classroom contexts teachers create. However, academic engagement is hypothesized broadly in the literature as a catalyst to higher achievement (i.e. grades). If African American boys are not different from their peers in this respect then something else serves as a more salient barrier to higher achievement for this population. One potential hypothesis is that teacher perceptions (not studied here) of African American boys are a more salient driver of achievement than African American boys' level of engagement. Studies examining stereotypes adults hold about marginalized youth and their expectations of performance could provide insight into why African American boys still differ in terms of achievement when there are no significant differences in terms of engagement (Priest et al, 2018; Swanson et al., 2003); studies of student engagement as a result of teacher expectations and beliefs are needed. This study is a first step to identifying academic school and classroom experiences that will lead to successful high school trajectories for African American boys; one that suggests that further research is needed to better understand other aspects of their experiences or interactions in schools.

Appendix: Variables making up the composite variable, Classroom Conditions

Course Clarity

- How much do you agree with the following statements about your [TARGET] class (*Strongly disagree*|*Disagree*|*Agree*|*Strongly agree*):
    - I learn a lot from the feedback on my work.
    - It's clear to me what I need to do to get a good grade.
    - The work we do in class is good preparation for the test.
    - The homework assignments help me to learn the course material.
    - I know what my teacher wants me to learn in this class.

Classroom Personalism

- How much do you agree with the following statements about your [TARGET] class: The teacher for this class (*Strongly disagree*|*Disagree*|*Agree*|*Strongly agree*):
    - Helps me catch up if I am behind.
    - Is willing to give extra help on schoolwork if I need it.
    - Notices if I have trouble learning something.
    - Gives me specific suggestions about how I can improve my work in this class.
    - Explains things in a different way if I don't understand something in class.

Academic Press

- How much do you agree with the following statements about your [TARGET] class (*Strongly disagree*|*Disagree*|*Agree*|*Strongly agree*):
    - This class really makes me think.
    - I'm really learning a lot in this class.
- In my [TARGET] class, my teacher (*Strongly disagree*|*Disagree*|*Agree*|*Strongly agree*):
    - Expects everyone to work hard.
    - Expects me to do my best all the time.
    - Wants us to become better thinkers, not just memorize things.
- In your [TARGET] class, how often (*Never*|*Once in a while*|*Most of the time*|*All of the time*):
    - Are you challenged?
    - Do you have to work hard to do well?
    - Does the teacher ask difficult questions on tests?
    - Does the teacher ask difficult questions in class?

Classroom Rigor

- How much do you agree with the following statements about your teacher in your [TARGET] class (*Strongly disagree*|*Disagree*|*Agree*|*Strongly agree*):
    - Often connects what I am learning to life outside of the classroom.
    - Encourages students to share their ideas about things we are studying in class.
    - Often requires me to explain my answers.
    - Encourages us to consider different solutions or points of view.
    - Doesn't let students give up when the work gets hard.
- How often does the following occur:

- In my class, we talk about different solutions or points of view (*Very little|Some|Quite a bit|A great deal*).

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Chapter 3: What Influences Success for African American Boys Following the Transition to High School?

The factors contributing to academic success are numerous and often deeply complex - there are individual psychological, school, family, community, and even, larger societal considerations that influence any one student's ability to succeed academically. By isolating particular experiences - in this case the transition to high school for African American boys - we can begin to pinpoint specific indicators of success for young people. We know broadly that freshmen students' high school course performance as measured by grades (coined by Chicago researchers as the "On-Track Indicator") is far more predictive of later success like high school graduation than their background demographics or academic outcomes in the 8th grade (Allensworth and Easton, 2007). Such quantitative indicators are reliable metrics for generalizable characterizations of students who are successful and students who are not successful academically, answering important baseline questions for practitioners, such as: Does this student have a GPA that would make him on-track to graduate? However, such quantitative indicators can only tell us so much about what leads to success for young people. These indicators do not convey the motivating factors behind students' desire to succeed.

A more robust understanding of academic success is critical, especially for students who tend to be marginalized in school settings. As one such population of students, the experiences of African American boys are often viewed as one-dimensional: the least successful students in terms of academic outcomes. The broader, mostly quantitative, literature would support this narrow view of African American boys. They are the least likely to be placed in advanced courses and are the most likely to be placed in Special Education classes (Aud et al., 2013). African American boys tend to have lower grades than other racial, gender subgroups of students (Aud et al., 2013; Luppescu et al., 2011) and lower college enrollment rates (Luppescu et al., 2011). And they have

the highest rates of disciplinary (particularly for subjective offensives) action taken against them (Morris & Perry, 2016; Schott, 2015; Gregory et al., 2010). In fact, much of the literature and professional development offered to teachers in support of their work with African American boys uses language that suggests Black boys are in crisis or a problem to be figured out. Searching the terms "African American boys crisis" in Google's search engine is a sobering exercise for anyone concerned with the experiences of this population; the search results in millions of hits.

These poorer outcomes cannot be disconnected from the experiences African American boys have in school and societal views of black masculinity that leave African American males vulnerable in school settings. Stereotypes about Black boys as manifestations of black masculinity find their way into schools and affect the interactions boys have in school (Thomas and Stevenson, 2009; O'Connor and Lewis, 2007; Noguera, 2003). A.A. Ferguson's (2010) ethnographic study of Black boys' experiences in school suggests that many of the stereotypes adults in schools, and even the system itself, believe about this population "adultifies" young Black males. To "adultify" is to attribute one's actions to adult-like intentionality and decision-making, disregarding the developmental stage a young person is in. The intersection of adultification and stereotypes about African American males in Ferguson's observations resulted in young Black boys being characterized as "dangerous" by most teachers and staff. This type of "social imagery" undermines African American boys' identities as learners and makes them uniquely vulnerable to lowered teacher expectations (Howard et al., 2012).

Such characterizations, whether explicit or implicit, can affect the types of relationships African American boys are likely to possess with teachers and other adults in schools. Many researchers have noted the lower expectations and negative perceptions the (largely white) teaching force has of African American boys (Thomas and Stevenson, 2009; Swanson et al., 2003;

Tettegah, 1996; Davis and Jordan, 1994; Cornbleth and Korth, 1980). Davis and Jordan (1994) also find that teachers' locus of control, or sense of responsibility for the quality of curricula, is correlated with African American males' achievement. Davis and Jordon interpret this to mean that in classes with low achievement by Black boys teachers feel less responsible for the development of quality curricula.

While the above findings are important and provide insight into the academic experiences and outcomes of African American boys, researchers such as Harper (2015), Howard (2014), and Donnor and Brown (2011) argue that most of the research on African American boys takes an ahistorical and deficit approach to understanding their academic experiences and outcomes and is in need of a "new narrative." Many argue that a new narrative must challenge framing of the problem as well as research designs that position students of color, especially Black boys, on the wrong side of the so-called achievement gap (Brown and Donnor, 2011). In her presidential address to the American Educational Research Association, Ladson-Billings (2006) called for an end to framing disparities in education as achievement gaps and a new focus on what is owed to marginalized students. She argues "that the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt" (p. 5). Addressing this debt is critical in Ladson-Billings's estimation, not just to rectify historical oppression, but also to create a future education system that serves all students well. Additionally, both Milner (2013) and Irvine (2010) argue that a focus on achievement gaps avoids unanswered questions about gaps in teacher pay, school funding, and other factors that affect student achievement. Further, positioning the academic performance of certain subgroups of students (White and Asian) as normative can only result in research that suggests the academic performance

of other students (Black, Latino, boys of color in particular, students from low-income backgrounds, bilingual students, etc.) should be considered deficient (Moll, 1998).

To counter these narratives, a growing number of (mostly qualitative oriented) researchers have begun to explore the factors that lead to academic success and positive academic outcomes (primarily defined as "college readiness" or "preparation for college") for African American boys. Noting the resilience African American boys exemplify, given the many barriers they face in pursuing academic success, this line of strengths-based research finds that African American boys are indeed an academically successful subgroup when provided with consistent supports (Voices in Urban Education, 2018).

Overall, the literature demonstrates the importance of adults in the academic experiences of African American boys; both school-based adults (teachers, counselors, and other education professionals) and parents and families. In schools, adult beliefs and practices as well as boys' perceptions of adults are critically important. In a convening of school-based adults, Tung and Villavicencio (VUE, 2018) observed that teachers who pushed beyond "color-blind" assessments of their role with young people were able to articulate a more nuanced understanding of their Black male students as young people in possession of wisdom and expertise in their own experiences and not "blank slates to be molded." These teacher participants were also keenly aware of and acted upon the intersectional needs of their students, acknowledging that race and gender cannot be separated in their understanding of boys' experiences.

In more traditional qualitative research, others find that teacher availability to support students and teachers who hold high expectations for students (even when they are not the top academic performers) are perceived by African American boys as important to their success (Warren, 2016; Harper and Williams, 2014). These "instructional supports," as termed by Warren,

conveyed the message to students that teachers care and are invested in their academic outcomes. Boys in Harper's study also discuss teachers who "genuinely care" as those are invested in student learning. Such teachers also take time to make sure students understand the work, according to the boys in his study. In a dissertation study similar to Warren's study, Crawford (2016) argues that Black students' motivation to attend college is rooted in "multiple levels of support," one being teachers who share their own college-going stories and convey the expectation that students have the ability to emulate them by attending and being successful in college.

Tucker et al. (2010) argue that African American boys in part credit their academic success to the belief that they "matter" to the adults in their schools. In addition to adults (teachers and counselors) who demonstrate high expectations, an important adult behavior includes adults taking the initiative in approaching and supporting students when they are struggling. In interviews with boys, Tucker interprets this as boys feeling protected and nurtured at school - an adult cares enough to proactively provide help.

African American boys also saw parent support as an important facet of their desire to succeed. Harper (2014), Tucker (2010), and Crawford (2016) all discuss the expectations African American boys conveyed from their families. For most of these young men, there was a very clear expectation from their families (and often broader communities) that they would attend college. As Harper noted, this expectation was grounded in the belief that academic success would lead to college which would enable these young men to "make it," and for many, to "transcend poverty." In addition to familial expectations, the literature also supports the notion that for many African American students the desire to succeed is motivated by a future orientation and a sense of self-efficacy, a belief that they possess the ability to do well in school.

Research Questions

Following Harper and others, who argue that for too long the academic experiences of Black boys have only been studied from a deficit perspective, this study uses an approach designed to elicit what is salient for boys as they make meaning of their current context. As such, I interviewed boys extensively about their academic experiences (their perspectives on and relationships with teachers and peers, the schoolwork, the social aspects of high school, the academic culture of school, the sources of their motivation, etc.) in their freshman year in high school - a critical transition point in one's trajectory through school. The boys in this study identified several factors that influence their desire to do well in school. They also identified where those factors go wrong, particularly in their perceptions of teachers.

To qualitatively explore the factors that influence perceptions of academic success for Black boys in their freshman year of high school, I ask, *How do Black boys make sense of academic success following the transition to high school?*

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), articulated by Spencer et al. (1995, 1997, 2004), as a theoretical guide to explore how Black boys interpret their experiences in their freshman year of high school and how those perceptions contribute to their sense of their academic selves; PVEST was born out of integrating a meaning-making perspective with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1994)[16].

[16] In articulating the Ecological Systems Theory, Bronfenbrenner relies heavily on the role of context. The interaction between individuals and environment creates a reciprocating space that is reliant on each actor's experience and belief systems, as well as, the messages signaled by the environment. The model rests on two propositions:
Proposition 1: "Especially in its early phases, and to a great extent throughout the life course, human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as *proximal processes*."

To understand how Black boys make sense of their educational experiences, it is necessary to situate our understanding of these experiences in an environmental context. Perhaps as important as the characteristics of individual actors are the environmental characteristics that engender and foster the dynamics individuals use to make meaning. For instance, in school settings, both students and teachers bring a set of experiences and beliefs about who they, and each other, are as people and what each expects from the environments in which they interact. Thus, the urban school context is replete with a diverse array of experiences and beliefs as teachers and students are not likely to be from similar backgrounds (racially and economically)[17]. The PVEST framework allows for an understanding of the fluidity between individual meaning-making and environmental influences.

Further, extending the contextual and environmental premises of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the PVEST framework allows for a multidimensional understanding of development, particularly for youth of color, whose experiences are often deemed aberrant in

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Proposition 2: "The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person; of the environment – both immediate and remote – in which the processes are taking place; and the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration" (1994, p. 38).
Bronfenbrenner further delineates five "nested structures" that comprise the ecological system: the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, *macrosystem*, and *chronosystem*. The *microsystem* is the most prevalent system in an individual's life, as its influence is immediate and consistent. It consists of settings that are regularly traversed such as the home, school, or workplace. Broadening the sphere of influence, the *mesosystem*, is made up of multiple settings that affect the development of the individual. A common example in the lives of children is the interaction between home and the school setting, each having multiple and varied influences on development. Like the mesosystem, the *exosystem* consists of multiple settings that affect the development of an individual; here at least one setting does not include the individual, yet is still salient in determining the individual's development. For instance, Bronfenbrenner suggests that prevalent exosystems in the lives of children are the parents' workplace or larger neighborhood/community contexts. Encompassing these smaller systems is the *macrosystem*. The macrosystem consists of the beliefs and customs that make up a society; it is best described by Bronfenbrenner as a "societal blueprint". Lastly, the *chronosystem* demonstrates the impact of time on the development of the individual in terms of chronological age as well as through environmental changes over the life course. As stated, these interactions range from an individual's immediate sphere of influence (family, peers, etc.) to societal ideals (1979, p. 17 – 8), and represents a process-person-context model where each factor is acting upon and being acted upon by the other factors.

[17] Snyder, T.D., Tan, A.G., and Hoffman, C.M. (2006). Digest of Education Statistics 2005 (NCES 2006-030). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

traditional theories of development. Spencer states that it is important to wedge out a piece of a population's life and scrutinize the interactions that contribute to the observed outcomes of the population. The bi-directional and recursive framework "aims to capture the individual's intersubjectivity and meaning-making processes in light of tangible experiences, which are determined by the proximal and distal contexts of development" (Spencer et al., 2006, p. 641). PVEST affords an examination of an individual's experience in the context of the vulnerability and stress one is exposed to in the environment, how the individual responds to vulnerability and stress, and the identities and outcomes these experiences produce.

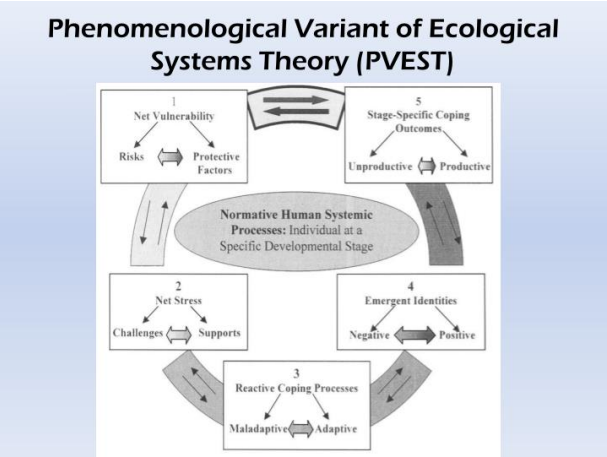

Figure 1 - PVEST

The dimensions of PVEST (Figure 1) depict the developmental processes involved in engaging with, interpreting feedback from, and making meaning of one's environment. PVEST suggests youth experience particular vulnerabilities, either risk or protective factors, as they engage in various contexts. Such factors include race, socioeconomic status, gender, etc. A factor that could be considered a protective factor for certain groups or in certain situations (e.g. male) could be a risk factor for another (e.g. African American male). Based on these characteristics, youth experience a variety of proximal stressors, meaning typical or day-to-day experiences. How youth cope with these stressors, whether through adaptive or maladaptive solutions, lays the

foundation for their emergent identities and the outcomes youth experience during adolescence. Thus, for African American boys in the midst of school and developmental transitions, the cues sent to them as a result of their interactions and interpretations of their experiences in school, in addition to, the multiple protective and/or risk factors they bring with them, have the potential to form definitive beliefs about their ability to succeed.

