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  This qualitative research study examines the Successful Team Aimed at Reaching Student Success (STARSS) mentoring program at Excellence High School (EHS). The STARSS mentoring program purports to address the academic, social, and emotional needs of African American young men at EHS. Hence, the purpose of this study is to settle my curiosity by examining the effectiveness of the STARSS mentoring program through the lens of the participants in the program over a six-year period, 2012–2018. The participants in STARSS consist of African American young men as well as teachers, counselors, and administrators, who actively serve as mentors and student advocates. In the research, the focus is on current and former teachers and administrators and former graduates from EHS who actively participated in the STARSS mentoring program. I define active participation as mentors, advocates, and mentees who participated in the activities and learning opportunities designed for the program. The activities and learning opportunities include, but were not limited to, the HistoryMakers celebration at the beginning of each program year, Breakfast for Champions, the STARSS Honors Academy, one-on-one mentor and mentee sessions, field trips, professional development opportunities, etc.

  To determine the effectiveness of the program, I gravitate towards Effectiveness Theory, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) to frame the study and to answer the research questions that ground the study. I use Participatory Action Research (PAR) to frame the methodology, and I use semi-structured interviews

as a research method to collect the data. I place these theories and research methods within the same space and within the same context as specialty programs. I define specialty programs as any program that intentionally works to enhance the academic, social, or emotional well-being of school-aged children outside of their classroom spaces (e.g., comprehensive school counseling programs). I reference comprehensive school counseling programs as an example, due to the commitment of the advisors in STARSS willingness to address the mentees' social and emotional well-being. I also reference these programs due to the advisors' commitment to bring attention to the idea of culturally relevant learning, inequitable school practices, and their commitment to disrupt social practices that marginalize and dehumanize students within our spaces of learning. Therefore, the benefits of this study could potentially add to critical discourse pertaining to education in the United States, best practices for implementing and examining school-based mentoring programs, and the academic achievement and social and emotional growth of African American males.

THE PRAXIS OF DISRUPTING EDUCATIONAL SPACES: CULTURALLY

RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN A SCHOOL-BASED

MENTORING PROGRAM

by

Elbert Hawkins, III

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Educational policy and reform in the United States is often complicated and controversial in theory and in practice. At the turn of the 21st Century, efforts to reform education and reauthorize the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act was a challenge for both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama. In 2002, President Bush signed into law No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to address an educational system that was presumably in crisis and in 2015 President Obama responded to this crisis as well and signed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law to transform a system predicated on a "one size fits all" model (USDOE, 2017). In the new revised bill, President Obama called for an inclusive and collaborative approach to education, which promotes educating the whole child.

In theory, this means educators would nurture not only their students' intellect, but they would nurture their human needs, their positionality, and their differences. Educating students in 21st Century schools from a holistic perspective, requires teachers, parents, students, administrators, counselors, and people who live in their respective communities to collectively transform the previous "one size fits all" way of thinking. To help lead this effort, professional school counselors who adhere to policies and practices in comprehensive school counseling programs have been charged by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) to initiate and support programs that advocate

for and encourage culturally relevant education and teacher, student, and community engagement (Gibbons et al., 2010).

However, in many 21st Century schools, professional school counselors coexist within an educational system that implements school policy and school reform that often reduces their role to testing coordinators, schedulers, and doers of ambiguous job duties that often takes them away from students and collaborative initiatives with other educators as well as other school counselors. Despite the attempts to reduce their professional role, many school counselors work to advance the profession and role by advocating for a definitive role—a role that positions them to focus on their students holistically and a role that enables them to bridge the idea of family, school, and community together to transform the scope of 21st Century schools.

Recently, abandoning their traditional role as "guidance" counselors, professional school counselors are beginning to reconcile traditional norms within their position. Professional school counselors are merging traditional counseling practices such as consultation, coordinating, and counseling, with contemporary practices that promote culturally relevant learning, acceptance, and collaborative learning. Additionally, they disaggregate data that brings attention to marginalized student populations, educate teachers on the importance of social and emotional learning, and lead professional development seminars and workshops that promote inclusiveness and equitable school practices within school and classroom spaces. In many schools throughout the United States, school counselors have taken on these duties and responsibilities to educate our students holistically due to social and cultural shifts that are taking place in the world.

As a professional school counselor, I am working towards the transformational change of 21st Century schools by embodying a role that sustains the existence of all students, their families, and community, specifically African American young men. Bridgeland and Bruce (2011) in the *National Survey of School Counselors: Counseling at a crossroads,* reports that more than half of the nation's counselors believe that our educational system needs a significant transformation and overhaul, especially in urban public schools identified as minority schools with high socioeconomic disparities (p. 18). Acknowledging the statement and responding to a need for action, many professional school counselors throughout the United States are beginning to transform our educational system by creating and advocating for programs that promote culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogy. The renewed focus and vision of comprehensive counseling programs enables counselors to lead initiatives that not only transforms 21st Century schools but, transforms the climate and culture within our respective learning spaces. Additionally, the renewed focus and vision enables us to critique and evaluate the effectiveness of best practices in theory and in practice, which helps to hone my work and practice as a professional school counselor.

Problem Statement

Over the past fourteen years, I have engaged in an educational system that purports to educate all students with equitable and equal practices, to meet students where they are, and to prepare students to enter and to engage in a world that accepts and values individualism, character, and a strong work ethic. Yet, on a national scale many students of color, specifically African American boys and young men are significantly trailing

their peers academically, socially, and emotionally. This is one of the reasons for my work and desire to research, establish, and engage in mentoring, mentorship, and school based mentoring programs. Based on my experience, many African American boys and young men are still marginalized, made to feel invisible, and in many ways they are left to personal vices to make sense of their social and emotional well-being. Gregory et al. assert, "Boys of color face harsh penalties in school, underperform academically, and graduate at lower rates than their White male counterparts" (as cited in Howard, 2013, p. 58). In addition, the literature reveals that young men of color, specifically African American boys and young men, are less likely to engage in their academic studies, are less likely to be placed in academically gifted or advanced placement programs, but more likely to be placed in programs for Exceptional Children due to social and cultural behaviors that are misunderstood or academic assessments that historically warrant social and cultural biases.

Many educators are working to address the crisis but often, they are working in isolation to dismantle the academic and opportunity gap between African American boys and young men and their White peers. I find this problematic. Like many professionals who work in human services, school counselors have been conditioned to work in isolation. However, some are beginning to realize—to work in isolation is not an effective or efficient way to work in a world that is constantly changing (Paisley & McMahon, 2001, p. 110). I speculate, working in isolation is a matter of position and choice, which creates boundaries and exudes a gatekeeper's persona that hinders progressive work. In many educational systems, throughout the United States, educators

are defined by their position (e.g., administrator, teacher, counselor, etc.), which unintentionally compartmentalizes, separates, and isolates us from each other and the collective whole. The compartmentalization of our position is detrimental to education, particularly the position of school counselors and teachers who spend a significant amount of time during the school day talking with and instructing students. As a school counselor, I address students from a physiological position. Meaning, I give my undivided attention to student's social, emotional, and academic needs. I also give credence to their family, community, and to the intersections that define who they are.