In this study, PVEST is primarily used as a conceptual tool to understand the experiences of boys from a developmental processes perspective following the transition to high school, and as an analytic tool to interpret boys' perceptions of the relationships available to them and the messages they perceive from adults, as well as, their sense making of their experiences.

Methods

Participants

A racially and economically mixed school, Del Rey High School[18], has virtually equal numbers of African American, Latino, and White students and a host of academic tracks and programming. While not representative of the segregated nature of most schools in Chicago, this setting allowed me to sample a group of African American boys across the spectrum of academic achievement.

Del Rey High School is a neighborhood high school that offers a variety of programs to students. It is consistently rated a top performing high school in the city and attracts students from virtually every neighborhood given its robust academic and extracurricular offerings. At the time of data collection, Black students attending Del Rey came from over 70 different grammar schools in the city.

[18] Pseudonym.

Given its status, in terms of programming offered and the quality of colleges many graduates attend, Del Rey is a desirable option for both students and caregivers outside of the district's selective enrollment schools. Unlike many of CPS's neighborhood schools, Del Rey's reputation has solidified itself as an elite school.

Working with the 9th grade counselor, I gained access to the academic records of all incoming African American freshmen boys for the 2013-14 school year and divided the list into three achievement categories. To create the categories, I used a combination of 8th grade EXPLORE[19] scores and high school academic track. EXPLORE scores range from 1 – 25. I classified a student as 'Low Achieving' if he had a score of 13 or below *and* was enrolled in Honors (the equivalent of regular classes); 'Middle Achieving' if he had a score between 14 and 17 *and* was enrolled in Double Honors; and 'High Achieving' if he had a score of 18 or above *and* was enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program. These categories were created in order to explore variation in boys perspectives and experiences by achievement level.

Using purposive sampling (Mason, 2002), I actively recruited 10 boys from each of three achievement categories. Flyers were distributed in all of the freshman advisory classrooms requesting African American freshmen boys to attend an information session. During the session an informational flyer (Appendix 1) was shared to provide more details about the study and who was conducting it. Research within Chicago Public Schools requires the researcher to obtain both the student's assent and the parents' consent. I was able to successfully secure permissions for

[19] The EXPLORE test is the first test in the ACT testing continuum. It is offered to 8th graders. According to the ACT, students' scores are used to predict how they will perform on later ACT generated tests. (These tests include the Plan and the ACT itself. The ACT is used in the college admissions process.) EXPLORE scores range from 1 - 25 and are a composite of how students perform on tests of English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science. www.act.org

five boys in each of my categories (n=15), which amounted to approximately one quarter of the African American boys in the freshman class (Table 5)[20] at Del Rey High School.

Twelve of the 15 boys were interviewed three times over the course of their freshman year; two had severe attendance issues and only participated in the first two rounds of interviews and one boy only participated in the first round of interviews. I lost communication with this young man shortly before the second round of interviews began[21].

Table 5: *Qualitative Sample*

Name (Pseudonyms)	Number of Interviews	Program Type	Cumulative Weighted GPA	On-Track Status at the end of 9th Grade
Anthony	2	Traditional Coursework	0.57	OFF
Brian	3	Traditional Coursework	2.07	OFF
Ceasar	3	Traditional Coursework	2.07	ON
Jeffrey	1	Traditional Coursework	1.43	OFF
Kevin	3	Traditional Coursework	1.43	OFF
Drew	3	Selective Coursework	3.90	ON

[20] Throughout the school year several boys whom I had attempted to recruit approached me to ask why they did not get to participate in my study. A few had forgotten their parent consent forms, but many more said they turned all of their forms into the counselor. This was an issue that was never resolved.

[21] Neither my efforts nor the counselor's efforts to contact the student or his mother were successful. His official school record indicates that he received no grades for the second semester of his freshman year. The counselor insinuated that this young man dropped out of school. However, his status was not confirmed by him or his mother.

Table 5, continued

Jonathan	3	Selective Coursework	4.07	ON
Raymond	3	Selective Coursework	4.38	ON
Sam	2	Selective Coursework	1.57	OFF
Tim	3	Selective Coursework	2.57	ON
Bobby	3	Highly Selective Coursework	4.71	ON
Dewayne	3	Highly Selective Coursework	3.35	ON
Malcolm	3	Highly Selective Coursework	3.74	ON
Ralph	3	Highly Selective Coursework	N/A*	ON
Terrence	3	Highly Selective Coursework	3.50	ON

Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with the sample three times throughout their freshman year of high school (see Appendices for interview protocols). The choice to conduct three interviews was an attempt to follow the ebb and flow of the school year. The first round of interviews captured the novelty of high school and focused on students' 8th grade experiences, obtaining a baseline understanding of how students interacted with teachers and peers and the expectations they held about high school, as well as, nascent perceptions of their 9th grade teachers, work, and social aspects of high school. The second interview took place after students received their first semester grades, when the "reality" of high school sinks in for many students. First semester grades are a part of a student's official academic record and thus, contribute to what

becomes their cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA)[22]. The third interview took place just before the end of the school year when students have a fairly good assessment of how well or not they performed academically and what their perceptions of high school are after a full year. These two subsequent interviews gauged ongoing connection to the school and relationships with teachers and peers in high school. The interviews also questioned levels of support and expectations from their teachers and families.

The interviews for this study were all conducted in a meeting space of the Freshman counselor's office. I coordinated scheduling with the counselor over the course of a month at each interview period. This meeting room was selected to provide a consistent meeting space that could be relatively private. The meeting room had its own entrance and another door that was connected to the counselor's office. During interviews, I was able to maintain confidentiality by meeting with students in a secure location without them having to walk through the counselor's office for him or other students to see them.

Additionally, I was also given access to the students' academic transcripts at the first and second semester marking periods. The administrative data found in the transcripts include semester course grades, cumulative GPA, attendance, credits (toward graduation) attempted and earned, and class rank. These data were useful as a check on how the boys in the sample talked about their performance in their classes.

Data Analysis and Coding

[22] Research by the UChicago Consortium on School Research has found that the high school graduation rate for students on-track to graduate in the 9th grade is 82% versus 22% for students who are off-track in the 9th grade. The definition of ontrack states, "A student is considered on-track if he or she has accumulated five full credits (ten semester credits) and has no more than one semester F in a core subject (English, math, science, or social studies) by the end of the first year in high school" (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Easton et al., 2017).

The analytic method used in this study is narrative analysis (Creswell, 2007; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; and Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative analysis is rooted in what theorists call narrative cognition, which produces "explanatory knowledge of why a person acted as he or she did; it makes another's action, as well as, our own, understandable" (Polkinghorne, 1995). Most commonly understood as evoking a story, narrative analysis uses the elements and events in a research participant's life to provide a richer understanding of the experience under study. This form of analysis typically takes place by synthesizing the data that comprise a story in, what Polkinghorne (1995) calls, a "bounded system." The freshman year of high school serves as the bounded system for this study.

This form of narrative analysis aligns well with a study focused on the meaning making perspectives of a population of students following the freshman transition. The environmental focus afforded by the PVEST theoretical framework follows a path from which to assess the bounded system created by the 9th grade year of high school. In many ways, the dimensions of PVEST delineate the elements needed to develop a story - an intriguing plot guided by the potential precarious experiences the characters are in and the reader's inability to pre-determine how they will respond and what will happen at the end. The way environmental messages are internalized and become a part of one's emergent identity, according to PVEST, can illuminate the stories individuals tell themselves about what is happening and what it means about them as they encounter different stressors in the environment.

The approach to coding is based on a thematic survey or analysis approach to foreground the participants' interpretations of their experiences in the findings rather than my own. In an initial round of open coding I looked for themes that were relevant to the participants' experiences as

high school freshmen.[23] The themes that emerged touched on both descriptive and conceptual experiences of school: institutional messages sent to students (i.e. expectations conveyed based on academic track), perceptions of teachers (assessments of teachers' behaviors and interactions), perceptions of the schoolwork assigned, underlying motivation, responsibility (i.e. who is responsible when students do not perform well), and identities on display (both academic and racial). These data come from students' perspectives.

This round of coding followed the steps typically found in thematic analysis:

1. Open coding
2. Search for emerging patterns across interviews
3. Thematic codes generated based on patterns
4. Generation of final list of codes

In the second round of coding, I reviewed the codes and themes generated in the first round and their respective interview sources to gain a better sense of the themes across the boys' achievement levels. While many of the themes generated in the initial round of coding remained relevant, it was clear that certain messages perceived by the boys and the rigor of the work they were experiencing differed substantially by academic track. Meaning, there were distinct experiences given the content and difficulty of the work they were required to do in the respective academic tracks. Given that this study was not intended to be a comparative analysis of the kind of work Black boys were engaged in across academic tracks, this second round of coding revealed the meaning boys made of a smaller, but richer, set of factors influencing how they perceive success. (For instance, one of the middle achieving boys, Drew, was enrolled in a math class that was very demanding. He spoke at length in his interviews about the work in this class. However,

[23] The coding plan in the initial round of coding was not intentionally intended to complement the quantitative work. However, a brief review of the themes that emerged suggest that they may be related.

it was his need for tutoring early on that fed his perception that he was the only student struggling in the class. Another example is Brian, a boy in the lower achieving group. In an example that is described in the Results section, Brian shares about a group project and how despite the teacher's help, the group did not receive a passing grade. The academic work of these two different tracks is not what stands out. What stands out are the stories both Drew and Brian tell themselves based on these experiences, that when something difficult comes along they are on their own in trying to figure it out.) This deeper analysis that examined the commonalities of how the boys perceive success across achievement levels allowed me to make more intentional inferences based on their experiences. It also allowed me to understand the emergent themes in relation to one another, as opposed to a group of distinct themes present in the study. For instance, the broader themes (institutional messages, perceptions of teachers and work, etc) are often influenced by how boys view themselves and the messages that are conveyed to them individually about their academic capacity.

Results

In answering the question, "how do Black boys make sense of academic success following the transition to high school?", several themes stood out in the their perceptions of how they were to approach their schoolwork, their teachers, their expectations of high school, and other topics that elucidated a more intimate set of needs that given societal views about Black boys and black masculinity require care in cultivating in the experiences of Black boys in schools. Noguera suggests that negative appraisals of what young people are capable of are evident in school sorting practices, which convey the contradictory message to African American boys in particular that they are valued in non-academic spaces like athletic fields, but not in classrooms, for instance (2001). Findings that demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of African American boys'

perceptions and how they navigate their learning environments and the cues and messages received from those environments are needed.

While there are some exceptions in perception depending on which academic track the boys were in that are noted, where the boys in this study converged, was evident in themes that centered on the factors that gave them evidence about what it means to succeed in school (whether the impetus or manifestation were positive or negative) - nuanced experiences and beliefs that are often overlooked in exploring the academic experiences of Black male students, in particular (Harper, 2014).

As delineated in the PVEST framework, the vulnerable state Black males are subjected to in attempting to negotiate schooling are ever present. This study provides an opportunity to peek into how they make these negotiations. Central to the developmental processes laid out in PVEST that lead young people to take on certain identities are the appraisals one makes of the self as well as the appraisals of others. Potential negative appraisals resulting from racial stereotypes leave Black youth vulnerable to incongruent messages about their value as young people capable of possessing an academic dimension to their identity. This study captures critical factors (resulting in more in-depth questions of how they process the narrative of success directed at them and the messages they receive from significant adults in their lives) that demonstrate how Black freshmen boys at Del Rey High School make meaning of their experiences following the transition to high school.

Doing One's Best. The boys in this study, regardless of achievement level prior to or during high school, received the message that high school would not be easy. Parents, older siblings, cousins, and friends, as well as 8th grade teachers, all conveyed the message to the boys that high school is the place where you have to do your best in order to succeed. This message

makes sense given college enrollment is the desired outcome for most of the U.S. student population (Roderick, 2006).

While the boys varied on whether or not they felt prepared to do their best in high school, across academic tracks they received similar messages about what high school would be like prior to the beginning of their freshman year. Kevin noted that his middle school principal would remind students, "'You know you gotta work hard?'" Jeffrey received the message: "...it'll be like 8th grade a little bit, but it will be harder...like the work will be harder." Anthony remembered, "Everybody said… In my old school, they said that, 'You gonna have three to four hours of homework…'" This was encouraging to him and his family because it meant that students at Del Rey High School would go on to good colleges after high school: "...And I noticed that the colleges that the students graduate - when they graduate from here to go to college, I notice the colleges that they was going to. Good ones..."

But, what "doing one's best," or a belief that high school will not be easy and you have to work hard, means in practice is not a readily identifiable aspect across all students. However, right from the start of their freshman year at Del Rey, this notion of "doing one's best" began to take shape and surface in a predictable combination of factors. The boys implicitly understood that success at Del Rey was an individual pursuit; namely, that their grades, noncognitive skills[24], and a sense of personal responsibility for their grades and noncognitive skills largely determined the boys' perceptions of, and likely, their actual success. Throughout the year it was virtually impossible to disentangle these three concepts in interviews with the boys in this study. Kevin's

[24] The factors outside of content knowledge that are important for success. Farrington et al. (2012) named these as: academic mindsets, academic perseverance, learning strategies, academic behaviors, and social skills.

candor in his interpretation of why high school teachers are so "hard on students" reveals this singular message conveyed to students:

> "Because they have like so many different students that they have, that they don't have time to figure out every single student they have and still make time for their families and like do other things that are important to them."

Additionally, Jeffrey's 8th grade teacher warned him, "if we don't get our act together like high school they're not going to babysit you here. So they was right.[25]"

In their first interviews in the fall of their freshman year, both Malcolm and Drew spoke about what it meant to succeed based on their experience at Del Rey. Before the first quarter marking period, Malcolm stated,

> "Good grades don't come easy. You have to work for everything that you want...Because, it's the workload, and it's something that you have work at because you have to have good time management...As long as you do that, regardless if it's good or bad - as long as you at least complete your work, then you're pretty much on the right track."

Drew attributed this notion of what it meant to "do one's best" to messages he felt he received from teachers:

> "It's just that a lot of times I feel nervous because there are so many ways to fail and it's emphasized by the school. You either sink or you swim...Now it's a little better. But at first it felt like that and it still, at times, feels like that. [Me: How does the school emphasize that?] I think it's, 'we'll try to help you but really this is all on you.' If you don't get your homework done or if you don't understand something you have to meet [the teacher] because they teach hundreds of people. You have to visit [them]. [They're] not going to talk to you about what's going on."

[25] These perspectives are an interesting contrast to findings by Warren (2016) who describe Black male students who believed that they were "babied" in high school and that there was too much "handholding" by teachers in high school. In particular, these young men felt as though this sort of unchallenging support (perhaps support that could also be construed as teachers having low expectations of students) did not serve them well as they transitioned into college. Notably, Warren's study population were older students. The differences are illuminating in their implications for supporting students through the spectrum of adolescent development.

This reflects a direct contrast to the types of teachers boys feel comfortable approaching for help with work. He later says, "Here you have to be independent and you have to take it upon yourself to get your education." Ralph also attributes success to being independent and possessing an advanced set of noncognitive skills[26]:

> "You're very independent when you come to this school. And if you're not really organized, it's going to take you a while to kind of figure out what you need to do to stay on top of things...So basically like your studying skills have to improve, like your focus in the classroom, like maybe eighth grade could have been like fun and games. That's usually your last year and you get excited because you're leaving, but when you come as a freshman, you really have to buckle down and do what you need to do to make sure you're successful. [Me: And you recognized that right away?] Like the first few days, it was fun. I was getting used to it, but then once you start seeing the bad grades or how hard the tests and stuff are, then that's when it really kicks in."

While all of the boys received the message that high school would be different and harder, their comments suggest that the meaning they made of this was internalized slightly differently by boys at the lower and higher ends of the academic performance spectrum. The boys who were in the traditional selective classes speak of high school from an interpersonal point of view. It is not a place where there will be hand holding, the teachers do not have time to check on you, etc. Whereas the boys on the higher end of the academic performance spectrum tended to talk about the skills one needed to perform in high school. The individual student has to stay on top of the work, independence is required, time management is necessary, etc. These differences likely represent differences in how teachers interact with students across academic tracks - classroom management for students on the traditionally selective track and skill management for those on the highly selective track.

[26] Needing skills one does not yet possess constitutes what Eccles et al. (1993) call a developmental mismatch, where the environment and the young person's developmental stage are not in sync.

Interestingly, with few exceptions, the work itself was not difficult. This was true for boys in the lower level classes as well as the higher level classes. In fact, boys across achievement levels said they could do more, but as Ceasar noted, "I don't want to tell them because they might make the work more hard for me." When asked if there was anything difficult about his classes, he responded, "Nothing but the teachers." Ceasar is in lower level classes, but Bobby who is in advanced classes expresses a similar sentiment: "[Me: Your teacher said you can do more than you're doing?] Yeah, kind of...I could but it's so much work and - it's a lot more work to do; I don't like busy work - I just don't like work that's just there to do." While seemingly at odds with the findings above, which characterize their experiences in high school as difficult, these findings make sense together. The work (whether lower level or higher level) is not perceived as exceeding their capacity to complete it. What the boys in this study struggle with, and presumably receive little support for, are the skills necessary to complete the work; in their own words - time management, organization, workload, etc. The literature suggests that a decrease in adult monitoring following the transition to high school is related to the difficulties students face academically (Rosenkrantz et al., 2014).

In this environment, the most reliable source of feedback was likely their grades. Though the importance of grades varied almost by the boy (with the exception of the boys in the most advanced classes, who were almost all concerned about class ranking), they all spoke of grades as key determinants of whether or not they were doing well. At all levels of achievement, the boys spoke of constantly checking their grades[27]. However, given their lack of or nascent noncognitive skills, many of the boys did not discuss their grades with teachers and were often left to wonder

[27] Admittedly, this is likely a feature of the modern high school experience, where students have immediate access to grade portals and thus, immediate feedback. This is also problematic in that not all teachers update grade portals in real-time, thus giving students an inaccurate (and sometimes more negative) assessment of their progress.

about the rationale behind their grades, on both individual assignments and overall grades. When describing the work he had completed for a group assignment, Brian spoke about being confused about a grade he received in Biology: "So we was doing our project, me and two of my friends. And my Biology teacher actually helped us. And he said it was a good project, but we wound up getting an F." It was not clear why the group had received an F on the project and neither Brian nor his group mates felt comfortable asking the teacher why they received an F, especially since he helped them and had previously given them positive feedback. Most of the boys seemed to understand grades as a game to be played and "mostly just try to get a good grade," as Tim noted, or as Dewayne stated, "the grade - that's the main thing." Drew's take on grades captures the power grades have on a young person's perception of success:

> "And you know, for some reason I've always thought of letter grades as you know, very significant. Like the grade is where you're going to end up in life. So you know, like grades have always been intimidating to me...But when I see grades and it's not an A or it's not the best I could be, that really forces me to actually try to do better."

Grades and noncognitive skills are key determinants in how boys perceive themselves as students. In the PVEST framework, how these boys understand success is likely a major contributor to their emergent academic identities. Whereas the explicit messages and cues from parents and teachers can always be rationalized as external and beyond one's control, how those messages and cues get internalized through students' grades and noncognitive skills take on an intrinsic tenor and start forming a story about who they are academically - "my grades and ability to keep up with the work mean something about me." When viewing boys' perceptions with that lens, it becomes clear why a student like Brian is struggling at the end of the year or why Ralph is

one of the highest performing students in the sample[28]. The ways in which boys are able to cope and make meaning of receiving a bad grade or navigating the amount of work, given the messages in the environment, begins to solidify an appraisal of who they are as students. In an environment where there is perceived little support or feedback for how to navigate schooling experiences, doing one's best becomes narrowly defined as it is the responsibility of individual students to get the best grades possible.

Messages Boys Receive From Supportive Teachers. The literature is clear that teacher support is one of the determining factors of student academic success (Uwah et al., 2008; Rascoe & Atwater, 2004; Baker, 1998). The literature is also clear that Black boys tend to receive less teacher support than other students (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Support can be defined in any number of ways (encouragement, high expectations, personal support, etc). In their first year of high school, most of the boys in this study do not identify a teacher (or any other adult in the school) who they can turn to for support beyond help with schoolwork. At most, a few boys thought they might be able to seek support around personal issues from a couple of teachers, but almost all of the boys in the study made it clear that they had not and likely would not seek support from a teacher in that way[29]. Based on the descriptions of interactions with teachers provided by the boys

[28] Ralph's transcripts were missing from the system (note the N/A in Table 1), but his self-reported grades were high.

[29] This finding should not be interpreted to mean that African American boys, and these boys in particular, do not need the support that a deep, personal relationship with an adult in their school could potentially provide. There are potentially several reasons why boys articulated a lack of desire for this type of relationship. One, this response could be a function of the school culture. In an earlier finding, I noted that boys implied that success in their experience was solely dependent on them. The school culture could be one that emphasized self-reliance. This would be an example of a vulnerability experienced from the PVEST perspective. If the environment, for instance, sends the message that students do not seek personal support, doing so can be perceived and internalized as too risky and the safer thing to do is focus on potentially only seeking academic support. Two, overlapping with the first potential response, this type of response could also be a function of the developmental stage in which the boys were in. In the quest to define themselves as high school students, a deep relationship with an adult at school could be interpreted as immature. Three, their responses could have been a reaction to me; possibly, the boys did not want to admit that they sought out that type of relationship with adults at their school. Anecdotally, in my time as a high school counselor there were students I had known well their entire high school career and yet, did not form a close relationship with until they were seniors. Finally, as Valenzuela notes, "students' desire for reciprocal relationships

in this study, I define supportive teachers as *adults who are perceived as relatable to the boys, authentic in their interactions with the boys and in their approach to their teaching, and provide clear guidance around how the boys should engage in their school work and interact with the teacher.*

Perhaps not surprising, early in the school year the boys place high value on the behaviors of their 9th grade teachers that are similar to the behaviors of their 8th grade teachers. Research shows that students tend to have closer relationships with teachers in middle school than high school and there is more adult monitoring of work and student progress (Rosenkrantz et al., 2014; Benner & Graham, 2009). Tim and Jeffrey both talked about 8th and 9th grade teachers that make sure students understand the work. Tim felt that the 9th grade teacher he liked most went "step-by-step" when explaining the work, just like his 8th grade teacher. Jeffrey's 8th grade teacher "took it slow" and "didn't rush" students, checking in to make sure students understood the work. Likewise, the 9th grade teacher he liked most encouraged students "to ask for help." Jonathan said that teachers who demonstrate this type of support never say things like, "...Oh, you should have been listening…"

Other boys noted that across 8th and 9th grade they could tell which teachers liked teaching. Speaking of his 8th grade teacher, Dewayne said, "You could tell. He enjoyed what he was doing. He was pretty interesting." He likened this teacher to one of his 9th grade teachers who he said, "spends time getting everyone interested." Although he did not experience a 9th grade teacher with the same level of enthusiasm, Raymond had been in awe of an 8th grade teacher who he believed was "really smart" and passionate about his work:

> "I don't know, he just knew a lot of the history on what he was - so he was a Math teacher. Like when you asked a question, he most

with adults at school is tempered by their experience, which teaches them not to expect such relationships" (1999, p. 104).

> likely had an answer or somewhere where you could find the answer. And he went more into the history of who made the theorems…"

In their descriptions, both Dewayne and Raymond immediately offered contrasting examples of 9th grade teachers who seemed uninterested in engaging their classes in supportive ways. Dewayne said, "we just take a lot of notes. It's hard to understand the stuff when it's just information thrown at you." Raymond said, "In class you just take notes and then you go home and look at your notes and learn it like at home by yourself." In these descriptions, noting the similarities and differences between 8th and 9th grade teachers, the boys are articulating the kind of support they need and whether or not they are receiving that support from 9th grade teachers.

Many of the teachers that the boys feel most connected to are described as "fun" or "funny." Other parts of their interviews give more nuance to this descriptor. The boys do not find these teachers necessarily funny in a comedic sense, but more a person who is at ease with students and can engage with students beyond conveying academic content. Malcolm describes "fun" teachers as teachers who "make the class feel open" and encourages discussion among students. Anthony similarly described "fun" teachers as creating space for students to interact with each other through group work. Ralph said "funny" teachers are "energetic" and "keep us [students] in the lesson." Laughing at his own characterization, Terrence said that he enjoys most classes, "but if a teacher's funny, that warms my heart." Those are the classes where he feels most at ease and "open" to learn.

In terms of academic support, it is clear that boys value teachers who create a path for learning and proactively communicate that they should come to them for help. This is evident from their descriptions of their 8th grade teachers. And while there were certainly 9th grade teachers that the boys said they could possibly go to for help, there were only a few teachers (typically the teachers also described as "funny") that boys felt most comfortable asking for help and had

previously done so at some point throughout the school year. As noted above, the teachers who created "open" classroom environments were the teachers boys relied on for academic support. Brian noted that his best teacher, "showed me how to do it, and then he made me do one by example. And then I kept doing it wrong. And he made me - he kept making me do it until I got it right." By contrast, Sam describes a class in which he "zones out" because "like she don't make it like clear enough to me. She just like give us the work and she doesn't say something about it and just be like, 'Do it, and it's due by this date.' And that's hard to me. I don't understand." Malcolm thought teachers would "go the extra mile [to support students] if they think you're trying." A few boys gave examples of ("open") classes where student discussion and group work were encouraged to create peer-to-peer learning. This was not consistent across classes, however. Brian shared an experience in a class where help-seeking was discouraged and, according to him, the teacher made a scene about his status in the class: "Because I be asking somebody for help and he just call my name. And he just put me out there just like saying stuff no other kid should know."

In an ideal situation, the experiences students have in school would demonstrate an accumulation of positive interactions that lead to learning and self-knowledge - a process guided by teachers intentionally supporting students in making meaning of their school experiences. (Based on what they conveyed about their experiences with their teachers in the 8th grade, it seems as though boys had expectations of this ideal situation coming into high school.) If that were the case, PVEST would not only be a means for analyzing the developmental processes of youth, but a frame teachers could use in their approach to teaching, and educators more broadly, in planning student school experiences. The findings of this study suggest this is not the case with boys' experiences with high school teachers, however. For the most part, 9th grade teachers at Del Rey High School are not intentionally (at least from the boys' experiences and interpretation of their

experiences) guiding students to make meaning of their school experiences. In interpreting the boys' experience, it does not appear that teachers are proactively withholding support, but their ways of interacting with students often come across as disconnected, without much forethought and intentionality. Disconnection is an implicit message communicated in the environment that boys are interpreting and internalizing.

This notion of teachers who are relatable, authentic, and provide clear guidance for students, especially those who tend to be marginalized in school settings, is an actionable finding for practitioners. It is an opportunity for freshmen-level teachers to create learning environments for students to safely thrive academically[30]. A reflection by Terrence of an 8th grade teacher who possessed these characteristics is both compelling and uncommon. No other student says anything similar about a 9th grade teacher, not even Terrence. Referring to his favorite 8th grade teacher:

> "Like, even now, it's still classes where only five people participate, and back then, at the beginning of the year, it would be like that. When new stuff would happen, it would be like that 'cause everybody was scared, like, 'I think I got this wrong, blah, blah, blah,' but he told us, he said, 'Say the answer. Even [if] you got it wrong, even if it is wrong, just say the answer, so I know what I have to help you with 'cause I won't know unless you tell me.'"

Familial Narratives Influencing the Desire to Succeed. Anecdotally, we often hear adults in school settings serving African American students ask, "What about their parents?" The implication being that Black parents do not care about their children's educational experiences and outcomes or that they are unavailable for circumstantial reasons. Perry (2001) notes that a strong emphasis on education in the African American community can be traced back not just to Emancipation, but to enslaved people who learned to read and write at all costs, including death.

[30] Several have noted that African American students are aware of pervasive "narratives" about them being academically inferior to other groups and are likely vulnerable to stereotype threat without teachers and other adults in school countering those narratives (Nasir & Shah, 2011; Tucker, 2010; Steele, 1997).

And Carey (2016) notes that Black youth are the recipients of their parents' many future aspirations, receiving messages suggesting that college is their best bet.

Family influence on the desire to do well manifests in two primary ways for the boys in this study: as a positively-reinforced expectation that is rooted in a future orientation (e.g. doing well in school (high school and college) will lead to a better life) and as pressure to perform better academically (e.g. an extrinsic push to regain access to free time or personal items). While just two boys' descriptions of their families' influence could be described as indifferent or passive, the rest described active and persistent interest in their academic standing. Thus, this theme of family as a motivator for academic success was not limited to the students with higher achievement.

For boys whose families' influence manifested in an expectation of performing well in school, doing well had been framed and often modeled by their families as the key to future success. Drew's father, a physician and former college athlete, could be described as a prototype for his belief that, "...if you go to high school and you do a good job in high school, it opens up opportunities for college. And obviously you go to college and you get better jobs, and you can get better lifestyles."

Drew goes on to state:

> "Yeah. My parents make me want to do well because my dad was - I wouldn't say one of the first, but he was basically the one to make it through all of college and played all these different sports through college: lacrosse, football, which is what I'm trying to do now. And he's become a pretty successful doctor and so was my mom. So I had a pretty positive environment and an encouraging environment to make me try to do well in high school and college."

Malcolm uses virtually identical language to convey the expectation from his family, "...good grades get you into a good college. And, good college gets you a good job. And, a good job gets you a good life." Malcolm goes on to say:

> "...because of my family history, I guess. Because, my mother went to college. She graduated with a bachelor in business administration. But, besides my grandfather and grandmother, she's pretty much the only one that graduated. My dad went to college, but he didn't graduate...So, they want me to go to college and graduate with a good degree, that way I can get a good job."

The families of these young men have stressed to them that academic success is a pathway to a future of one's choosing.

As stated, this notion of the expectation that one will do well is not a new concept among Black families (Carey, 2016). When reflecting on his desire for academic success, Malcolm makes clear the standards set for him by parents: "...it's not like I can get away with come home with five Ds. They'll frown upon me, in other words."

Other boys describe this expectation as one not solely rooted in a successful future tied to the type of potential career they can attain or financial success, but reflecting admiration for their families' example of success or care for them. Ralph eloquently describes his drive for success as the result of his (biological) family and church family "pouring into him." Both Terrence and Bobby talk about wanting to do well because of how much their mothers care for them and support them academically. Terrence's mother's influence on him manifested in his reflective stance of trying to think about what will come next based on his current actions: "I think it's more so what *could* happen if I do well that makes me want to do well." He spoke excitedly about what possibilities could be open to him in the future. "Looking at my older family members, seeing them accomplish and everything, it just makes me want to do it," was how Jonathan spoke of the example his family had set for him. He explained that several members of his family had told him that academic success "is going to pay off":

> "Like you're going to be successful when you get older, especially being intellectual and smart, and I know this goes in our transcript, so when I'm looking for a job or something, or trying to get a career going, it won't be as hard for me as someone who isn't trying…"

Positive family framing gave boys a lens from which to see their future selves. While, as shown above, these boys did not always have the best experience with teachers, the messages they internalized from their families allow for a future-oriented identity to emerge; one that is grounded in academic success.

Other families used pressure to encourage their sons to do well. This pressure was typically in response to failing grades and a sense that these boys were capable of doing better academically if they tried harder. This familial response was common among boys in the traditional coursework track. Just one boy in a higher academic track, DeWayne, spoke about his family using pressure to encourage his academic performance. (While his cumulative GPA was high at 3.35, DeWayne had the lowest GPA of all boys in the Highly Selective and Selective tracks.) A couple of boys shared that their parents took away their "stuff" when their grades became too low. Kevin talks about trying to raise his grades in response to his father's actions: "So then he took all of my things, so I was not able to have a distraction. So I had to do it." After explaining a low grade in his English class, Ceasar goes on to describe his parents' reaction to the grade:

> "I mean, I'm in trouble now because of my grades. [Me: From first semester?] From first semester and second semester. I can't do anything. [Me: What does that mean?] My stuff. They took my stuff. They took away my laptop. My Play Station 3. My headphones. My T.V. And what else did they take? A couple of Christmas gifts. [Me: So when you get home…] Homework."