Conversely, many teachers address students from a cognitive position—primarily to focus on and to assess their students' ability to think through course content and core curriculum standards, while helping them to rationalize and connect course content to the existing world. To do this work, teachers often ignore or do not make time for the social and emotional needs of their students in the classroom. It is my experience that when teachers solely address education from a cognitive perspective often, they reject the need and desire to establish and nurture a healthy teacher and student relationship, which is also problematic. Education in practice is a relational performance that should engage all students, especially African American males. However, this performance is often overshadowed by stereotypes and a narrative that positions them as less than or as the nation's problem, which compromises the formation of any healthy classroom relationship not only with their teachers but among themselves and their peers. Harmon and Ford (2010) suggest, "African American male students typically find themselves to be 'cultural misfits' in the schools they predominantly attend. Nowhere is this difference

in culture more apparent than in the way teachers interact and develop relationships with African American male students" (p. 10). In other words, this social crisis warrants our attention and if teachers want to become intentional about disrupting the current narrative regarding African American males in their spaces—developing an authentic relationship with them will need to become a vital part of their practice.

Lastly, another concern with teachers solely educating from a cognitive perspective is the idea of social and emotional learning becomes intolerable in many classroom spaces. When most teachers are faced with highly charged social and emotional behaviors from students in the classroom, they are quick to respond to students with "go see your counselor" with hopes that upon their return students will be "fixed" and able to learn without further interruptions. Teachers who take the time to empathize, understand, and attempt to work through these highly charged behaviors, often compromise their position and place student learning and student achievement at risk. Please note, I am not placing any accusation on teachers or school counselors, but on an educational system that does not allow for critical and collaborative work. In addition, the argument is not to have teachers embody the role and responsibilities of school counselors or vice versa, however, the goal is to suspend our position in hopes of finding a way to collaborate and combine efforts to engage our students in a classroom and school environment that is constructive and conducive to a holistic style of learning.

The idea of wholeness is a part of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and in practice educating from a position of wholeness can positively influence student learning, particularly learning for African American boys and young men, their perception of

school, and experiences in school. To accomplish a sense of wholeness, developing the

skills to collaborate will become critical, as educators work to eliminate the social crisis

affecting African American males in our schools. Gibbons et al. (2010), state that

collaboration is a vital part when educating towards a sense of wholeness, especially

since our students face many barriers that affect their social, emotional, and physical

development (p. 4) However, many educators continue to work in isolation with hopes of

subverting the status quo. As an educator, who is a part of the minority, I realize to work

in isolation is ineffective and not an efficient way to address the social crisis affecting

African American males within education throughout the United States. Hence, the

reason why, I am engaged in critical work that solicits the help of the collective body—a

work that will enable the collective body to transform a world that is currently predicated

on divisiveness.

Purpose and Understanding of Key Terms and Concepts

Over the past several years, I have had the privilege of being actively engaged in

the Successful Team Aimed at Reaching Student Success (STARSS) mentoring program

for African American young men at Excellence High School (EHS). The program

purports to address the academic, social, and emotional needs of African American young

men, while simultaneously exposing them to enrichment and leadership opportunities in

and outside of the classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this research study is to settle my

curiosity by examining the effectiveness of the STARSS mentoring program at EHS. To

assist me with the research, I use Hall's definition of mentoring to capture the essence of

the STARSS program. Hall (2006) defines mentoring as the relationship where a person

with greater experience assists another with less. This relationship is generally viewed as a one-on-one interaction of unrelated (non-blood relation) individuals of different ages networking on a regular basis (p. 9). In practice and based on my experience, both as a mentor and protégé, I add to Hall's definition and I position mentoring as an effective, life changing, and reciprocal experience.

Like most mentoring relationships, people who are engaged in the practice of mentoring through structured programs look for ways to determine the effectiveness of their relationship either quantitatively or qualitatively. As one of the advisors to the STARSS program, it is important that we document the effectiveness of the program that includes its challenges, successes, and best practices with hopes of understanding the nuances in school-based mentoring programs, mentoring, and mentorship. In the research, I bring attention to the idea of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogy within our classroom spaces and in comprehensive counseling programs. I suggest that classroom teachers are not the only educators who use transformative styles of pedagogy to influence curriculum and instruction, classroom and school aesthetics, and language—professional school counselors are heavily engaged in critical work as well.

Research Methods and Research Questions

Taking a qualitative approach, I used participatory action research (PAR) to frame the methodology and I used semi-structured interviews as a research method to collect the data. I interviewed several program participants who were actively involved and engaged in the STARSS mentoring program as a mentor or a mentee. Throughout the

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program, active involvement and engagement consisted of participants who checked in with their respective mentor or mentee, participated in the arranged activities and events sponsored by the STARSS program, or mentors and mentees who were present physically and mentally with one another to address aspects of school and education in relation to their lives. In addition, they created a social network and presence enabling them to take a sense of ownership of their environment and spaces in which learning was taking place.

The grounding questions for this research are:

1. How did mentors in the Successful Team Aimed at Reaching Student Success (STARSS) mentoring program for African American young men at Excellence High School transform or enhance the quality of life for the program participants?

2. How did mentors in the STARSS mentoring program for African American young men influence the climate and culture within Excellence High School?

3. Lastly, what did the young men involved in the STARSS mentoring program learn from their program experience?

The questions sparked my curiosity after speaking with several colleagues inquiring about the current direction, purpose, and visibility of the program and student participants. I also began to think of ways to subvert the dominant narrative of African American young men in 21st Century schools. The answers to these questions are essential to the growth and longevity of the STARSS mentoring program, which could potentially add to the larger conversation of school-based mentoring programs and its best practices. In addition, these answers could help to address the academic, social, and

emotional needs of African American young men at EHS. Lastly, the answers to these questions may help to answer other pressing questions that involve student achievement, student opportunity, and African American young men in education throughout the United States.

Theoretical Perspective

Theory is essential to all styles of research. Theory in practice enables people to work through their assumptions or generalizations—relying on philosophy and scientific principles to answer complex questions. Therefore, to frame the research, I draw from the following theoretical perspectives: Effectiveness Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. In practice, these theories have characteristics that may help to answer the research questions and could possibly contribute to best practices regarding school-based mentoring programs throughout the United States. First, I begin with the idea of effective-ness, a concept that in theory means to produce and to cause a desired or intended result—a result that leaves a strong or favorable impression on people, and lastly, in practice, it is a concept that is equipped for action (Brott, 2006, p. 179). To understand this concept, I examine the idea of effectiveness through the lens school effectiveness and when it is in practice, ideally, educators work collaboratively to transform the climate and culture within their spaces of learning and support the interests of all students. Creemers and Reezigt (1999) explain Effectiveness Theory is measured when "the quality of instruction at the classroom level is determined by three components: the curriculum, the grouping procedures which are applied, and the behavior of the teacher" (p. 33). Other characteristics that define the idea of effectiveness are the

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idea of high expectations, open communication, accountability, a balanced curriculum, and well-prepared teachers. However, effectiveness theory does not explicitly acknowledge social and cultural differences and biases that disrupt the performance of effective learning.

Secondly, I draw from Critical Race Theory (CRT), in practice educators create spaces for people to tell their story through an authentic and unfiltered lens. Ladson-Billings (1998) asserts, "It departs from mainstream legal scholarship by sometimes employing storytelling. It critiques liberalism and argues that Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation" (p.7). In addition, CRT enables educators to create discourse that addresses and critiques the inequitable practices in education, and it enables people to examine the interaction between citizenship and race. Lastly, CRT in practice, educators purport that race is a social construction, race is infused in all social aspects of human existence, and race-based ideology is woven into aspects of human culture (Ortiz & Jani, 2010, p. 176).