While Anthony does not mention losing privileges or access to his possessions, his mother responds to low grades by increasing her monitoring of certain aspects of schooling. This is especially true of homework. When asked why he wants to do well, he noted that his mother repeatedly asks about whether he had completed homework, "Because my mom, she always tell me, like, "Do your homework. Do your homework. *Do your homework.*" Kevin also describes

instances when his father "kept bugging me about it." For these students, extrinsic pressures result in academic success becoming a burden that one must shoulder.

Though parents used different tactics to encourage their sons to do well in school, virtually all parents connected academic success to racial identity. Messages that have been generationally ingrained in the experiences of many Black people and documented in research (and fictional accounts) were also conveyed to the boys in this study. Both Ceasar and Dewayne's parents told them that they have to work harder than other kids to be successful. And for Dewayne, Terrence, Ralph, and Drew working harder meant not being considered a stereotype. Dewayne says, "[They say] sometimes we have to act differently. I have to separate myself, act more mature, so they don't, I don't know, put us all in the same category…"

Again, Drew referring to his father:

> I mean, because my dad, he's a doctor now so he's really successful...But you know, he definitely did not grow up, you know, in the best place to grow up. He constantly tells me that as a Black male you have to be more aware. You have to be more aware of what's going on. You have to prove yourself in school that you can actually do it. Because there's so many things just going against you know, Black people. Like lower test grades. More crime. All of that stuff. And it's like he's like, 'as someone who's Black you have to really try your best to overcome all these things. You have to be better than the stereotype.'"

Of the boys in this study, only Malcolm's parents connected academic success and racial identity with a positive affirmation of being an educated Black man. His parents told him that by doing well academically, he is "becoming a part of history." This affirmation resonated for him when he read a story about a Black teen who was accepted to all of the Ivy League colleges: "Then I just thought about how that's history, a Black man being able to do that."

Likely, with lived experience as their guide, parents understood that to successfully navigate school environments their sons would need to carefully interpret their interactions in

school with peers and adults, and make decisions that positioned themselves outside the stereotypes of black masculinity. Interestingly, this level of awareness would require one to have a metacognitive understanding of the PVEST developmental process. Not only are youth making meaning of the experiences they have in the school environment and adapting and coping in that environment, but they must also attend to, and arguably make the "right" decisions about, the racialization process that they are immersed in.

Discussion

In reframing the questions we ask about the academic experiences of African American boys, we see that despite any individual's particular academic outcomes, African American boys engage in deep sense making of the messages they are receiving and interpreting what those messages mean for their desire to succeed academically. This is true for both high achievers and those who are struggling academically. When asked questions about what influences academic success - what or who makes you want to do well, put in effort - the boys in this study made connections to tangible and intangible factors that guide their thinking.

Spencer's phenomenological theoretical framework asserts that "self-perceptions organize one's behaviors, thoughts, and actions" and are responsive to environmental feedback (1997, p. 818). By centering their perceptions we can glimpse into how the boys in this study make meaning of the factors that influence their perceptions of academic success. The findings of this study suggest that how Black boys internalize the notion of "doing one's best," academically supportive teachers, and family encouragement influence the boys' notion of academic success. Some parents and families use very specific future orientations rooted in college and career aspirations to motivate boys to do well, while others use threats in response to poor grades, or sometimes grades

they deem unacceptable. For almost all of the families academic success for Black boys was a means of challenging stereotypes of Black boys and black masculinity.

The findings here suggest that relationships with teachers matter for African American boys. At this stage in their lives, the boys in this study did not appear to want a personal relationship with teachers, but instead found academically supportive relationships to be a key part of their success. Again, this supports the findings of Benner and Graham (2009) and others' developmental perspective of the 9th grade transition. Adolescents need support for navigating this new structure of schooling and increase in work demand. The teachers boys found supportive were relatable, authentic, and provided clear guidance as the boys navigated their freshman year in high school. However, few high school teachers the boys discussed in their interviews possessed these qualities consistently. Despite not receiving consistent support, the boys in this study had received the message that high school is the place where students have to do their best in order to succeed. With little perceived relational support to rely on, the boys interpreted "doing one's best" as achieving success through pushing themselves to get good grades and work hard through the use of noncognitive skills, or the skills necessary to achieve, above and beyond content knowledge. Virtually all of the boys believed that "doing one's best" was an outcome achieved in isolation. Higher achieving boys were able to academically navigate their freshman year, despite the lack of support. While it was not easy and caused stress for some (Drew: "...I feel nervous because there are so many ways to fail…"), they maintained GPAs that not only placed them "on-track" to high school graduation but also made them academically competitive students. This was not true for boys in the lower track classes. The boys in these classes struggled to persevere in the support starved environment. Evidence from the UChicago Consortium on School Research shows that all students' grades suffer following the high school transition. With little support around how to

navigate the structures of high school by scaffolding needed new skills like time management, workload balance, help seeking, these boys were not able to translate "doing one's best" into academic success. Their cumulative freshman year GPAs ranged from 0.57 - 2.07 and of the five boys only one was "on-track" to high school graduation.

Situating these findings in Spencer's PVEST framework demonstrates the potential for vulnerability these young men often find themselves in navigating their first year of high school. The themes that surface in their academic experiences are indeed factors they draw on in framing their desire to do well in school and succeed, but how these factors manifest in practice do not necessarily support boys to do well academically, consistently or independent of other negative factors. For example, as we learned earlier, Anthony's mother in an attempt to more assertively monitor his academic behaviors, implored him to "do his homework." And yet, Anthony ended the school year with the lowest GPA of all the boys in the study, and off-track to graduation. Further, though they may not explicitly articulate it, many of the boys in this study sense that there is a missing piece to their experience in high school as it relates to their in-school interactions with adults. Based on their 8th grade interactions, they know what it means to have supportive relationships and clear expectations from adults. That does not translate in many of their interactions with high school teachers. For many, the inconsistent support confirmed the message that "no one will hold your hand in the real world." Many of the boys seem to believe, and others seem wary of, the message that they receive in high school - this is an endeavor you do on your own. This is evident in their emphasis on needing to manage their time better, be more organized, keep up with the pace of the work, when these are developmental skills to be learned and supported by adults. Again, the boys in higher track classes were able to navigate the lack of support in ways that the boys in lower track classes were not. That should not be taken to mean the boys in higher

track classes did not need more intentional and clear support. The findings here suggest a need for differentiated scaffolding of how to navigate high school. As many have noted, the transition to high school is often a developmental mismatch for young people, where the structure and expectations of high school do not match the needs of young people looking for cues from the environment during such an intense period of identity development (Benner and Graham, 2009).

The implications of this study are twofold and overlapping: First, the findings of this study represent an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to engage with African American boys from an asset-based, strengths perspective and to follow the tradition of research that attempts to understand the nuances of Black boys' perceptions of their learning environments and motivators, and how they interpret and internalize the messages and cues present. Exploring the influencers of success, and even where those influencers have the opposite effect, give a more in-depth look into the academic lives of Black boys. Knowing and operating from the knowledge that Black boys rely on and are eager for clear and structured support from adults and want to figure out how to do their best to be successful enables both practitioners and researchers to shift from a deficit perspective to an asset-based strengths perspective of Black boys experiences of school. Learning more about how African American boys navigate high school culture and interactions with adults is a critical next step in determining how the field can foster more intentional relationships between African American boys and adults, relationships that clearly communicate to Black boys that they matter as capable, academic beings (Tucker et al., 2010).

Second, this study demonstrates the need for practitioners to build and bring a developmental lens to their work in classrooms and for administrators to structure the freshmen experience with more intention. A developmental understanding grounded in PVEST can help practitioners pinpoint stressors and potential ways boys may internalize those stressors, and then

help Black boys develop new narratives about their academic selves that lead to positive emergent identities. Del Rey High School has a freshmen building, which physically communicates an emphasis on freshmen, but without systems in place (and support for teachers) to assist freshmen in navigating how one becomes a high school student and scaffolding that experience for young people, the separate facilities are likely ineffective. Many schools have implemented what is known as Freshmen Academies, where students are not only housed separately for most of the day, but their schedules tend to incorporate skill building classes that help them understand the structure of high school. The findings on the effectiveness of Freshmen Academies are mixed; however, most research looks at the effect of these academies on standardized test scores (Muschkin and Bonneau). Muschkin and Bonneau find positive effects on outcomes that are more relevant to the experiential nature of high school - more engagement, fewer suspensions, etc.

This study has limitations. One, boys' perceptions of what influences the notion of success for them was not checked against parent or teacher observations of the boys' performance, the two groups that were highlighted as important by the boys. Their grades and on-track status, however, do give some indication as to teacher perceptions of the sample. Of the 15 boys in the study, 10 finished the year on-track to graduate and nine had above a 2.5 (or average) cumulative GPA at the end of the school year.

Two, this study took place in one high school. While Del Rey is considered one of the traditional neighborhood high schools in the city, meaning it does not have test-based admissions, it is unique among this group of high schools. It is uncommonly diverse, both racially and economically. It also has a robust set of programs that many neighborhood high schools in the city are not able to provide for their students. These two characteristics of the school, in particular,

perhaps create unique opportunities for students that even boys in lower track classes benefit from in ways that Black boys in less-resourced and diverse schools would not.

Lastly, I do not take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the interview data in my analysis. My treatment of the 9th grade year is in response to the new experience of high school and how the boys in my sample make sense of academic success, rather than exploring how the sample gets to the end of 9th grade and the changing nature of success. Interestingly, most of the negative perceptions and feelings boys have are identified at the start of the year and persist throughout the year. For instance, Drew, Malcolm, Ralph, and others realize right away the challenge to academic success in high school. However, there is the possibility of more to learn about the relationship with success had I followed the sample's experiences in temporal order. Future study, perhaps in the form of case study or vignette, can illuminate the shifting perceptions of what influences success for this population throughout the school year. A case study format could potentially elucidate boys' perceptions of growing or stagnant support for course content from teachers in relation to their increasing noncognitive skills (i.e. how do their perceptions of the coursework and their teachers' support for understanding and navigating coursework shift with their increased skill at time management or feeling more comfortable with seeking help?). The line of questioning in this study did not have enough depth to discern this type of longitudinal experience.

The aim of this study was to understand what factors African American freshman boys draw on to conceptualize, and make meaning of, academic success following their transition to high school. The implied desire for, and reliance on, consistent and supportive adult monitoring is a key finding that can inform how we think about the needs of this arguably most marginalized student population. Likewise, the boys' conceptualizations about what it means for them to do

their best in school can help the field (practitioners, administrators, district leaders, and researchers) think about how the transition into high school is structured such that all students believe they are well equipped to navigate that experience. As reported here, these are narratives students are interpreting and relationships they rely on for academic support, but they are not always beneficial or available in the way boys need them. Closing these gaps - gaps that leave vulnerable students feeling unsupported and alone in learning to become high school students - is the critical gap that needs closing.

Appendices

Appendix 1
Figure 2: Recruitment Flyer

What can I expect if I participate?

- You will be interviewed once in the fall, once in the winter, and one more time in the spring. I will ask to audio tape your interviews.
- It is completely up to you if you want to participate.
- I will ask you questions about your experiences in 8th grade and high school: what it's like to be a student, your teachers and classmates, and what you think about high school.
- I will not share your name with anyone.
- No one will be able to link your responses to you.
- There are no wrong answers!

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact Nicole Beechum at 773-702-1122 or nicolew1@uchicago.edu. Melissa Roderick is the Principal Investigator on this project, and she can be contacted at 773-834-3642 or postsec@ssa.uchicago.edu.

We want to hear from you!

Academic Engagement in the Transition to High School

Share your story!

Who I am:

I am a PhD student and a Research Assistant from the University of Chicago and I study classrooms in CPS High Schools. My goal is to understand how young people experience the transition to high school to help improve the experience for all students.

About the Study:

I am interested in how students from similar backgrounds can have such different experiences in school. Ninth grade is an important year because just when you're going through a lot of changes as a teenager you're placed in a new environment, with a completely different structure than grammar school. I want to understand why early high school experiences are so important so that researchers can better inform high schools about how to help all students successfully transition into high school.

What will happen?

Beginning this fall, I will be interviewing 30 students at your school three times over the course of your freshman year. Why? Because I want to learn from you what your experiences are in the ninth grade. With your help, we can make Chicago Public Schools better and help prepare more students in CPS to succeed in high school and in their future! You know firsthand, right now what freshman year is like - I would love for you to be one of the students in my study!

Appendix 2: Interview Protocol #1

OPENING

Thanks so much for joining the project. I really appreciate your help as I try to understand what the transition to high school is like for students.

Before we start our interview, there are a few things we need to go over. First, when I'm doing these interviews, I want to be able to give you my full attention, so I don't want to be taking notes while you're talking. On the other hand, I want to make sure we remember everything you say, so I'd like to tape record the interviews. Is that okay with you? Do you have any questions about that?

Interviewer: initial here to indicate student has given verbal consent to audio record the interview.

Second, in this interview, and in every interview, what you say to me is confidential. I am not allowed to tell other people what you have told me here. There is one important exception though. If you tell me that someone is hurting you or that someone else is being hurt, the law requires me to tell a counselor. I am not allowed to keep something like that a secret. If this happens though, I'll discuss it with you first. Does that make sense? Now my questions today aren't about information like that, I just need to tell you anyway.

Just to remind you about some other things we've talked about, which is that I hope to interview you three times between now and next spring.

CHOOSING [SCHOOL]

- Tell me about [SCHOOL]. If I were an 8th grader visiting [SCHOOL], what would you tell me about it?
    - Did you visit before starting 9th grade?
    - (If visited) What did you think about [SCHOOL]? Now that you're here is it different or the same as you thought? In what ways?
- What did you know about [SCHOOL] before you came here?
    - (If prior knowledge) Where did you hear this information?
- How did you decide to attend [SCHOOL]? Your idea? Parents' idea?
    - So far, do you think it was a good decision to attend [SCHOOL]? Why, or why not?
    - If you had to make decision again, would you choose [SCHOOL] or somewhere else?

[8TH GRADE TEACHERS & CLASSES]

- So, I know 8th grade probably seems like a long time ago already, but try and think back to 8th grade:
- What were your classes like? Did you stay with the same teacher most of the day? How many different teachers did you have?
- **Think of your best 8th grade teacher. What makes him/her the best, in your opinion? What did he/she do?**
- **Do you think you learned a lot in that class? Why?**
- **If you didn't know something, how did you get help to understand it?**

- **Did that teacher treat everyone in class equally? (Try to think about equality in different kinds of ways: really, really smart kids compared to everybody else; girls vs. boys; things like that.) Can you give me an example?**
- **Did that teacher ask you guys to share your ideas or opinions? Can you give me an example?**
- Did that teacher do a good job of explaining the work to you guys? Can you give me an example?
- Do you feel like that teacher cared about how much you learned? How do you know?
- Was the class difficult? Explain. Did the teacher help you manage how difficult the class was? How so; what did he/she do?
- **How did you know if you were doing a good job in that class?**
- Did that teacher ever talk to you guys about your future? What kind of things did he/she say?
- Overall in 8th grade, did you like school?

[8TH GRADE PEERS]

- Let's talk a little bit about your friends from the 8th grade. Are any of them here with you at [SCHOOL]?
- Were your 8th grade friends from your neighborhood, or you guys were mostly school friends? (If different groups) In what ways were your school friends different than your neighborhood friends? In what ways the same?
- Let's focus on your school friends. Were you all mostly in the same classes?
- Did you guys ever do homework together?
- **Did you guys help each other with schoolwork or homework? In what ways? Example please?**
- **Were you guys competitive about your school work? Like, "Ha! I got a better grade than you did." Anything like that?**
- **Do you think it was difficult to be in the same class as your friends? For instance, did you goof around more if you were in the same classes as your friends?**
- **Do you think your friends wanted you to do well in school? Or do you think they even cared?**
- **If you were in class and asked for help with the work, would your friends have made fun of you for asking for help?**
- Did you and your friends ever talk about your future? What kind of things would you talk about?

[9TH GRADE TRANSITION]

- So, now you're here at [SCHOOL]. Tell me, does it feel different from [ELEM SCHOOL]? In what ways?
- **Does [SCHOOL] have anybody who just helps freshmen figure high school out? For instance, is there anyone who has talked to you about what is supposed to happen when you get to high school?**
- Are freshman on a different bell schedule than everyone else?
- Did you go to an orientation in the summer? What happened at orientation?
- At orientation did they explain to you what high school classes are like? If so, what did they say? Are your classes like that? If not, what did you think classes would be like before you started? Are classes like that?

- Did you tour the school before you started? If so, who gave the tour?
- **Think back to the first day of school. Do you remember how you felt? Can you walk me through that day? What happened? How did you feel? Tell me as much as you can remember starting with walking into the building…were you on time? Go from there. (Prompts: Lost going to class? First impressions of teachers? Locker? Who did you talk to/sit with at lunch? Did any of your teacher start teaching that day? Did you get homework in any of your classes that day?**
- **I know this is kind of personal, but did you feel nervous? (For instance, I always have those crazy dreams before the first day of something, where you're totally unprepared. You have a presentation, but forgot it at home or whatever. Even as an adult. It's crazy.)**
- **Do you think this school makes freshmen feel welcome? You guys are the newest students here, is there anything special for you guys?**

[9TH GRADE TEACHERS & CLASSES]

- You've been here about 2 – 3 months already, can you tell me how you feel about your classes so far?
- How many classes do you have? What classes?
    - Do you like your classes? Which do you like? And which do you not like?
- **In the classes that you like, what is it about those classes that you like? (Prompt: Something the teacher does? Other students in the class? Really interested in the topic?)**
- **Think about the best of those classes. What makes it the best? What is that teacher doing?**
- **Do you know what your teacher wants you to learn in that class? What?**
- **Do you think you learn a lot in that class? Why?**
- **If you don't know something in that class, how do you get help to understand it?**
- **Does that teacher treat everyone in class equally? (Same as before. Try to think about equality in different kinds of ways: really, really smart kids compared to everybody else; girls vs. boys; things like that.) Can you give me an example?**
- **Does that teacher ask you guys to share your ideas or opinions? Can you give me an example?**
- Does that teacher do a good job of explaining the work to you guys? Can you give me an example?
- Do you feel like that teacher cares about how much you learn? How do you know?
- Is the class difficult? Explain. Does the teacher help you manage how difficult the class is? How so; what does he/she do?
- Do you have to do the homework to do well in that class?
- **How do you know if you are doing a good job in that class?**
- **What about a not so great class? What is different about it compared to one of your really good classes?**
- **What is the teacher like?**
- (I know I'm asking you the same questions OVER AND OVER AGAIN, but this really helps me understand the difference between really good classes and not so good classes.)
- **NOTE: Use responses about good class for comparison. "You said you learn a lot in X class because of X, Y, Z, how is it different in this class?" Use the same prompt for**

class equality, sharing ideas/opinions, teacher explanations, cares for learning, class difficulty, and homework.

- **SCENARIOS. Help me out with a couple of scenarios. If you haven't experienced these, no worries at all, I just want to understand a little more if I can.**
    - **Students are disrupting class. How does the teacher in the good class deal with it? What about the teacher of the not so great class?**
    - **Homework is due. How does each teacher make sure you know about it? Does either remind you about it? How do they collect homework? You put it in a folder? Or teacher actually collects it?**

Appendix 3: Interview Protocol #2

Thanks so much for letting me interview you again. I really appreciate your help as I try to understand what the transition to high school is like for students.

Before we start our interview, I have to remind you of a few things. First, when I'm doing these interviews, I want to be able to give you my full attention, so I don't want to be taking notes while you're talking. On the other hand, I want to make sure we remember everything you say, so I'd like to tape record the interviews. Is that okay with you? Do you have any questions about that?

Interviewer: initial here to indicate student has given verbal consent to audio record the interview.

Second, in this interview, and in every interview, what you say to me is confidential. I am not allowed to tell other people what you have told me here. There is one important exception though. If you tell me that someone is hurting you or that someone else is being hurt, the law requires me to tell a counselor. I am not allowed to keep something like that a secret. If this happens though, I'll discuss it with you first. Does that make sense? Now my questions today aren't about information like that, I just need to tell you anyway.

This time around I'd like to ask you a little more about your thoughts on your classes.

[OPENING]

- You've been in high school over a semester now, how do you feel about it?
    - Is high school how you thought it would be?

[BEST AND WORST]

- Before I ask you about specific subjects, what is your favorite class?
    - Why is it your favorite?
    - What does the teacher do that you like?
    - What are your classmates like in that class?
    - Has this been your favorite all year or has it grown on you?
    - If a different class before, what was it? Why is that class no longer your favorite?
- What is your least favorite class?
    - Why is it your least favorite?
    - What does the teacher do that you don't like?
    - What are your classmates like in that class?
    - Has this been your least favorite all year or did things go downhill over the first semester?
    - If a different class before, what was it? What changed?

[ENGLISH]

- What's the best thing you guys have done in this class?
    - What about that assignment/activity was so great?
    - Did it help you learn more or was it just fun to do?
    - If learned more, how can you tell you learned more?
- What's the most boring thing about this class? Why do you think that?
- What do you think is difficult about English?
    - If not difficult, is it too easy, like you're not learning anything new?

    - If difficult, does your teacher know that you struggle with English? How does he or she help you understand it better?
- Do you think you're learning a lot in this class? Why?
- What kind of class is it? One where the teacher talks mostly and students just listen and take notes? Or one where students participate and discuss a topic?
- What kind of work do you mostly do in this class? Read a lot? Write a lot? Projects? If not those things, what? Do you like that?
- Have you had any big assignments/projects due? What was it?
    - For that assignment, did your teacher check the progress of your work? (So before the due date, did he or she have you turn in drafts and give you feedback? See how far along you were on the assignment? Etc.?)
- What happens if you don't do the homework for this class?
- What happens if you're absent in this class?
- Do you look forward to going to this class? Why? Why not?

[MATH]

- What's the best thing you guys have done in this class?
    - What about that assignment/activity was so great?
    - Did it help you learn more or was it just fun to do?
    - If learned more, how can you tell you learned more?
- What's the most boring thing about this class? Why do you think that?
- What do you think is difficult about math?
    - If not difficult, is it too easy, like you're not learning anything new?
    - If difficult, does your teacher know that you struggle with math? How does he or she help you understand it better?
- Do you think you're learning a lot in this class? Why?
- What kind of class is it? One where the teacher talks mostly and students just listen and take notes? Or one where students participate and discuss a topic?
- What kind of work do you mostly do in this class? Read a lot? Write a lot? Projects? If not those things, what? Do you like that?
- Have you had any big assignments/projects due? What was it?
    - For that assignment, did your teacher check the progress of your work? (So before the due date, did he or she have you turn in drafts and give you feedback? See how far along you were on the assignment? Etc.?)
- What happens if you don't do the homework for this class?
- What happens if you're absent in this class?
- Do you look forward to going to this class? Why? Why not?

[RESEARCH]

- What's the best thing you guys have done in this class?
    - What about that assignment/activity was so great?
    - Did it help you learn more or was it just fun to do?
    - If learned more, how can you tell you learned more?
- What's the most boring thing about this class? Why do you think that?
- What do you think is difficult about Research?
    - If not difficult, is it too easy, like you're not learning anything new?

    - If difficult, does your teacher know that you struggle with Research? How does he or she help you understand it better?
- Do you think you're learning a lot in this class? Why?
- What kind of class is it? One where the teacher talks mostly and students just listen and take notes? Or one where students participate and discuss a topic?
- What kind of work do you mostly do in this class? Read a lot? Write a lot? Projects? If not those things, what? Do you like that?
- Have you had any big assignments/projects due? What was it?
    - For that assignment, did your teacher check the progress of your work? (So before the due date, did he or she have you turn in drafts and give you feedback? See how far along you were on the assignment? Etc.?)
- What happens if you don't do the homework for this class?
- What happens if you're absent in this class?
- Do you look forward to going to this class? Why? Why not?

[CLASSES/SCHOOL GENERAL]

- What do you think about the work you have generally? Too hard/too easy/just right? Too much work/too little work/the right amount of work? What are some examples?
- Do you have friends at other schools that seem to be having a different high school experience than you?
    - Do their experiences sound better or worse? Why do you think that?
    - How are their experiences different?
- Half way through school year, how do you feel about your decision to attend LP?
    - What do you really like about LP?
    - What do you wish were different? Academically? Socially?

[ENGAGEMENT]

- What makes you want to do well in school? Is there something or someone that you can identify that makes you want to do well?
    - What role do your parents play?
    - What about your teachers?
    - The idea of getting good grades?
- Think about a time when you were really struggling to get an assignment done, but you did finish. What was the assignment? What made you finish?
- How important is it to you that your teachers make you feel like you want to learn?
- Have you ever had a teacher who made you feel like you could do anything? Solve any problem/learn whatever? What subject? What grade were you in?
- So I want to tell you about this big idea in research and I'm hoping you can tell me if you think it is right. I'm asking you this because a lot of the time adults think they know things about young people, but never ask them if what they think is correct. This idea is called Student Engagement. Basically, it goes like this: students who 1) feel like they fit in at their school and 2) participate (you know, in class and after school activities) do well in school. That's it: *Fit in and participate and you'll do well in school.*
- Does this sound about right to you?
    - Is there something that it's missing that students need in order to do well?
- Do you think there are things that get in the way of doing well in school?

    - What if someone fits in and participates and they still don't do well? What does that mean? Is it his or her fault? Do you know any examples of this happening to someone?
    - What if they only do well in some classes and not others? What does that mean?
- Is this not it at all? Do you think it takes something else to do well in school?

[CLOSING]

- What are you looking forward to most this spring? Anything interesting/fun happening here at LP? In your classes?

Appendix 4: Interview Protocol #3

Thanks so much for letting me interview you one last time. I really appreciate your help as I try to understand what the transition to high school is like for students.

Before we start our interview, I have to remind you of a few things. First, when I'm doing these interviews, I want to be able to give you my full attention, so I don't want to be taking notes while you're talking. On the other hand, I want to make sure we remember everything you say, so I'd like to tape record the interviews. Is that okay with you? Do you have any questions about that?

Interviewer: initial here to indicate student has given verbal consent to audio record the interview.

Second, in this interview, and in every interview, what you say to me is confidential. I am not allowed to tell other people what you have told me here. There is one important exception though. If you tell me that someone is hurting you or that someone else is being hurt, the law requires me to tell a counselor. I am not allowed to keep something like that a secret. If this happens though, I'll discuss it with you first. Does that make sense? Now my questions today aren't about information like that, I just need to tell you anyway.

This time around I'd like to ask you a few questions about your peers and your experience in school, but also wrap up a bunch of those academic topics I asked you about in our previous interviews.

[OPENING]

- People say the transition to high school can be difficult. How has this transition been for you?
    - What could the school have done to make it better?

[ACADEMIC WRAP-UP]

- Let's first wrap up all these academic issues I've been asking you about. I have just a few questions left about your classes.
- What do you think most contributes to the effort you put into your English/Math/Research class?
    - Your potential grade/The teacher/The subject?
    - Is there something else that wasn't one of the options?
- Generally, do you understand how your teachers grade your work?
    - Do you ever think you know what you're going to get on an assignment?
    - How close is the grade you think you're going to receive to what your teacher actually gives you?
- Do you mind telling me your grade in your English/Math/Research class? [If they don't know ask for 1st semester grade.]
    - Can you explain to me how you earned that grade? For instance, what/how many assignments contribute to your grade in that class?
    - What else contributes to your grade in that class?
    - Do you think that grade is an accurate reflection of how you have done in that class?
- When you get a new assignment (project, paper, etc.), does the teacher give the class a rubric for how the assignment will be graded?

- (If not, how does the teacher let the class know how the assignment will be graded?)
- Can you explain the teacher's rubric to me? Does it break down points or does it say what the teacher is looking for in the assignment?
- How closely do you stick to the rubric when you complete your assignment/project?
- Have you ever been given a lower grade than you thought you would get based on what the teacher asked for in the rubric?
- Are you ever confused by what your teacher wants you to do on an assignment? How do you deal with that? (Talk to teacher, other students, just do what you ***think*** teacher wants, etc.)

[ADULT SUPPORT]

- Are there adults here that you feel comfortable talking to? Superficial conversations or deep?
- What kind of support do you get from teachers?
- Do you think all of your teachers have high expectations for you? How do you know?
  - What does that look like?
  - If not, what should they be doing?
  - Are the expectations for you different than for other students?
- How consistent are your relationships across adults here? All pretty much the same? Some good/some bad?
- Do you think teachers here care about you? Understand you as a person?
  - Do you care if they do?
- Do you feel comfortable talking to your teachers about your performance in their classes? Why? Why not?
  - Do they ever come to you with concerns about your performance? How (in front of class, through your parents, conversation with you)?
- What can your teachers do to help motivate you academically?

[FRIENDS AT SCHOOL]

- Are your friends here mostly people you have class with or just people at school generally (band, teammates, etc.)?
- How do you feel about your friends here?
- How much of an influence are your friends here in terms of:

o Getting your work done?
o Doing well?
o Pushing yourself academically?
o Your behavior in class?
o Participating in class (asking questions, answering questions)?

- Do you think your friends want you to do well in school? How do you know?
- How much do you guys help each other with school work or homework?
- If you're in class and ask a question or ask for help, does anyone make fun of you?
- How are your friends here similar to your friends in the 8th grade? Different?

[RACE]

- Do you think someone's race and/or gender affects them in school in any way? How so?
- How do you identify yourself (race/ethnicity)?

- Is it difficult for you being a black male [or however student identifies himself] here? Why? Why not?
- Do you think it's difficult for most of the black males here? If so, why?
- Are there stereotypes of black males here? What are they? Where do you hear them? Who says them?
    - How does that make you feel?
- Do you ever feel like you're treated differently because you're a black male? Example. By teachers? Other students? Anybody else?
- Have your parents ever had a conversation with you about what it means to be a black male? If so, what did they say? Have you found what they said to be true?
- Do you think you have a different experience because of your race/gender than White boys/ Latino boys/Black girls?
- Do you think your race/gender affects how you view school? What about your future? Why not? Or, in what ways?

[BACKGROUND]

- I have a couple of quick background questions for you.
- Remind me what elementary/middle school you attended.
- Who do you live with?
- Has anyone in your immediate family gone to college? Where? Did they graduate?

[CLOSING]

- You're getting close to the end of the year. Tell me, do you think you've had a good freshman year? How so? Socially? Academically?
    - Highlights of your year?
    - Challenges?
    - Can you think of one thing that happened this year that stands out to you?
    - Last thing, if you wanted me to pass on a couple pieces of advice to your teachers (anonymously, of course), what would it be?
        - 1) What they should know about what school is like for high school freshmen?
        - 2) What they could do better/different in terms of teaching?

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Chapter 4: The Importance of Intentionality for Positive Teacher-Student Relationships: Implications for Professional Development and Practice

To teach students in a way that is affirming of who they are, teachers must *know who they are*; or as Ladson-Billings (1994) states in her seminal text, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, "good teaching starts with building good relationships" (p. 125). Ladson-Billings argues that educators must know students through culturally relevant teaching practices - "pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, attitudes" (p. 18). As the name of the method suggests, drawing on students' cultural referents is a crucial element of the interplay between teaching and learning; and the foundational grounding of culturally relevant pedagogy (and more contemporarily, culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies) is the relationship between teacher and student.

Likewise, when Theresa Perry asserts there are "extra social, emotional, cognitive, and political competencies required of African American youth" to engage in learning (2003, p. 4), she is questioning whether African American students can trust that teachers will authentically have their best interests in mind, value them as learners, and actively affirm their cultural background in the interplay between teaching and learning. To engage with students in a culturally responsive way, it is necessary for adults to acknowledge - beyond the exchange of content delivery and the reception of content - the many realities and potential barriers marginalized students, in particular, experience in acquiring education. To divorce these realities from their experience as students is to ask marginalized young people to leave a piece of themselves at the door and to absolve adults from knowing and affirming the young people in front of them (Valenzuela, 1999).