Thirdly, I draw from Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) which enables educators to infuse culturally relevant materials into the curriculum and their instruction to prepare students for a multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual world. Another characteristic of CRP is that teachers work to affirm their students' cultural identity, while encouraging them to question the social, political, and economic inequities and disparities in their institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Educators who practice CRP disrupt the dominant narrative that is embedded in the climate and culture of many schools and classroom spaces. Including CRP in the same space as Effectiveness Theory

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and CRT enabled me to make sense of the STARSS mentoring program and coupled with PAR and the participants' interviews enabled me to make sense of the mentees' academic achievement. Therefore, I argue that the application of these theories can contribute to best practices regarding the creation and implementation of school-based mentoring programs. I also argue that the application of these theories can contribute to the academic and social and emotional development of African American males in our schools and classroom spaces.

Understanding Theoretical Intersections

Research is an extension of questions and thoughts grounded in theory and like people, research relies on the parts of its body to make sense of the whole. In research, theory is a part of its body that enables researchers to make sense of their thoughts and the world in which they live. As previously mentioned, I made sense of the STARSS program and supported the research by using Effectiveness Theory, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) to influence the research. In the theoretical perspective section, I explained their meaning however, in this section I examine the way theorists use them to frame research and the way in which each one of them intersects with each other. Purposefully, I pair these theories together to help illuminate the relevance and humanness in mentoring programs, specifically school-based mentoring programs that advocates for students of color. To begin with, I focus on the idea of effectiveness, often in practice, it is used to quantify the quality of instruction by way of three components, the curriculum, group procedures and the way in which they are applied, and the behavior of the instructor. In relation to research, the idea of

effectiveness lies in frontal view for many educators, especially educators at EHS—as they have become emboldened to question the effectiveness and the relevance of the STARSS mentoring program and the influence the program has on the school and its participants.

The idea of effectiveness within many institutions, specifically education, requires people to ask and answer one simple question—does *it* work? Wrigley (2003) states,

> It grew in a context of the neoliberal educational market and consumer choice, alongside the (neoconservative) public denigration of anything mildly progressive in schools; like ivy on the tree, it inhabits a dense forest of high stakes testing, league tables, accountability, teacher competences, performance pay, performance review, an increasing emphasis on education as the production of human capital, curricula imposed from above, and, under New Labour, government-imposed teaching methods, the restoration of selection and accelerating privatization. (p. 92)

In many ways, the idea of effectiveness creates an educational environment predicated on instant gratification, inequitable school and classroom practices, and the need to aggressively compete without any regard for other people. In practice, many educators use effectiveness to assert a style of authority that perpetuates a "top-down" approach to teaching, which threatens the idea of democracy, equity, and shared experiences within our spaces of learning.

Wrigley (2003) states, "Effectiveness discursively underpins the structures and cultures of an entire education system. We are looking, in effect, at a discursive practice connecting research paradigm, policy, and ideology" (p. 91). In other words, the idea of effectiveness used in this way gives us a false sense of not only academic success, but a false sense of the way people define success socially and culturally within their

respective spaces. Conversely, the idea of effectiveness does hold educators accountable and holds them to high expectations that all school-aged children should be privileged to receive. Therefore, to help frame the research, I reimage and interpret the idea effectiveness and I attempt to use it in a democratic, equitable, and qualifying way to honor and value the STARSS participants and the program.

Another theory I draw from to help frame and situate the various nuances within the research is CRT. CRT purports to acknowledge and address race as a social construct and as an inevitable aspect of our human existence that perpetuates the idea of superior and inferior social and cultural norms. With CRT, educators suspend the dominant narrative and reject universal truths in relation to race, culture, and human identity. In addition, CRT enables us to think democratically, critically, and consciously about the world in which we live. Ortiz and Jani (2010) assert, "As a critical theory, it promotes a structural approach to addressing the problems of a diverse society, rather than merely expanding access to existing resources and opportunities" (p. 176). For example, CRT gives people an opportunity to tell and to permeate their narrative into spaces that adds to and breathes life into a collective narrative.

Tyron Howard, a scholar and researcher who conducted a qualitative study with African American young men on the west coast of the United States in 2005–2006 using counter storytelling, a method that negates the dominant culture's narrative and perception of African American young men in public education (Howard, 2008, p. 967). Howard documented alarming school experiences from ten young men enrolled in urban and suburban schools that negatively affected their school experience. These young men

experienced a school and classroom climate that dehumanized and marginalized them, insulted their intelligence, and lowered and diminished their expectations. The narratives of the young men suggested, their school officials' perception of them was skewed and biased, which resulted in unjust and unfair treatment within their school and classroom spaces as they worked to claim a sense of agency. The young men participating in Howard's work helped to illustrate that when educators employ pedagogy structured around counter storytelling, they subvert an educational system predicated on deficit thinking and dismantle narratives and a mindset that often leads to the miseducation of African American young men.

Lastly, I draw from CRP to help frame and situate the research as well. With CRP, educators empower, inspire, and help to shape the identity of all students, specifically students of color. In practice, CRP enables educators to actively engage and invest in the lives of their students. Based on the literature, when educators do not appreciate the life and culture of their students, specifically African American boys and young men, they compromise their effectiveness to teach them (Kunjufu, 2013, p. 55). In addition, CRP gives students an opportunity to intentionally use their culture to explore, create, and critically engage in discourse—creating an environment where knowledge is created and shared to make sense of a world that is constantly in transition (Milner, 2010, p. 69). Language is essential to culture and as a part of CRP, language enables students to create meaningful discourse that confronts inequitable practices that often supports dominant cultural norms. I recall the work of Hyu-Yong Park, a researcher at the University of Wisconsin who studied the hidden power relations in language and

discourse between second generation students from Korean immigrant families and their teachers.

In his research, Park (2008) focused on classroom language, discourse, and power structures in his students' school and society that influenced their academic performance. The structure, content, and implementation of the curriculum Americanized the students' language, heritage, and culture, which gave them reason to attend weekend Korean schools to preserve their culture. In addition, he focused on teacher discourse and pedagogy and the differences between the two. Throughout the research, Park used CRP to unpack the concept of language for second language learners who lived in complex heterogeneous communities. Giroux explains,

> In a heterogeneous society, there exists unequal power relationships between genders, races, classes, and ethnic groups. In this situation, linguistic minorities who are learning a dominant language are never free from these unequal relations of power because language teaching and learning is not a neutral practice but a highly political one. (as cited in Park, 2008, p. 4)

Like many of the students Park worked with, many African American young men feel trapped between two worlds as well and regardless of their academic level and the way they perform in school the pressure to conform to dominant norms isolates them.

However, educators like Christopher Emdin use CRP to alleviate this sense of isolation. He uses CRP in the form of cogenerative dialogue (cogens), which enables him to create a learning environment that encourages critical thought and intellectual agency. Emdin (2008) suggests cogens is a form of discourse between two people who come together to discuss social fields that have and will continue to have a transformative

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impact on our existence and collective experiences (p. 774). In addition, Emdin uses

cogenerative dialogue to relinquish traditional styles of authority, to learn from his

students, and to engage in a world that recognizes human differences as an extension of a

collective body. Emdin (2016) refers to cogens as "simple conversations between

teachers and students with the goal of co-creating/generating plans of action to improve

the classroom" (Chapter 4, para. 6). With cogens, Emdin and his students systematically

examined the cultural divide while addressing course content from a political, economic,

and social perspective.

The works of Howard, Park, and Emdin respond to a social crisis that often leaves

many students of color falling victim to inequitable school practices throughout the

United States. Importantly, their work suggests that our current educational system needs

an overhaul, which can no longer operate from a "one size fits all" model to educate 21st

Century students, especially African American males. Their work is influential, and it

intersects with the tenets that drive Critical Race Theory and Culturally Relevant

Pedagogy—tenets like democracy, culture, accountability, and claiming agency and

identity, has influenced not only pedagogy but the students they passionately work with.

With an exception to the practice of accountability, Effectiveness Theory in practice

currently does not share the other characteristics like democracy, culture, agency, and

identity, but with time and space the idea of effectiveness has potential to sustain these

qualities in education as well. Like professional school counselors, Howard, Park, and

Emdin understand that students do matter, which allowed them to address and respond to

inequitable school practices that isolated and marginalized them within their spaces of learning.

The use of CRT and CRP incorporated into their work illustrates authentic and meaningful work in which I attempt to employ in my research with the addition of Effectiveness Theory. I admit, these theories do not fit neatly into a box however, embracing these theories will enable me to frame my research in a way to help educators and students, specifically African American young men reconcile their differences with themselves and education. With these theories, I hope to illustrate a school-based mentoring program that matters—a concept school counselors employ that reminds educators human existence and experiences are an essential part of the world in which we live (Curry & Bickmore, 2012, p. 111). In practice, educators who create school and classroom environments that exude the idea of mattering help to undermine educational systems that are destructive and strips away a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging for many students within our educational systems.

Research Significance

Currently, the narrative of many African American young men reveals that they are trailing behind in all academic categories in many schools throughout the United States. Socially and emotionally, many African American young men are invisible and disconnected from the traditional school process. Garibaldi (2007) states, "Unfortunately, the situation has not changed considerably in the first decade of the 21st century even though Black males have made modest educational progress over the last two decades" (p. 324). Currently, the literature exposes an educational system that reflects the criminal

justice system in the United States—a system that unapologetically exploits, marginalizes, and dehumanizes African American young men. Thomas (2013) asserts, "Evidence of targeting school age children to direct them to juvenile detention, termed school-to-prison pipeline refers to a national trend in which school policies and practices are increasingly resulting in criminalizing students rather than educating them" (p. 181). As a professional school counselor, I can attest to the criminalization of African American young men, from the over policing of their bodies, their style of dress, and language, to how they choose to engage within a system of whiteness—many African American young men find themselves trapped in an unjust educational conundrum that will never end well for them.

Due to this educational crisis, many African American young men have become desensitized to inequitable school practices and the violent acts made against their bodies. African American young men are emotionally detached as they begin to normalize the idea of their disposability and inferiority to the dominant gaze. Perhaps, recent violent acts against black and brown bodies in the United States is evidence that many, if not all, African American young men no longer see themselves as valuable and honorable people who can contribute to a world that is constantly changing. This crisis in education and in 21st Century schools reminds me of the concept of freedom—educators who are not grounded in the idea of wholeness and equitable educational practices that promote student achievement lack education and a sense of wholeness for themselves. Therefore, their sense of freedom and the performance of being free is distorted and "null in void." Hence, the significance of the research study—no one can claim to possess an adequate

and equitable education without the respect, honor, value, and love for the whole collective body.

Summary

Within education, it is important for educators to understand and embody their role as professionals but not at the expense of our students, their education, their families, and their communities. Currently, professional school counselors are charged with the responsibility to help transform an educational system predicated on inequitable school practices that dehumanize and marginalize many students, specifically African American males. As mentioned, education in the United States needs an overhaul, which will require the help of all prescribed positions working collaboratively to transform its current state. Therefore, as educators, we can no longer work in isolation to resolve an educational crisis that currently disrupts our schools, classroom spaces, and inadequately prepares our students for citizenship. The literature reveals that African American males trail their White peers in almost every academic category, and they are overly represented in the juvenile and criminal justice system at disproportionate rates, which is problematic.

Currently, the state of education in the United States has me questioning the authenticity of educators and their classroom practices, specifically in relation to African American males. In practice, mentoring, particularly school-based mentoring, may be a solution to resolving this crisis in education. Educators who create spaces to mentor African American males do so to transform their quality of life, academic achievement, and sense of cultural and social consciousness. Throughout the research, in theory and in practice, I claim that when practitioners apply Effectiveness Theory, CRT, and CRP to

implement school-based mentoring programs—in practice these theories enhance their opportunities to positively influence mentoring practices and mentorship regarding African American males, their academic achievement, and social and emotional well-being. Therefore, with the research, I hope to engage in and add to critical discourse that questions the way we educate students of color, specifically African American males within our schools and classroom spaces.

Moving forward throughout the dissertation, in Chapter II, the literature review, I examine the idea of mentoring, what it is, how it works, the idea of resistant masculinity and mentoring, and the idea of mentoring for social change. In Chapter III, I explore the idea of theory and its transition into practice, further examining the idea of effectiveness, CRT, and CRP, comprehensive school counseling programs, and school-based mentoring programs. The makeup of Chapter IV further examines the methodology and the research method I used to collect the data. In Chapter V, I discuss the results and analyze the methods I used to answer the research questions, I create new meaning by way of the participants' voices, and I introduce the themes that emerged. Lastly, in Chapter VI, I initiate a discussion, highlight research implications, recommendations, and offer my conclusion.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before entering high school, I recall a conversation with my mother about my social and academic intentions and my level of focus towards high school. I remember being excited during the conversation as I told my mother that I was going to be involved and engaged in as many academic and social activities in high school that was possible. My mother listened to me with excitement and with every thought and idea she encouraged me—insisting that whatever I set my mind to with persistence and a strong work ethic I would accomplish every goal. However, when my freshman year of high school began, I realized that I could not accomplish my goals alone. Throughout my freshman year, I observed and became immersed in the climate and culture at my school, which enabled me to connect with my teachers and peers as I identified clubs and organizations of interest. Quickly, I gravitated towards the performing arts and student government. In these spaces, I found my voice, which allowed me to disrupt messages and images that painted young men of color, specifically African American young men as less than.

During my tenure in high school, participating in these extracurricular activities also allowed me to empathize with the human condition and engage in social justice activities that raised my level of consciousness towards many social crises such as poverty, violence, racism, and inequitable practices within my school. To assist me

during this period of growth, I was fortunate to have an advisor, Mrs. AH from the Student Government Association at my high school to serve as my mentor. Our relationship was informal, meaning I was not assigned to her, I intentionally chose her. I gravitated towards her wit, strength, and her love for children, education, and community. Lastly, I gravitated towards her love for blackness and the culture. Mrs. AH is an activist, a conscientious and righteous woman who, at the time, did not mind disrupting spaces to bring attention to inequitable school practices, the poor, the oppressed, and an educational system that left many students of color behind. Born during a time when separate was not equal and Jim Crow Laws, white supremacy, and a war that left black and brown bodies gasping for air—she learned to cast her burdens aside as she stood on the shoulders of people who embodied hope, a sense of righteousness, and unshakable faith.