The importance of teacher-student relationships is commonly accepted in mainstream education research and practice and is a frequently named factor when describing schools and learning environments where students do well (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). However, it is often one of the key missing elements in the academic experiences of marginalized students. Further, in practice, teacher-student relationships are too often treated with a superficiality that belies their power. Teacher-student relationships form the basis for cultural understanding and deployment as a lever of building trust with students that Ladson-Billings and Perry reference. And yet, what these relationships all too often entail for marginalized students, especially African American boys, who in many ways are the targets of many of our worst societal stereotypes, vacillates between extremes - African American students are deemed unworthy of relationship because of conscious and unconscious bias or relationships are formed with the intention of saving students from their poverty-stricken (framed as both economic and cultural) surroundings, also known as a "savior complex" mentality (Picower, 2009). Zaretta Hammond (2015) argues that too frequently, for marginalized students, teacher-student relationships run the risk of being built upon low expectations, where teachers are more concerned with protecting marginalized students' feelings rather than stretching their academic capacity.

This paper's intent is to make the case for ongoing professional development that reaches beyond instructional support to educators and includes a reflexive approach as a leverage point for healthy and productive teacher-student relationships that cultivate and build on the knowledge and experiences of marginalized youth. To make this argument, I explore teacher belief systems and approaches to students - specifically, the ways in which adults care for students and have a sense of responsibility for and support students - that can lead to intentional relationships with marginalized students such as African American boys, as well as, what gets in the way of

intentional relationships. The core of my argument is that marginalized young people, particularly Black boys, are not deficient and in need of one particular kind of relationship, but that adult mindsets are too often (consciously or not) grounded in deficient thinking about marginalized students: their culture, race/ethnicity, economic status, agency, and the capacity that such students have to succeed; thus, deeming marginalized students less worthy of intentional relationship and care. Again, consciously or not. I do not intend to articulate a rigid definition or strictures of the kind of teacher that can engage African American boys, or marginalized students more broadly; it is impossible to narrowly define what that teacher does and how that teacher interacts with students. I suggest here that educators' unexamined positionality can have negative implications for relationship building with their most marginalized students.

In the following sections, I first review literature examining important conceptual underpinnings of teacher-student relationships in schools, empirical research that examines how stereotypical beliefs and biases prevent teachers from building relationships with marginalized students, and theoretical and empirical research that demonstrates the importance of teacher care and sense of responsibility in cultivating relationships with marginalized students. I then share implications for a professional development approach ("inside-out" work) educators can embody to foster intentional relationships with marginalized students.

Literature Review

Teacher-student relationships are revealing in that research suggests the health and quality of these relationships can provide insight into a school's climate, broadly, and the culture and connectedness of individual classrooms, more specifically (Cohen et al., 2009). Further, across the conceptualizations of teacher-student relationships, the literature suggests that for the most part teachers are the drivers of relationships with students (Davis, 2003; Noddings, 1988). In reviewing

the literature, I examine the conceptual underpinnings of teacher-student relationships, the factors that typically hinder positive teacher-student relationships for African American adolescent boys, and those that may bolster them.

Conceptual Underpinnings of Teacher-Student Relationships

The various theories from which teacher-student relationships are conceptualized tend to be rooted in three domains: interpersonal interactions (attachment theory), support obtained from interactions (motivation theory), and context-dependent interactions (social cultural and ecological theories). These theories provide context for how teacher-student relationships can (and cannot) lead to meaningful, supportive academic experiences for students.

Attachment Theory. Given its structure (an adult with authority charged with the wellbeing of a young person), the teacher-student relationship is often conceptualized as another form of the parent-child relationship. This line of thinking turns to Ainsworth and Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bretherton, 1992) to theorize the role of this relationship. The clinical research of Ainsworth and Bowlby argues that early in life, in particular, babies with a secure attachment to a "principal attachment figure" are able to demonstrate independence and self-regulation in ways that babies with a more chaotic attachment are not. A secure attachment is a manifestation of a socialization process in which young children experience consistency and security from a nurturing primary caregiver (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Bowlby, 1988).

The original theory was intended to hypothesize early personality development, however researchers using an attachment theory lens in education suggest that early attachment relationships can influence the teacher-student relationship and that there are parallels to establishing relationships between teachers and students. In particular, many of the foundational

elements of attachment theory are explored in teacher-student relationships, including emotional closeness, conflict, and dependency. Pianta (1999) and others suggest that the influence of early relationships provide children with models of how adult-child relationships operate. If those early experiences are negative children may initially perceive teachers negatively as well. Likewise, Hale and Murdock (2001) suggest the perceptions of relationships formed in "preverbal development" may be difficult to change as children interact with teachers, who can be viewed as alternative parental figures. However, researchers also hypothesize that good teacher-student relationships provide children with the "motivation to explore as well as their regulation of social, emotional, and cognitive skills" (Davis, 2003, p. 209). Others have noted that teachers are an important influence in helping young people regulate their emotions along the developmental trajectory (Pianta, 1999). While prevalent in education research, Attachment Theory raises the question of whether a young person's ability to attach with significant adults is a function of one's personality characteristics (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Pianta, 1999) or is the result of the interpersonal interactions with key adult figures (Davis & Lease, 2000; Baldwin, 1992).

Motivation Theory. Motivation theory, another perspective on teacher-student relationships, conceptualizes the factors that lead to students' commitment to learning. Much of the motivation literature can be characterized as exploring two issues: the first being, students' motivational beliefs/values, and the second, teachers' ability to socialize motivation among students and create classroom environments that lead to motivation. These two issues are deeply interrelated. However, in terms of teacher-student relationships, the majority of motivation theorists posit that teacher-student relationships and learning more broadly are typically teacher-driven endeavors (Wigfield et al., 1998). Whereas, students enter new environments with a set of beliefs and values informed by past experiences that may potentially affect their level of

motivation, teachers have the ability to structure classroom environments such that students have a sense of autonomy and are able to internalize positive motivational beliefs (Davis, 2003; Wigfield et al., 1998). Thus, teachers have an important role in creating the contexts in which positive teacher-student relationships can flourish.

Motivational theorists believe that one mechanism by which teachers can influence teacher-student relationships is through structured and supportive classroom environments where students believe they can be successful (Davis, 2003). Structured and supportive classrooms often manifest in both teacher beliefs and instructional contexts. Teacher beliefs such as perception of student ability and effort can influence the quality of relationship teachers have with students (Thomas & Oldfather, 1997). Other researchers have noted teacher beliefs about student effort can also determine what kind of resources they provide students (Muller, 2001; Pianta, 1997). The type of instructional program a teacher follows is also likely to affect relationship building, according to motivational theorists (Devries & Zan, 1996). Teachers who believe students can and should co-construct knowledge in classrooms tend to interact differently with their students in two important ways. One, they allow students autonomy in making choices; these teachers share power and control with their students. And two, they evaluate students in a manner that allows for continuous growth in student learning, emphasizing the process of learning rather than products such as completed assignments (Davis, 2003).

Beyond the influence on academic learning and outcomes, motivation theory suggests that teacher-student relationships also influence social-emotional aspects of learning, or the affective culture of classrooms (Davis, 2003; Turner et al., 2001; Osterman, 2000). Also known as belonging, a positive affective culture can promote empathy, help seeking, and influence intrinsic motivation for students (Ryan & Pintrich, 2001; Battistich et al., 1997). It also is related to positive

academic self-efficacy and increased academic achievement (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Roeser et al., 1996). The influence of the teacher-student relationship on social-emotional outcomes is particularly salient during school transitions such as the transition to high school. Motivation theorists suggest that it is during critical transitions when young people are most vulnerable to declines in grades and attitudes about school affecting their sense of belonging in particular (Neild & Weiss, 1999; Alspaugh, 1998; Eccles et al., 1991).

Context Dependent Theories. Context dependent theories of teacher-student relationships, such as ecological theories and sociocultural theories, argue that relationships between teachers and students (or the lack of relationships) cannot be conceptualized separately from the environments in which these relationships are created and fostered (Davis, 2003), or as Bryk and Schneider (2002) state, "a complex web of social exchanges conditions the basic operations of schools." An eye toward the context present in schools guards against conceptualizing relationships as solely dependent on the dyad at hand. Contextual understanding of individual relationships recognizes that the environmental influence present is dynamic and that any individual relationship is likely reflective of a pattern of relationships within the school across time and space (Davis, 2003).

Ecological perspectives primarily focus on the structural formations of schools that influence relationships. These perspectives examine classroom as well as school size as factors determining the ability of teacher-student relationships to develop. Research by Lee and Loeb (2000) suggests that smaller school settings increase the quality of relationships between teachers and students as teachers have more time and opportunity to create personalized relationships with fewer students. Classroom size is also related to the ability of teachers to manage and direct the dynamics within classrooms, meaning not only managing their own relationships with students,

but guiding students' relationships with each other (Wentzel, 1994). The potential for a mismatch between peer culture and teacher-led classroom cultures and expectations exists when class sizes become too large (Berndt & Keefe, 1996) and teachers' ability to exert control over the dynamics present in the classroom decline (Davis, 2003).

The ecological perspective relies on the opportunities to create relationships based on the structure of the school. Social constructivist theories, on the other hand, rely on how teachers and students perceive each other, and thus, make meaning of their interactions with each other, both in terms of learning and social engagement. Meaning making in the classroom (and in other social arrangements) relies on the community of individuals constantly constructing the rules of interaction. Thus, individual teacher-student relationships are byproducts of the classroom norms of participation as well as how both the individual teacher and individual student perceive each other. This constructivist lens on relationship development suggests that students must know that their understandings of the relationship and the expectations teachers have of them are valued in order to form positive strong relationships (Davis, 2003). Here too, how a teacher incorporates student perspective into learning is an important determinant of students' perspective of teachers. It is not just one-on-one interactions that determine relationships, but students seeing themselves authentically reflected in learning and classroom decision-making.

Not to be understood as distinctive types of relationship frameworks available to teachers in cultivating relationships with students, the theories posited here overlap and build on each other in a more developmental way. Relationships are dynamic processes. Thus, attention must be paid simultaneously to the environments in which teacher-student relationships are created and nurtured, and the means by which teachers and students understand the other's motives and actions. At the classroom level, the interpersonal safety available to students that results from a

secure attachment can create a level of closeness and trust that students can draw on as they navigate potentially challenging academic experiences; whether that challenge is related to the content's degree of difficulty or a situation in which a young person's identity may come under threat due to potential stereotypes. Interpersonal safety between teachers and students, as well as, between peers in learning environments that prioritize co-construction of knowledge and autonomy can serve as motivators for students to see themselves as valuable contributors to the learning community. While there are teachers who facilitate relationship-focused classroom environments without prompting, the larger school context will likely influence the consistency of the type of relationships available to students, more broadly. The unspoken rules that govern school cultures likely affect whether positive teacher-student relationships are one-off and dependent on individual teachers or are a central function of adult practice within a school.

While these theories are foundational to teacher-student relationships universally, they necessitate more critical reflection on the role of teacher-student relationships particularly in service of marginalized student populations. Meaning, the factors that influence teacher-student relationships extend beyond how teachers structure classrooms and the larger school culture; societal factors are present and in need of a space to grapple with their influence. To engage in relationships with marginalized youth without a frame of reference for the historical, political, structural, institutional, and community, among other forces (forces that for African American males in particular are racialized and gendered) they are constantly navigating is likely to subject young people to further marginalization (Tuck, 2009).

Threats to Teacher-Student Relationships for African American Boys:

What Gets in the Way

In a society dominated by racialized experiences and outcomes, and one that has yet to contend with its racist past (or present), several factors could be viewed as threats to teacher-student relationships. However, stereotypical beliefs about Black students, and by extension, teacher expectations of Black students' behavior and academic performance are likely the most salient factors preventing the cultivation of positive, supportive teacher-student relationships for African American boys.

Stereotypes. Bonilla-Silva (2002) notes that in the post-Civil Rights era, as "racetalk" has shifted from overt to indirect dimensions of racism, color-blind racism (in which white people express racist views without mentioning or alluding to race) has become a pervasive form of articulating stereotypical beliefs about marginalized groups. Especially true in school settings is the reliance on cultural explanations of African American students' behavior and academic performance (as opposed to supposed biological explanations of inferiority historically) to account for differences in student outcomes. Given that white Americans make up 83% of the teaching force (Aud et al., 2013), many scholars have questioned whether it is teachers' perceptions of African American students and other marginalized groups that account for these differences, as opposed to the capacity of the students themselves (Martin, 2009; Picower, 2009).

In her qualitative study examining the ways in which white pre-service teachers' conceptualize and talk about race, Picower (2009) suggests that white teachers often rely on "hegemonic understandings" of race that create stereotypical narratives of African Americans. These narratives are informed by teachers' own experiences (likely, unconsciously) navigating race. The two prevailing hegemonic understandings of race found among the participants in her study were fear of African Americans and deficit constructions of urban schools, families, and students. The pre-service teachers drew on experiences from their own youth in which they

interpreted their interactions with African American youth as scary, describing feeling unsafe and often characterizing the people in question as dangerous. One woman described her town's competing high school as having "really big Black football players" and feeling scared because the "attitude and stuff [of the students at the other high school] was different." The participants also created narratives about the areas surrounding the schools they would be placed in - framing New York City neighborhoods and the people who lived there as potentially dangerous. One woman needed "reassurance" that she would be safe walking from the train to the school before she told her mother about the teaching placement to which she was assigned. Rather than reflecting on and challenging these beliefs, Picower argues that the participants relied on various "tools of whiteness" to preserve their hegemonic understandings of race. Among the many tools that would allow these teachers to perpetuate stereotypical beliefs about African American in general, and their potential students in particular, was the argument that they would "not be able to relate" to their students. Many of the pre-service teachers talked about not understanding the backgrounds and experiences of these students, and again, drawing on a perceived notion of students (some referring to students as young as 3rd graders) being potentially dangerous.

The findings of Picower's qualitative study are confirmed by a recent survey of white adults who work and/or volunteer in various capacities with young people of color. Priest et al. (2018) sought to understand the prevalence of racial stereotypes white adults have of people of color. Relying on previous research that suggests older African Americans are perceived as less stereotypical than younger African Americans, and African American children less than African American adolescents, Priest et al. also sought to confirm whether or not stereotypes shift across different age groups. Consistent with previous research, the researchers found that African Americans, as a group, were viewed harshly in terms of perceived warmth (e.g. warm, sincere)

and competence (e.g. capability), the two dimensions of the Stereotype Content Model. African American adolescents were among the groups (typically along with Native American and Latinx adolescents) to be viewed the least positively and the most negatively; for instance, these groups were the least likely to be perceived as non-violent and the most likely to be perceived as violent. Additionally, unlike other adolescent racial groups, Black and Latinx adolescents were perceived more negatively than white adults, in terms of perceived laziness, prone to violence, unintelligence, and unhealthy habits. Priest et al. note, unfortunately, that these findings are the result of self-reported data and respondents could potentially be underreporting their actual stereotypical beliefs due to the perceived social desirability of not appearing racist.

Such skewed views of African American youth affect their experiences beyond just the academic interactions they have with adults. Goff et al. (2014) argue that pervasive stereotypes fuel prejudices that dehumanize African Americans - dehumanization entailing not just social exclusion of a group, but moral exclusion and stripping of basic human protections. Arguably, this dehumanization manifests itself in the disproportionate discipline rates of African American students in American schools. Several scholars have noted that there is indeed a "punishment gap," in which African American students, boys and girls, alike are the most likely to be punished, suspended, and expelled in American schools (Morris & Perry, 2016; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Indeed, recent mainstream media accounts of the physical assault of African American students in schools has led activists to proclaim "#CounselorsNotCops," as a social media campaign to bring attention to the treatment of students that extends beyond the school-to-prison pipeline and bring light to the physical harm being inflicted on students; harm that many activists argue stems from the dehumanization of black bodies. These efforts have been supported broadly by organizations from the Americans for Civil Liberties Union to Teaching Tolerance.

Teacher Expectations. Early research on teacher expectations framed teacher beliefs about students as a Pygmalion effect, in which teachers' self-fulfilling prophecies about student behavior drove that behavior (Diamond et al., 2004; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Brophy, 1982). As research examining the interactions between teachers and students of different races has evolved, teacher expectations have become an important facet of that work. Deficit-based teacher expectations - common in the schooling experiences of African American boys (Noguera, 2009) - are often an extension of the stereotypical beliefs held about marginalized students' capability to learn and their behavior in the classroom.

Several scholars have examined African American boys' experiences with teachers and come to conclusions suggesting that African American boys are highly visible and invisible at the same time. Meaning, teachers scrutinize African American boys' for clues of misbehavior while neglecting them academically. Melissa Roderick's analysis of the experiences of African American boys in the transition to high school explicitly speaks to school interactions that place Black males at a disadvantage academically. Roderick observed that teachers' reactions to student behavior could often be categorized as "benign neglect," where little if any effort was exercised to understand the underlying causes of student behavior; and avoidance, where students' issues were ignored to the detriment of their academic performance. Thomas and Stevenson's review of the literature suggests that while maleness is advantageous in most areas in society, this is not the case for Black boys, noting that they face "clear inequities in their classroom experiences" (p. 164). Teacher expectations and perceptions of students' work were negatively related to actual student outcomes; the authors cite studies that demonstrate an effect of negative teacher expectations on test performance among 10th grade African American males and another that demonstrates lower expectations of African American and Latino elementary age students as compared to their White

and Asian counterparts. They note as well that a great deal of the inequities Black males experience stem from their interactions with teachers, who have the power to impose disciplinary action that likely impedes learning; meaning, when students are not in class, they cannot learn.

Correlational evidence also suggests that achievement for African American males in high school is related to teachers' locus of control (Davis & Jordan, 1994). Though the relationship was somewhat diminished by the introduction of controls, Davis and Jordan show that teacher sense of accountability for student outcomes had an inverse relationship with achievement for African American boys. Meaning that African American boys performed better in classes where teachers were explicit about their responsibility for providing quality curricula. Elsewhere, teacher sense of responsibility for student learning has also been tied to the racial composition of schools (Diamond et al., 2004).

Swanson et al. (2003) examined teacher expectations of African American boys and found that negative perceptions were more associated with African American boys acting out, or coping by demonstrating exaggerated bravado. The authors speculate that support from school personnel may be particularly important for Black males and when they do not receive it they are likely to be indifferent to the achievement expectations in school. This is interesting in light of historical evidence provided by Osborne (1999). Taking on the issue of identification with achievement for Black males specifically, Osborne presents correlational evidence that demonstrates a decrease over time in identification with achievement for Black males, both developmentally and longitudinally. Meaning that between 8th and 12th grade, the boys in his study showed sharp declines in identification with achievement. He also notes that as early as 1972 identification with achievement for African American males was not significantly different from boys of other racial groups. Osborne argues that these findings demonstrate the malleability of identification with

achievement, as well as, psychosocial factors that may contribute to de-identification among African American males. He only examines identification with achievement from an individual-based perspective (such as stereotype threat, cultural-ecological perspective, and cool pose), but Swanson's findings suggest that another alternative to identification with academics and achievement may lie in the school-based interactions boys have with school personnel (also, Steele, 1997). To that end, in Roderick's work she saw substantial declines in performance across the transition to high school for the boys in her study, as well as, more negative appraisals from high school teachers than grammar school teachers[31].

Several scholars have begun to study teacher expectations by looking at demographically matched and mismatched teacher and student pairings (Battey et al., 2018; Gershenson et al., 2015; Dee, 2005; Downey & Pribesh, 2004). This line of research adds more nuance to the dimensions of teacher expectations of marginalized students. While there is growing evidence of the benefits of teacher-student racial matching (Egalite et al., 2015; Dee, 2004), given the demographics of the teaching population (again, 83% white), it is unlikely there will be a significant increase in racial matching in the near future. This line of research is instructive however in delineating the areas where the mostly white teaching force can shift their expectations of marginalized students. In a large-scale quantitative study, looking at racial matching within-student (each student in the study's dataset has one Black teacher and one non-black teacher), Gershenson et al. (2015) found that non-black teachers have significantly lower expectations of Black students than do Black teachers. The effect of this finding was larger on African American boys. By asking two different

[31] While the methodological chapters in this dissertation did not examine grade fluctuation across the transition to high school, the qualitative chapter's findings that boys perceive inconsistent messages from 9th grade teachers suggesting that they were on their own to figure out high school is in line with Roderick's work. The proactive support they described and had come to rely on from 8th grade teachers was for the most part not available to them in the 9th grade.

teachers how much schooling they expected the target student to complete, the authors attempted to understand how much of a teacher's response (particularly in a racially mismatched pairing) could be attributed to potential bias or an accurate assessment of student skill. They conclude that non-black teachers' responses are primarily the result of bias. They note that teacher expectations are an important input into student beliefs about their own abilities. Thus, interacting with students from the perspective that they are unlikely to go far in their schooling serves as a limiting factor for marginalized students' academic outcomes.

Similarly, in a study using racially matched and mismatched teacher expectations to explore whether white teachers' ratings of African American students' classroom behavior was the result of bias or actual student misbehavior (framed as oppositional behavior), Downey and Pribesh (2004) assert that the ratings observed could be attributed to bias. They compared teacher ratings of Kindergarten students and 8th graders' behavior. Their expectation was that if ratings were the result of students' actual behavior, there would be a difference in ratings between the younger student population (when signals about oppositional behavior and de-identification with school are not yet present) and the adolescent student population. However, across the age difference, white teachers rated African American students' classroom behavior similarly, leading the authors to conclude that white teachers are more likely to negatively interpret African American students' behavior.

In a study exploring racialized effects on learning in math classrooms, Battey et al. (2018) observed "relational interactions" between teachers and students. An exploration of these interactions pushes the research on racial matching between teachers and students beyond the mere presence of a match or mismatch, but explores the actions that take place in this dynamic. Battey and colleagues define relational interactions as any form of verbal or nonverbal communication

between a teacher and student around the math lesson currently being taught. Relational interactions are made up of several dimensions: addressing behavior, framing mathematics ability, acknowledging student contribution, attending to language and culture, and setting the emotional tone. They examined these dimensions from various perspectives - positive or negative interactions and the intensity of the interactions - among white and Black teachers in suburban and urban schools, where all of the suburban teachers were white and the urban teachers were either Black or white. The white urban teachers in the sample were more likely to have negative and intense interactions with Black students than either the Black urban teachers or the suburban white teachers. This was true for virtually every dimension, except 'attending to language and culture.' The study showed few instances of any teacher making the content and lesson culturally responsive, but when it did happen, it was done by Black teachers. The somewhat surprising finding of a difference between white teachers in urban and suburban schools may be an indication of the social demands present in urban schools (i.e. high concentration of students from low income backgrounds) that white teachers may not fully understand or have support to deal with.

If unchecked, racial biases and stereotypes that prevail about African American people, in general, and African American boys, in particular, have the potential to lead to schooling experiences that are detrimental to students' academic outcomes and their perceptions about what they are capable of achieving in the future. Research contextualizing teacher expectations by pinpointing the means by which low and negative expectations serve as potential barriers to student success is a step in the direction of challenging school practices and policies that rely on 'colorblind' narratives.

Opportunities to Bolster Teacher-Students Relationships:

What Can Be

While there are many structural barriers to productive teacher-student relationships, there are also opportunities for teachers to reflect on the belief systems and approaches they take in interacting with marginalized youth. Two areas ripe for reflection as teachers consider their positionality in relation to marginalized students is their sense of care for and their sense of responsibility and support for marginalized students, especially African American boys.

Teacher Care. Noddings (1988) argues that a full consideration of an "ethic of care" in schools would completely uproot the current structure and system of schooling. This is because a care ethic is rooted in "love and natural inclination" and is based on being in relationship with others as opposed to action that is done out of principle and based on duty. Absent the upheaval of the current system, Noddings argues that at its core an ethic of care is about the modeling, dialoguing, and practicing of care, and confirmation of who a young person can become; a form of engagement that requires adults to know and have high expectations of students abilities to grow from receiving such care.

In her groundbreaking ethnographic study of the predecessors to student achievement at a predominantly Mexican high school in Texas, Angela Valenzuela (1999) argues that the cultural disconnect between the mostly white teachers and Mexican students' is underscored by each groups understanding of care, where " teachers ask all students to care about school while many students ask to be cared for *before* they care about" (p. 24). Rooted in Noddings' notion of an ethic of care, Valenzuela illuminates why "care" is an important piece of what it means to approach relationships with marginalized students with intentionality. As discussed earlier, adults must do the social constructivist work to understand the meaning students make, and share their own meaning with students, of what is needed to build relationships.

The notion of care is more than just the feeling of being socially cared for, it is a component of learning. Learning theorists note that in order for deep learning to take place the teacher and the student must find common ground, where teaching and skill meet (Goldstein, 1999; Rogoff, 1986). This common ground is nurtured by the affective state of the teacher-student relationship; specifically, what the child experiences and interprets in the relationship (Immordino-Yang, 2015; Goldstein, 1999).

Often framed as an antidote to disengagement, the notion of teachers as warm demanders, effectively captures what finding "common ground" means in building relationships with students. Citing empirical research on the positive correlation between support and academic press ("content...is made clear, expectations for academic learning are high, and students are held accountable...and provided with assistance needed to achieve"), Delpit (2012) states that, "these relationships are imbued with a sense of trust, confidence, and psychological safety that allows students to take risks, admit errors, ask for help, and experience failure along the way to higher levels of learning" (p. 82). Additionally, Bondy and Ross (2008) state that teachers operationalize caring in the classroom through "warmth and a nonnegotiable demand for student effort and mutual respect" (p. 1). The literature on warm demanders demonstrates that these mostly African American teachers balance authority, an ethic of care, insistence on student performance based on the teacher's high expectations, and support and scaffolding for students (Ford & Sassi, 2014; Delpit, 2012; Bondy & Ross, 2008; Ross et al., 2008; and Ware, 2006). Consistent with Hammond's (2015) argument that most relationship building with African American students is surface-level and does not hold students accountable for learning, many argue that when fully operationalized, warm demanding is the manifestation of culturally responsive teaching (Ware, 2006).

The mostly qualitative analysis of warm demanders has noted that it is typically found among African American teachers who share common cultural ways of knowing and being with African American students (Ford & Sassi, 2014; Delpit, 2012; Ware, 2006). Ford and Sassi (2014) have explored the means by which white teachers can learn from and build a warm demander practice. Lacking common cultural formations, they found that the white teacher in their ethnographic case study had to modify her interaction style to build relationships with her Black students. For instance, where the African American teacher could directly challenge students through what the researchers call "mean talk," the white teacher had to use more indirect means of keeping students on task by employing subtle cues as a warning to students that they were off task. Ford and Sassi argue, however, that white teachers who align themselves with African American students by creating space for cultural understanding and possess a justice orientation are likely to be successful at cultivating a warm demander practice that demonstrates authentic care. Likewise, in Delpit's observations, white teachers who engage their African American colleagues in deeper conversations about race in an attempt to learn have noted that they were more effective teachers because of it.

How care manifests in classrooms has the potential to significantly influence what young people think about themselves as learners. One might imagine a young person contemplating, in the vein of Perry's dilemmas, "Is this an adult who is here for me?" To answer affirmatively, the response must take on social, educational, and contextual dimensions. Given the common stereotypes about their ability and behavior, African American boys in particular, are in need of messages in schools, and specifically from adults, that convey to them they are capable students with future possibilities (Oyserman et al., 1995).

Sense of Responsibility and Support. Teacher responsibility and support are typically thought of as two separate lines of education research. Here, I consider them deeply intertwined ideas following the line of thinking articulated in Bettina Love's (2018) recollection of her fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Johnson, in her groundbreaking book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*:

> "She had a sense of responsibility for her students, and we were a family. You did not want to disappoint Mrs. Johnson because then you disappointed the class and your family. It was a collective spirit of accountability, love, and purpose. She genuinely listened to us, took up our concerns in her teaching, and made sure each voice in the classroom was heard" (p. 48).

This sentiment is present in empirical research. In Diamond et al.'s (2004) study of teacher sense of responsibility for student learning, they note that in schools with a high degree of collective responsibility for student learning, teachers adjusted their instruction to meet students at their skill level and paired those adjustments with supportive encouragement that students (despite barriers) could achieve. While teacher responsibility has been conceptualized in a variety of ways, the literature broadly supports the notion that teacher responsibility is a critical component in relationship development with students and in student academic success (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2013).

Teacher support has been noted to be important for success among African American students (Baker, 1998). Several studies point to the types of support that are likely to motivate students of color to work hard. Uwah et al. (2008) find that being encouraged to participate is one factor that can be attributed to an increase in academic self-efficacy for African American boys specifically. And Ferguson et al. (2002) suggest that the type of support needed to succeed may be different for students of color than for white students. His survey findings indicate that students of color feel most capable when teachers use encouragement as a pedagogical strategy, whereas white students respond primarily to teacher demands. Specifically, African American students are

three times more likely and Latino students are twice as likely as white students to report working hard in response to teacher encouragement than they are in response to teacher demands.

Rascoe and Atwater (2004) conclude that "validation, validation, validation" is key to success for African American boys. When teachers validate their identities as learners and that the boys are capable of understanding and completing the coursework, the boys felt better able to do the work. Rascoe and Atwater also point to the importance of teachers validating their own skills as the teacher. The African American boys in this study thought it was important for teachers to demonstrate a strong grasp of the work. In a study of African American and Latino boys in New York City schools, Harper (2014) hears a similar refrain in his interviews. Students respect and want to learn from teachers who are confident in what they are teaching and have high expectations for themselves as teachers.

Along the lines of Diamond et al.'s research on organizational level, or collective, responsibility, Kyburg et al. (2007) demonstrates the importance of "responsible leadership" in principals' efforts to create school environments that were supportive of academically advanced marginalized students. In practice this meant hiring teachers who expressed a desire to achieve more equitable outcomes as opposed to those with a longer tenure teaching. It also resulted in professional development approaches that shifted adult perspectives on learning – the focus shifted to creating strategies for all to find success in the advanced programming. The support teachers provided directly to students also changed. Kyburg notes a theme of extra support outside of the classroom, including teacher-led study groups and consistent feedback to students, and scaffolding learning within the classroom. The boys in Harper's study also identify receiving non-judgmental help from teachers outside of class as an important form of support.

Valenzuela, Love, and others note that having a sense of responsibility for and supporting students is more than relaying content through instructional practices, it is a mindset that is practiced through relationships with students.

Implications for Educators: "Inside-Out" Professional Development Supporting Intentional Teacher-Student Relationships

In the literature section above, I review three aspects of teacher-student relationships: important theoretical underpinnings demonstrating how these relationships are advantageous for students; stereotypes and teacher expectations that can serve as threats to the cultivation of positive teacher-student relationships for African American boys in particular; and the opportunities for adults to cultivate positive relationships with African American boys grounded in an ethic of care and sense of responsibility. Though teacher-student relationships are touted as a crucial component in successful learning environments, the literature demonstrates a depth of what is needed - critical reflection on how stereotypes and expectations influence teachers' interactions with students and a sustained commitment to care and responsibility - to build and maintain these relationships, that too often is not present in teacher professional development.

Based on the literature reviewed, in this section I suggest that teacher-student relationships require a level of intentionality from adults that likely requires constant critical reflection about who one is (both personally and professionally) in relationship to marginalized youth. This level of intentionality is not solely directed at white educators, though they dominate the teaching field. Further, I suggest that the intentionality needed to build positive teacher-student relationships is not an individual endeavor, but one supported by, what is colloquially called, "inside-out" professional development.

I conceptualize intentionality as a focus on relationships that pushes adult practice beyond the notion of how one's instruction affects young people, but how who teachers are and what they believe in also affects young people. It also requires that young people are known (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994); young people's lived experiences must be at the core of their learning, and their learning is guided by adults who care for and support marginalized youth with the understanding that *because of* the experience of being marginalized they possess vast knowledge relevant to their education, beyond just schooling (Valenzuela, 1999). bell hooks talks about this as "engaged pedagogy" - self-aware teachers (professors) that consider their pupils as whole individuals with knowledge to contribute to the learning taking place in the classroom - where teacher-student relationships are based on "mutual recognition" (hooks, 1994).