As my mentor, Mrs. AH modeled a life that captured the essence of critical thought, love for the collective, and activism. Mrs. AH was my Socrates, and I, her Plato; she was my Benjamin E. Mays, and I, her Martin Luther King, Jr.; she was my Beauford Delaney, and I, her James Baldwin. And like many teacher and pupil and mentor and mentee relationships, Mrs. AH showed me light. Like Baldwin (1997) asserts in reference to his mentor, "I learned about light—the light in everything, in every surface, and in everyone," (p. 88). To place his words into context, Baldwin is speaking of the way the light is positioned in one of Delaney's paintings. However, through Baldwin's eyes, Delaney is light that illuminates all things in existence and all things within his reach. Like Delaney, Mrs. AH taught me to appreciate and accept the beauty in all creation,

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especially in relation to human existence. Mrs. AH was the epitome of mentorship—her guidance and commitment to education and to young people helped to disrupt an educational system predicated on inequitable school practices and the dehumanization of students of color, especially the dehumanization of African American boys and young men. In this chapter, I examine the idea of mentoring and suggests that when in practice, mentoring can be a viable and effective performance to disrupt the status quo within our schools and classroom spaces. In addition, I examine its meaning and how mentoring works, the idea of resistant masculinity and mentoring, and the idea of mentoring to initiate and promote social change.

Mentoring as a Verb

The idea of people who take their time to teach and to impart knowledge for the purpose of producing knowledge and creating new meaning with a person they deem as their "special" is not a new phenomenon. The idea of a mentor in practice has produced some of the most influential people throughout our history. People like William James, Benjamin E. Mays, and Beauford Delaney, mentored and influenced the lives of W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Baldwin and not only were they critical and conscientious thinkers, they were advocates, activists, and agents for social change. Per Baker and Maguire (2005), the word *mentor* derives from the character "Mentor" in Homer's epic tale *The Odyssey* (p. 2). In *The Odyssey*, Mentor serves as a teacher and counselor to Odysseus and later to his son, Telemachus, during his father's absence. From the beginning, Mentor teaches and models a life before Telemachus that right his wrongs and directs his path towards a sense of righteousness (Odell, 1990, pp. 7–8).

Mentor takes on the responsibility to nurture Telemachus while addressing the human condition and the world in which they lived.

The word mentor is someone with greater experience or wisdom than their mentee and someone who offers guidance or instruction that is intended to facilitate growth and development of the mentee, (Dubois & Karcher 2005, p. 3). Baker and Maguire (2005) define mentor as "a relationship between an older, more experienced adult and an unrelated, younger protégé—a relationship in which the adult provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the protégé" (p. 2). In addition, Hall (2006) defines mentor as "a person with greater experience who assists another with less. This relationship is generally viewed as a one-on-one interaction of unrelated (non-blood relation) individuals of different ages networking on a regular basis" (p. 9). From experience, the term is also an embodiment of effective, life changing, and reciprocal experiences—reciprocal in terms of culture and practice, particularly in relation to addressing the needs of African American males. In practice, reciprocal performances in the mentoring relationship gives stakeholders an opportunity to share the commitment, responsibility, and accomplishment in knowing lives are being transformed.

To validate and justify my rationale for adding to Hall's definition, I examined a case study that focused on the *UMOJA Network for Young Men*, a high school-based mentoring program that is situated in two alternative schools in New York City. *UMOJA*, meaning unity in Kiswahili, authenticates the program, its direction, and its purpose, which is to mentor African American and Latino young men holistically while working

towards academic success and towards social and emotional health (Jackson et al., 2014,

p. 404). Established in 2004, *UMOJA* is an existing mentoring program that serves young

men who are behind in their graduation requirements and who find navigating high

school challenging. *UMOJA's* creator and mentor states,

> Many of these young men come to the program underperforming in crucial
> literacy skills; thus, one of the most popular reasons for wanting to join the group
> for academic assistance. Another common reason given for wanting to join
> UMOJA is the desire to find other males in the school who share participants'
> various social interests. (p. 398)

Therefore, in 2009–2010 and 2010–2011 academic school year, Jackson et al., the

principal investigators for the study, focused on the mentor and mentee relationship and

their experiences and the various features that contributed to the students' academic,

social, and emotional growth.

To settle their curiosity and to answer the research questions, they documented

the success of the mentoring program through the lens' of the young men. Jackson et al.

take this approach asserting, "The literature does not fully address the mentoring

relationship from the students' perspectives in ways that account for how they understand

the nature of mentoring and the programs they attend" (p. 398). Taking this approach,

they were able to reveal an ethos of care and reciprocal performances, specifically

reciprocal performances in love that strengthened the mentor and mentee bond. In the

study, reciprocal love is defined as,

> An understanding that a love for the self is inextricably linked to a love for others;
> an acknowledgment that good ground produces good fruit, which in turn produces
> good seed to be sown in good ground in an endless cycle of regeneration. (p. 399)

The principal investigators use the analogy of planting seeds to illustrate Lisa Delpit's lecture entitled *Educators as 'Seed People' Growing a New Future*, which suggests educators have a responsibility to plant the seed in our students, nurture and cultivate the seed, and wait patiently in hopes that our students will plant more seeds to enlighten a new generation (Jackson et al., 2014, p. 395). However, taking the idea of seed planting a step further, I wish to teach our students that once the seed is planted it is to their benefit to water, weed, and in some cases replant or repot the seed when necessary to garner longevity and success in life.

In their study, the participants consisted of 14 African American and Latino young men who attended school within the Sunset Hills Academy Network, an alternative school setting that gives students an opportunity to graduate from high school. To collect their data, the principal investigators used several methods such as field notes, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews to answer their research questions. Additionally, to analyze their findings, they used a phenomenological approach to explore the participants' experiences, which revealed the following themes: (a) brotherhood and collective responsibility, (b) trust and open dialogue, and lastly, (c) a broadened sense of capacity and personal aspirations, which for them these themes fell within a framework of reciprocal love (p. 404).

Similar to the principal investigators in *UMOJA*, I take an approach that intentionally used the mentees' interviews in the STARSS program to help tell a comprehensive story. Their interviews coupled with the mentors' interviews illustrated and revealed reciprocal performances that are captured through active listening,

discourse, and personal experiences. Therefore, by structuring school-based mentoring programs within a social context of one-to-one mentoring, the idea of effectiveness, and reciprocal performances, educators may subvert a narrative that historically frames African American males as lesser than, devalues their sense of humanness, and understanding of who they truly are.

The idea of mentoring and formal mentoring programs, as we have come to know, emerged and began to take shape in the United States at the start of the 20th Century. At the time, much of its practice gained momentum in the North and in major cities that experienced economic growth, social and cultural mobility, and a sense of prosperity due to an increase in business and in industry. Positioned as a tenet within human services, mentoring and many mentoring programs responded to the human condition and people in need while addressing institutions that systematically threatened their political, economic, and social well-being. In theory, mentoring offered all people in need a sense of stability and sustainability within their prescribed spaces. However, in practice, mentoring did not include all people and in many ways became a selective practice that did not give many people access to the "American Dream" and reinforced systems predicated on discriminatory agendas.

In many, if not all states and cities across the United States, the "new" America excluded people of color, immigrants, the working poor, and the poor from this period of expansion. As a result, many institutions and social systems suffered, especially the institution of education. From the infrastructure of rural neighborhoods and busy streets—to unequal funding for schools, economic demands, and the need to work, many

school-aged children found their lives and education in crisis. Per Baker and Maguire (2005), "The result was the child-saving movement, a national commitment to protect children from the ravages of poverty, exploitation, and neglect" (p. 4). Ideally, this movement would educate, protect, and save the children from social malaise, a life of delinquency, and for some, time served in the juvenile justice system.

The child-saving movement justified a need for mentors and mentoring programs, and a need for social transformation for children exhibiting delinquent behavior. At the time, people of influence and affluence positioned themselves as mentors and advocates for mentoring programs. They engaged and involved themselves in the movement to address the basic human needs of children that went unmet. However, due to its perception, the child-saving movement did not garner national attention until the film *When a Feller Needs a Friend* featuring Jackie Cooper debuted in 1932. In the film, Jackie Cooper portrayed a physically disabled young boy traumatized and victimized by other people due to his condition, which complicated his existence and challenged his worldview. The film ignited a sense of emotion in many people, which compelled them to respond and act in a way that confronted the human condition and helped people in need. In addition, the film helped to reframe and relieve the movement from an image many people thought to be self-aggrandizing, pretentious, and an image that fed the ego of people in a position of class and social status (pp. 6–7).

After the film debuted, people living in the United States began to witness the emergence of formal mentoring. Formal mentoring consists of people within an organization or program who intentionally pair a protégé or a person with less experience

with a mentor, someone with wisdom and more experience than the former. As people did this without argument or question to its purpose, formal mentoring in practice became a part of a social movement that focused on the human condition of poor families and children in the dominant culture (p. 8). Unfortunately, the exclusion of poor families and children of color, specifically African American children was not a concern of those people taking up such a just cause for humanity. During this time, even one of the nation's oldest and largest mentoring programs, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, did not find value in advocating for African American families and their children. However, African American families and their children leaned on one another and formed natural or informal mentoring relationships to sustain their sense of identity, home, family, and community (p. 8). These natural mentoring relationships enabled African American children to rely on their uncles, aunts, grandparents, teachers, pastors, and other members within the community to shape and mode their existence and experiences.

Unlike formal mentoring, the idea of natural mentoring during this era enabled people of color, specifically African Americans to preserve their sense of identity, traditions, culture, and connectedness to a body of people shunned by the dominant culture. Currently, the idea of natural mentoring serves as a basis for many school-based mentoring programs that involve African Americans, specifically African American males throughout the United States. The idea of natural mentoring enables people to connect and explore commonalities readily and willingly with others who genuinely find an interest in their well-being. This led me to question, how does mentoring work, specifically natural mentoring regarding African American males within a formal space

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like EHS? In addition, this led me to question its effectiveness regrading them as well.

Historically, people mentored to address the human condition, guide, uplift, model

rational behavior, and empower people, particularly youth, to work towards success and

excellence. Rhodes (2005) states,

> Children and adolescents with natural and volunteer mentors have been found to be less likely to take part in delinquent problem behaviors and more likely to graduate from high school, both of which suggest the presence of a more positive future orientation in the identities of mentored youth. (p. 7)

In theory and practice, mentors who address mentoring from a natural position help to

develop meaningful and lasting relationships that influence not only the mentee but

influences their family, community, and the world in which they live. Additionally, based

on my experience, mentoring in this way, particularly with African American young men,

enables the mentor and mentee to think critically and consciously about our social norms,

social systems, and institutions that continue to systematically marginalize and oppress

black and brown bodies.

To help settle my curiosity, I examined several school-based mentoring programs,

its effectiveness, and life changing approaches regarding young men of color, specifically

African American young men. I began with *The Brotherhood*, an afterschool-based

mentoring program that was established in 2004 by Shelby Wyatt, a professional school

counselor in an urban high school located in Chicago. In the program, she addresses the

academic and social disparities affecting African American young men. The program was

created to close the achievement gap due to the disproportionate number of African

American young men that appeared disengaged in their education (p. 463). Wyatt states,

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"Statistics from the Schott Educational Inequity Index (2006) indicate that nationally, 47% of African American males graduated from high school in 2006 but only 37% from Chicago public schools in the same year" (p. 463). She further reports that in comparison to other young men, 51% Latinos, 58% whites, and 76% Asians—African American young men graduated from Chicago Public schools at a rate of 39% before the age of 19 (p. 463).

Like many professional school counselors, Wyatt wanted to address this disparity and by creating the program she accomplished that through collaboration, student advocacy, and by giving her students access to leadership opportunities. Wyatt asserts, "Since manhood has been reported historically as a complex task for Black males it is imperative that their manhood is fostered at an early age by positive socializing agents and institutions" (p. 463). Hence, the reason for and creation of *The Brotherhood* mentoring program. I also would like to add, while it is important for them to establish a sense of manhood throughout these programs—it is as equally important for them to establish their meaning of manhood and masculinity. Therefore, to frame the program and her work, Wyatt uses a thirty week curriculum that follows the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) standards, Empowerment Theory, and the Nguzo Saba, the seven principles in Kiswahili, to support the young men.

This particular structure offered a unique approach, which enabled the mentors to accomplish the objectives within the program. Using the ASCA standards, Wyatt outlines and defines the knowledge, attitudes, and skills students should acquire while participating in a comprehensive counseling program. She also uses Empowerment

Theory in two ways: firstly, to increase personal, interpersonal, and political power so that families and communities can improve their current conditions. Secondly, to position professional school counselors to take an active role in promoting academic success for all students. Lastly, she uses Nguzo Saba, the seven principles, which are, Umoja (unity), Kujicihagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Niaa (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Inmani (faith). The Afrocentric principles served as a rite of passage for many of the young men in the program working towards social transformation and academic success, (Wyatt, 2009, p. 465).

During the fifth year of *The Brotherhood*, to determine its effectiveness, Wyatt documented the participants' grade point averages (GPA) before they enrolled into the program and after their exit. She also gave 36 participants a questionnaire to complete, which included some alumni members. The participants answered the following questions: (a) How often does/did the Brotherhood help you to understand the importance of academics to the real world; (b) How often does/did the Brotherhood help you to acquire the intrapersonal skills to respect yourself and others; and (c) How often does/did the Brotherhood help you to investigate the world of work in making career decisions? (p. 466). The participants' responses coupled with Wyatt's data analysis enabled her to conclude the study with positive results. After the study, she documented an increase in many of the participants' GPA and words of affirmation highlighting their appreciation for the program. However, Wyatt suggests the work needs to continue, which validates the need for more school-based mentoring programs. Wyatt (2009) states, "The findings

that there is a need to provide continuous academic, personal/social, and career development support to males through the use of mentoring groups" (p. 467). She also states that professional school counselors should regularly assess the needs, trends, and challenges of a comprehensive school counseling program to ensure their students have access to an equitable education (p. 469). Additionally, it is also to their benefit to create and implement programs that addresses inequitable school practices as well.

In addition to *The Brotherhood* mentoring program, I also examined Horace Hall's school-based mentoring program for African American and Latino young boys and men entitled *Respect, Excellence, Attitude, and Leadership (R.E.A.L.)*. Established after careful consideration in the 2000 academic school year in Chicago at Visions Charter School (VCS), *R.E.A.L.* was designed to address the academic achievement and life skills with young boys and young men from the ages of 11–18 years old. Additionally, their initial mission was to (a) develop positive academic, emotional, and intellectual growth through problem solving activities and classroom discussions, and (b) to expose youth to practical real life business skills through a process of researching, creating, and organizing an actual business (Horace, 2006, p. 73). Hall used two approaches to implement the program, which were a teamwork approach and a student-centered approach. These approaches enabled both adult mentors and mentees to collaborate, build relationships, and implement an effective business plan.