My most recent work builds on bringing these ideas to fruition. Since 2016, I have played a lead role in the Building Equitable Learning Environments Network and framework development sponsored by the Raikes Foundation. My role has been to support schools and school support organizations across the country to synthesize and translate research into practice in service of racial equity in schools. Practically, this has involved being a thought partner and strategist to schools and organizations attempting to support educators in taking up more culturally and developmentally responsive practices. Having spent the last several years involved in this national network attempting to build equitable learning environments (meaning, delineating the student experiences, adult mindset and behaviors, and policy implications of providing all students, but especially the most marginalized, with schooling experiences where students' race, class, gender, language, and other social and cultural factors have zero predictive power of their outcomes (BELE Network Framework, 2019)), it has become evident that in order for teachers and other adults in schools to think differently about their interactions with young people they need professional

development experiences that ask them to think differently about who they are as educators; as I have observed one partner organization[32] communicate to educators, "it's about how you will *be* different, not what you will *do* differently."

Professional development that guides participants through what skilled racial equity facilitators call "inside-out" work is crucial to new ways of understanding who they are as educators. "Inside-out" work means that participants start by reflecting on their own experiences in school, in their families, and in their communities. What was school like for them? What resources were (or were not) available to them? What influenced their perceptions of the world? Such internal work allows educators to grapple with their positionality in relation to their students and how their experiences inform their worldview - they are able to place what they know and how they learned it in context. For many educators, engaging in such processing moves them beyond simple reflection and toward a more critical reflexive understanding that their worldview is one of many and based on a certain set of experiences; or as Ryan and Webster (2019) put it, "a reflective approach to teaching implies the possibility of challenging and even changing existing practices, beliefs and aspirations, thinking of other ways of doing things and other ways of *being*" (p. 68). For many white educators, in particular, they can begin to understand that their worldview and experiences are also based on a set of privileges[33] afforded by whiteness (Mason, 2016). This type of self-reflexivity is what Kumashiro (2000) describes as "separating the normal from the self" (p. 45).

[32] Facilitators from the National Equity Project. https://www.nationalequityproject.org

[33] This is true of educators from other backgrounds as well, however, the privilege of whiteness in American society has a different relationship to power.

As educators progress through this type of professional development, they move from internal to external work, and are challenged to think about the goals of education in our society and who the American education system was designed to serve, as well as, to articulate the reasons they work in this system. This prompting pushes one to articulate whether they approach their work with a deficit-based or asset-based framing of young people. What are the ways they have internalized notions of success (i.e. tracking, testing) that have roots in racist notions of intellectual hierarchies? What level of responsibility do they take (or do they?) for the learning of those deemed "hardest to serve"? And what actions do they take (or do they take any?) once they have reflected on who they are and their role in education?

Inside-out works allows educators to do their own meaning making of their experiences and the societal and structural forces that perpetuate the marginalization of certain communities - or what Irvine calls seeing with "cultural eyes" (2003) - then decide what actions they will take, if any, to build relationships with marginalized young people that affirms their humanity. In practice, inside-out work is incredibly difficult, uncomfortable, and slow work[34]. In the years I participated in the BELE Network, many individual practitioners made significant progress in terms of their own internal work only to find their organizations or school systems not receptive to meaningful change or teams shifted and lost members requiring that they start from the beginning in building this inside-out understanding of themselves as a community.

[34] In a special edition of the International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, *Second -Wave White Teacher Identity Studies: Toward Complexity and Reflexivity in the Racial Conscientization of White Teachers* (2016), the mostly white identity scholars grapple with the shifts in how white teachers understand race and significance in their work and interactions in schools. Jupp and Lensmire (2016) note that in the first wave, white teachers primarily denied and evaded the significance of race. The second wave takes on white identity more directly and how it manifests throughout education systems, structures, institutions, and policies. Many white teachers likely vacillate between the two waves depending on context.

Educators who choose to invest in this deeply complex and transformative work are not automatically granted access to marginalized young people. They must still do the work of building relationships with individual students by taking the time to get to know young people and how relationships with adults can benefit that young person academically, socially, and emotionally. Yet, the culturally responsive lens developed and/or strengthened through inside-out professional development creates fertile ground for adults to build intentional relationships with marginalized youth that affirm their humanity.

Discussion

Teacher care and sense of responsibility and support are concepts that are seemingly too simple, and already present in the interactions that comprise teacher-student relationships, to be worth highlighting. Each is well researched and often taken as a given. However, I would argue there is more and continuous reflective and reflexive work to be done that starts with teachers taking a step back, confronting the pessimism and biases caused by structural and institutional racism, and asking themselves whether they allow those (admittedly overwhelming and oppressive) systemic issues to serve as barriers to how they authentically and intentionally care for and hold themselves responsible for marginalized youth. Doing so requires deep reflective and reflexive inside-out work.

Many have argued that teachers need to know and recognize the means by which culture, differing cultures, dominant and non-dominant cultures play out in school settings (Goldenberg, 2014; Milner et al., 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This is true in our increasingly diverse society and difficult to do - practically, to learn about and incorporate many different cultures into one's pedagogical practice, but also as a shift in normative understanding and practice, talking openly, critically, and in developmentally appropriate ways about race, oppression, hegemony, White

supremacy in schools with colleagues and students. Milner et al. (2013) argue that teacher educators rarely do so with pre-service teachers and expecting such talk to safely take place in schools is unlikely. And yet, it is needed for the well-being of our most marginalized young people especially.

I would add that in addition to the important work of learning culturally responsive pedagogical methods there is a need for teachers to continuously reflect on and evaluate their own belief systems about why they are teaching, particularly in school systems that predominantly serve marginalized young people. Without this self-awareness the systemic barriers to healthy and productive teacher-student relationships will likely suppress attempts to be in authentic relationships with students.

This approach to educator development likely has many criticisms. One concern is that an overemphasis on the reflexivity needed to practice intentionality in relationships can lead practitioners to focus more on their own experiences than how those experiences are influencing their work. To strike a balance, Finlay reminds us, "the self is exploited only while to do so remains purposeful" (2002, p. 542). A larger concern is the political nature of intentional relationships with students. As stated, to know students is to draw on their cultural referents. For marginalized youth, this means acknowledging and teaching the ways in which their various identities and communities have been oppressed, both historically and contemporarily. In fact, in the field of education broadly, many have questioned the political intent of teaching about race or racism in schools or questioned the academic rigor of culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy. These two criticisms in particular have been voiced by many conservative analysts and politicians. This critique, however, assumes a neutrality to what is currently taught in schools. While not as vocal or explicitly opposed to this type of work, the actions of many districts across the nation suggest they

are not ready to take on race, cultural responsiveness, and the intentionality they provide for teacher-student relationships.

Despite potential reluctance or outright resistance, across the country many educators (if not whole systems) are beginning to understand the potential for teacher-student relationships in working with marginalized student populations. Grounding care and a sense of responsibility and support in one's commitment to building on what marginalized youth bring to school, as opposed to a mindset intent on teaching in spite of what young people bring to school, can lead to teacher-student relationships that create a sense of possibility and agency for young people. In the words of Ella Baker, "I believe in the right of people to expect those who are older, those who claim to have had more experience, to help them grow" (Payne, 2007, p. 67).

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Chapter 5: Conclusion

A great deal of research uses a deficit lens and is oriented toward understanding and explaining failure among African American boys. Often this research informs policy, and at a more basic level, practitioners' and societal beliefs about this population (Fordham and Ogbu's "acting white" theory is a prime example). Research, policy, and programs geared toward improving outcomes for this population that are disconnected from African American boys' perceptions and meaning making of their experiences are not likely to have the intended impact (Noguera, 2009). This dissertation is an exploratory attempt to produce research findings that inform practice and policy using an asset-based lens, foregrounding factors that lead to success from the perspective of African American boys using both quantitative and qualitative data sources.

Academic engagement is viewed as a precursor to academic success (i.e. grades). It is defined as students' "active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, focused interactions" with school environments (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). The quantitative portion of this dissertation uses the concept of academic engagement to situate African American boys' perceptions within the larger field's conversation about what drives success. Academic engagement is difficult to succinctly define leading to vague terminology in the field. Fortunately, the data source used for this study (the UChicago Consortium's My Voice, My School survey) conceptualizes academic engagement similarly to the constructs identified in Frederick et al.'s (2004) overview of the concept, which is the most widely used articulation of academic engagement.

Empirical research on academic engagement typically falls into one of three categories - research that examines the influence of students' individual and demographic characteristics on engagement, classroom influence, and school level characteristics influencing engagement. Very little research on academic engagement has approached this concept with the intention of

disaggregating race and gender to understand how various subgroups think about engagement. In this respect, the current study adds to the field. I use Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) to understand the differential effect individual characteristics, classrooms, and school characteristics have on academic engagement for Black, Latinx, and white racial-gender subgroups of students in one cohort of Chicago Public Schools freshmen. I asked four questions in this study: *1) Do classroom contexts predict academic engagement? 2) Is this relationship different for African American boys than other racial-gender subgroups? 3) And do classroom contexts predict academic engagement, above and beyond, individual background characteristics and school-level characteristics? 4) Similarly, is this relationship different for African American boys than other racial-gender subgroups?* With few exceptions, I find that African American boys' perceptions of academic engagement and the factors that influence these perceptions do not differ significantly from those of other racial-gender subgroups of students. While the perceptions of all other subgroups in each of the models looking at differences between racial-gender subgroups lead them to have higher perceptions of engagement, the difference is only significant for African American girls. Further research is needed to understand if this can be attributed to high levels of segregation in Chicago schools in the context of broader gender differences in student academic engagement (Wang, 2010; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2005; Saunders, 2004; Marks, 2000). Much like the consistent gender difference in grades (Roderick, 2006), where all girls have approximately .2 higher GPA than boys of their same race, it may be that girls have higher levels of engagement even within the same schools. The findings also show that students' perceptions of teacher-led classroom factors predict academic engagement more so than individual or school-level characteristics. This is interesting as much of the research has looked at student demographic characteristics and school

level characteristics, but perhaps unsurprising, as classrooms are the most proximate space to academic interactions.

At the time of data collection, the quantitative and qualitative interests of this dissertation were pursued in parallel. While the quantitative work was grounded in a specific concept to be explored, the qualitative data collection was open-ended and primarily driven by Spencer's (1995, 1997, 2004) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST). PVEST was used to understand how a group of African American boys in one neighborhood high school in Chicago broadly interpreted the experiences they had their freshman year in high school. What stood out in the data collection were the stories boys relied on to make meaning of academic success. To dig deeper into this theme, I asked, *How do Black boys make sense of academic success following the transition to high school?*

This question, situated in PVEST, guided my analysis. Relationships with adults (parents and teachers) stood out as factors influencing the boys ideas about academic success. Most families conveyed the message that because they were young Black men in the United States, the boys needed to be more concerned about and committed to their academic performance. For these families, performance determines success, and success determines life opportunities. Given that I was attuned to asset-based framing for this dissertation study, it was surprising to find that only one family framed the need to succeed positively. Malcolm's belief that he was "becoming a part of history" was in contrast to almost all the other boys whose families had told them they must be better than the stereotypes of Black men. This is an interesting find and worth exploring further in research about African American families' meaning making of success.

Their relationships with teachers and how boys in this study made meaning of academic success are likely the most important findings of this study. Early on, the adult behaviors boys

described as most helpful in navigating high school were found in 9th grade teachers who supported boys similar to the ways their 8th grade teachers had supported them. These supports included more explicit and intentional ways of interacting with students in terms of guidance on how to do schoolwork and in being relatable to students as an adult. Unfortunately, these supports were not consistent for any one boy in the study. The notion of "doing one's best" also stood out because every boy talked about it and almost every boy seemed to struggle with how to do their best. What boys know is that they have received the message that high school will be hard, what they find out is that the work itself is not necessarily difficult, but keeping up with the work and navigating teacher expectations is difficult. Eccles et al.'s (1993) notion of "developmental mismatch" in transitions is evident in these two findings: boys do not perceive teacher support in a way that will help them understand how to be successful as high school students. Future study should explore more deeply how teacher actions and the messages they convey to students are received and internalized by students, and in turn, how they affect student academic behaviors.

Taken together, the findings of the quantitative and qualitative portions of this dissertation led to a larger question that was peripheral at the start of the dissertation process - what about teachers? While it is evident that teachers are central to the success of students (and my observation of teachers' interactions with African American boys in my previous professional experience was an important motivating factor for the genesis of this dissertation), the intention had not been to study teachers. Thus, there was no data collection plan in place focused on teachers. The student-focused research conducted for this dissertation, as well as, my role in the growing education research sub-field of research-practice partnerships (Coburn & Penuel, 2016) informed the final piece of this dissertation and is the area where my future empirical research interests lie.

To grapple with the role of teachers in the particular experience of African American boys (but illuminating for other marginalized groups), I draw on literature that conceptualizes teacher-student relationships and what positive relationships with adults can offer to students. Understanding what positive teacher-student relationships can offer to young people, I then draw on a line of education literature - teacher expectations - and its larger antecedent - stereotypes about African American boys and black masculinity - to conceptualize what serves as a roadblock to teacher-student relationships between these two groups. Lastly, I look at the literature on teacher care and sense of responsibility and support to understand what opportunities exist to strengthen teacher-student relationships.

I conclude by suggesting an approach to teacher development that asks educators to explicitly challenge the threats to teacher-student relationships found in a white supremacy culture. I suggest a reflective and reflexive professional development approach to support teachers in building relationships with marginalized student populations: intentionality, or critically understanding one's self and role as a teacher of marginalized students, in particular, but of all students, in general. I share an approach to professional development called "inside-out" work that moves educators toward the level of intentionality needed to know students and foster positive relationships that humanize students. This type of development work asks teachers (and other adults in schools) to constantly reflect on their commitment to cultivating and building on the rich knowledge and lived experiences marginalized youth possess through care and support and responsibility for those young people. Through various projects in my current work I am looking at how adults create learning environments and structure supports that view marginalized youth as assets rather than problems to fix.

New Directions

Given that our system is educating young people it was not designed to serve, we must understand and know students in new ways, in ways that do not start from a deficit perspective (Paris, 2019). Pedro Noguera (2009) has referred to Black boys as the "canaries in the coal mine." Meaning that they are often the first indication that there is a problem with the system as a whole. While changes in teacher mindsets and actions toward African American boys are absolutely needed, systemic change is required to improve outcomes for this and other marginalized populations.

At a broader field level, there is a need for more research that engages student and family voice and understands youth from an asset-based perspective (Ginwright, 2018; Ginwright & James, 2002). Researchers need to ask themselves in what ways they are using notions of objectivity to perpetuate deficit perspectives of marginalized people. Teacher preparation programs can also make changes that center racial, gender, and linguistic justice and child and adolescent development. Organizations outside of traditional university-based colleges of education are increasingly pushing these programs to both diversify their recruiting practice and incorporate an equity lens into their training. One such program, Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity, posits a framework designed "to build equity-oriented educator preparation programs" through practice-based approaches, inclusive pedagogy, equitable experiences, intersectional content, data empowerment, and communities of learners (www.educatordiversity.org). At the district and school level, districts are beginning to experiment with identifying district-wide equity strategies. While these efforts are new and have yet to show any outcomes, districts like Chicago Public Schools are acknowledging and taking steps to act upon this "moral imperative" ("CPS Adds New Equity Officer Position in Effort to Tackle 'Opportunity Gap,'" www.wttw.com, 5.18.2018).

Test scores, grades, on-track status, socioeconomic status, and discipline rates are not enough to tell the story Black boys have to tell. Without their voices and perspectives, we cannot fully understand the lived experiences - hopes, dreams, fears, aspirations, frustrations, courage - of African American boys. Without their conceptualization of success, Jason Reynolds' (2018) words ring true:

In fact,
I have yet to see
my own dream
made tangible.

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