In the program, Hall did not explicitly mention a grounding theory however he gravitated towards The Act of Removal. Hall (2006) explains, "The Act of Removal gives mentors and educators the chance to transform hierarchical classrooms and

relationships into equitable learning communities, where youth and adults are positioned laterally" (p. 28). The Act of Removal reminds me of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy, which enables educators to give students an opportunity to experience and access curriculum that honors and values their existence, home, and community. Hall (2006) mentions, "Unfortunately, the present atmosphere in our public schools, where we find a majority of Latino and African American males, encapsulates students in an air devoid of self-knowledge, self-discovery, creativity, and care" (p. 58). Sharing his sentiments, many school systems throughout the United States, including the system I serve fail to see Latino and African American young boys and young men holistically, which suggests we need educational transformation and not educational reform. Educational reform enables educators to address and make changes to policy, but it neglects to make changes to their practice—educational transformation completely alters the generic construction of policy and practice to create a new image and a new mindset (personal communication, Anthony Graham, December 8, 2018).

During the initial program year, "The Pilot Run," the population at VCS consisted of 80% African American, 20% Latino, and 15% White (p. 67). Additionally, the faculty and staff makeup did not reflect the student population, which hindered many of the relationships between teachers and students, especially their relationships with male students. Hall (2006) mentions, "With respect to the racial disparity between students and staff, some teachers believed that their gender and ethnicity played a role in the classroom relationships that they had with many of their male students" (p. 67). As a result of this disparity, many of the teachers expressed the need for diversity among their

staff—thinking a diverse staff would perhaps give their students an opportunity to learn from people who looked like them, which in turn would perhaps translate into academic success. To further complicate matters, Hall and the other mentors faced some opposition from the principals, parents, and mentors regarding the program, its vision, and its participants. One of the major reasons for dissension was between Hall and the participants' parents over their first fundraiser, The REAL Deal Car Wash and whether or not the young men should be compensated for their time and labor. To say the least, *R.E.A.L.* in its inaugural year was a learning experience for all stakeholders, which warranted a shift in structure.

Like STARSS, after reflecting on the first year, Hall assessed the program and made some significant changes. Firstly, he created a space where the young men could express their social and emotional concerns and secondly, he used an art based curriculum to engage and encourage participants to express themselves (p. 81). Therefore, instead of focusing on entrepreneurship and a business plan, Hall proposed and implemented "REAL Voices" in the 2000–2001 academic school year. REAL Voices enabled the participants to creatively self-express and reflect on the complexity and challenges they faced in high school. His rationale was three-fold: (a) to engage the participants in collaboration and exploration, (b) to advance student creativity, individuality, and expression through the arts and critical education, and (c) to expose teachers, parents, school administrators, and the community at large to the unseen and unheard identities of a representative segment of society's young males of color (p. 83).

With this program shift, Hall received recommendations from teachers of many students who were specifically interested in the arts (e.g., visual, performing, and written expression). Due to this shift, the participants were excited to attend *R.E.A.L.* and looked forward to creating experiences that were tangible and authentic. Hall (2006) mentions, "By mid-November, I found students rushing to get to REAL meetings. A large majority of the boys could not wait to finish their writings or artwork and share them with the rest of the class" (p. 92). Many of the young boys and young men began to see the program as an outlet, a place for them to claim agency and lend their voices to topical issues that influenced the human condition. Topical issues such as the idea of violence within their spaces, representation on social media and news mediums, crime statistics that inaccurately and disproportionately represented young boys and men of color (p. 93). By providing a space to discuss these issues and to creatively think through them, many of the mentees began to experience academic success. Hall (2006) states,

> Third-quarter grades revealed that just over fifty percent of the boys, in both the middle and high school, had made the honor roll with a B average. A majority of the boys achieving this feat, and who had C and D averages in previous quarters, were regularly attending REAL members. (p. 99)

The R.E.A.L. become their safe space and served as a catalyst for the mentors and mentees to build upon each other's strengths, connect in ways that were thought unimaginable, to hold each other accountable, and to build relationships. Mentoring is about relationships and until educators are in relationship with their students, especially African American and Latino boys and young men—to educate them, based on experience, will always present many challenges.

Another mentoring program I examined was *The Kuumba Group*, in Memphis. The program was not school based however the focus was on school aged children, their academic achievement, social and emotional development, and their mental health. Created out of a need to serve children holistically in the University of Memphis Relative Caregiver Program (RCP), *The Kuumba Group* served African American boys and young men who did not live with their biological parents but lived with relatives. Kuumba, meaning creativity in Kiswahili, was culturally centered with an emphasis on Afrocentric values particularly, spirituality and the promotion of harmony, balance, interconnectedness, and authenticity (Washington et al., 2006, p. 46). In theory and in practice, the Afrocentric approach did not align with religion but embraced a sense of spiritualness, which enabled the mentors to focus on their mentee and their family, community, and cultural strengths while infusing African tradition into their way of living. The uniqueness of the program garnered a sense of consciousness, respect, and reflection from its participants as they learned to value and honor their identity, become self-sufficient, and live in the present by acknowledging their past history.

The RCP is important to mention regarding *The Kuumba Group* due to the purpose of its program, which is to remove children from an abusive home environment and to purposely place them with a relative caregiver (i.e., biological grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, etc.). The literature reveals that many of the children assisted within the program went to live with relatives who were women, who lived in impoverished living conditions, and who did not have the presence of a male role model in the home. However, despite their human condition the goal of the program was to keep families

together and connected and to keep children from entering foster care, (p.47). As a result, *The Kuumba Group* was established in 2003 by Dr. Gregory Washington at the UTK College of Social Work. His goal was to serve African American boys and young men ages 9–17 with a mission to counteract the social and cultural images perpetuated in the dominant culture of this particular group. Washington et al. (2006) assert,

> The Kuumba group was designed to act as a cultural inoculation to counteract the values associated with self-destructive behavior and identities such as those promoted in the popular media. These include values promoted by a "gangster" lifestyle and prison culture. (p. 47)

The focus of the mentoring group was also designed to eradicate deficit thinking while promoting growth and change through therapeutic measures.

In the program, the creators take on mentoring through a team centered approach. They describe team mentoring in terms of having two, three, or four mentoring teams, (p. 50). Traditionally, many mentoring programs use a framework of one-to-one mentoring, which does yield positive results. However, *The Kuumba Group* takes the approach of teams to expose its participants to various personalities, experiences, lessons, strengths, and failures from more than one adult. The group also takes on a gender and race specific approach. The program creators insisted on having the mentors be African American adult men. Washington et al. (2006) assert,

> There is not a lot of research on gender and racially specific approaches but it was proposed that group mentors involved with African-American male youth in a culturally centered group mentoring approach should predominantly, if not exclusively, be composed of African-American males that include social workers, educators, mental health practitioners, college students, relatives and other community elders. (p. 52)

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The approach was important to them due to the idea that many African American boys and young men who live in spaces without the consistent presence of a male role model, specifically the presence of African American adult men.

With the implementation of the mentoring program, the creator and mentors were able to serve twelve African American boys, ages 9–17 from Memphis from April 2004 to May 2005. Like *The Brotherhood* mentoring program, *The Kuumba Group* framed its program activities and interventions around the Nguzo Saba, the Seven Principles. Using the principles, enabled the mentors and mentees to self-reflect, appreciate the intersections that made their identity, culture, and it enabled them to embody nonviolent conflict resolution practices. The program proved to be a success, which validates the need for more mentoring programs that specifically address the social and emotional and mental health needs of our students, particularly African American boys and young men. Washington et al. (2006) mention, "However, given the resistant nature of the social problems of African-American youth in poverty, the potential benefit of the intervention warrants strategic replication" (p. 64). Meaning, mentoring and mentorship is needed as an intervention to help guide African American boys and young men and to garner academic achievement.

Lastly, I examine and give reverence to the program creators of *Project 2000*, a school-based mentoring program in Washington, D.C. that focused on preventing early academic failure among African American youth, both males and females. However, for the purpose of my research, I focus on the influence the program had on African American boys and young men. Holland (1996) asserts, "Common knowledge too is the

fact that a large percentage of the urban schools these boys attend fail to provide them

with the educational tools they will need to survive in the technologically oriented 21st

century" (p. 315). Meaning, educators have a responsibility to educate African American

boys and young men and equip them with tools and resources that not only equips them

to survive but to live comfortably in a transformative world. To accomplish this goal, the

focus and objective of the program was to expose African American boys and young men

to educators who looked like them and who shared social and cultural interests.

Additionally, the mission was to educate their teachers who were mostly women on the

nuances of educating and preparing them for authentic life experiences.

The program began in the Fall of 1988 when the graduating Class of 2000 entered

into the first grade. At the elementary school level, the focus was to engage them in the

importance of listening, developing self-control, responsibility, commitment, and work

ethic (p. 317). To assist with the day-to-day operations, African American men were

recruited from all walks of life, which included men from the community, the local

university, and several civic organizations. They offered their support by volunteering,

positioning themselves as mentors and role models, and by assisting teachers and

students on field trips. Holland asserts,

> Based on PROJECT 2000's conviction that there is nothing a primary-grade boy
> is being taught that a literate adult male cannot help him learn, truck drivers,
> doctors, lawyers, electricians, and plumbers alike were enlisted to provide Stanton
> School's young Black boys with alternative role models to the men they typically
> encountered in their non-school environment. (p. 317)

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In other words, it was essential for the young boys to witness and work with African American men who were diverse and who represented various facets of blackness. The program coordinators were intentional and purposeful in making sure that the 53 first graders had an opportunity to access the resources and education their mentors and school offered.

As the young boys transitioned from fifth to sixth grade, the program coordinators knew *Project 2000* had to continue due to the developmental and social challenges of preadolescence. Holland states, "We were increasingly aware that these boys were entering a period in their lives when the negative aspects of their non-school environment would impinge upon them with even greater urgency" (p. 317). Therefore, in 1994 Holland and the other program coordinators shifted from a school-based mentoring program to a community-based mentoring program that served school-age children. During that year, they also established the program as a nonprofit organization, established a board of directors, obtained tax exemption status, and conducted a full scale Project 2000 summer program before the Class of 2000 cohort entered into the seventh grade (p. 318). Additionally, a doctoral student from Howard University conducted a study that revealed 75 fifth grade students from a comparable elementary school did not do as well in subject areas such as mathematics, reading, language arts, and spelling, and they scored significantly lower on their standardized tests in comparison to the participants in *Project 2000* who had access to external resources that aided in their academic success (p. 319). The program changes coupled with quantitative and qualitative results, enabled the coordinators in Project 2000, Inc. to give their attention

exclusively to program operations and to African American boys and young men in the Washington D.C. area in grades seven through twelve.

The theory behind the program was not explicitly mentioned however, fragments of Critical Race Theory, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and Afrocentric Theory were visible. Throughout the duration of the program, the participants' home, family, and community played an essential role not only towards the development of the program but towards the development and transformation of its male participants. The program creators intentionally solicited the assistants of African American adult men from their community to position and assert themselves in the schools and partner not only with the program participants but partner and model academic and social skills to teachers, ensuring the success of each participant. Holland (1996) states, "The tools that will allow these boys to look beyond the now and expand their vision of the future lies within the African American community, working and partnering with concerned citizens in other communities" (p. 321). Looking beyond the now to expand their vision became an essential tenet within the program as the mentors worked to sustain and protect the bodies of African Americans boys and young men from debilitating life experiences.

Since its inception, mentoring in theory and in practice has required action and intentional movement. From Mentor in *The Odyssey* to the mentors and mentoring programs that helped to shape the culture of the 20th Century and are currently shaping the culture—mentors and mentoring programs address many social disparities in pursuit of education, social justice, and social transformation. As I examined school-based mentoring programs like The Umoja Network for Young Men, The Brotherhood, REAL,

The Kuumba Group, and Project 2000, school-based mentoring programs for students of color, specifically African American boys and young men, shared many commonalities. To begin with, the programs focused on preserving their participants' sense of pride in family and community while also working to transform their mindset about school and their education.

Another commonality was the need to infuse the idea of home, family, and community into their educational spaces of learning, which valued and honored their presence and position. By doing this, the creators of each program garnered a sense of trust, respect, and comradery from participants, especially the boys and young men they personally served. The last commonality I noticed within each program was the idea of masculinity, which they positioned in the peripheral as a subliminal theme. In many ways, like education, the idea of masculinity needs an overhaul and redefining in relation to African American boys and young men. Without addressing masculinity explicitly, the creators of each program concluded their work was effective and successful. The data showed a decrease in discipline referrals while making strides to improve academic achievement. In addition, the data showed the urgency and necessity of school-based mentoring programs and the need for consistent and intentional work to transform the lives of African American males.

The Idea of Resistant Masculinity and Mentoring

When people speak of transformation, particularly social transformation, the idea is to change the mindset of a few to reach many. The idea of social transformation is complex and not an easy feat for the people involved. While examining the praxis of

school-based mentoring in the five mentoring programs previously mentioned in this

chapter, I noticed the idea of masculinity in the peripheral as a subliminal theme. While

the mentors in each program intentionally worked to transform the mindset of African

American boys and young men in relation to education and their future—a person would

have to infer the transformation in their behavior from boys to mature and productive

young men would be a by-product of their work. In other words, the boys and young men

in each program experienced positive male role modeling from African American men

within their school, from business and industry, and their community. Yet, the idea of

manhood and masculinity was often "just" modeled and not the focus or a part of the

program's model.

The idea of resistant masculinity is the rebellious performances from African

American men fighting against their oppressors for freedom, (Dancy, 2013, p. 8). Dancy

best explains resistant masculinity through the lens of Fredrick Douglas as he recounts

the two-hour brawl with his overseer,

> The fight with the slave overseer…rekindled in my breast the smoldering embers
> of liberty. It brought up my Baltimore dreams and revived a sense of my own
> manhood. I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before—I was a
> man now. (p.8)

Historically, the idea of resistant masculinity evolved from what Dancy describes as Nat

Turner syndrome. Nat Turner's hatred toward an oppressive institution that enabled

people to kidnap, enslave, dehumanize, and destroy families caused him to violently fight

for the idea of freedom (p. 8). African American men positioned behind the line of fire

fighting for freedom and to protect their families was not by happenstance or an

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uncommon feat. hooks explains, "Enslaved African American men were socialized during slavery by Whites to believe that they should endeavor to become family patriarchs. Family patriarchs were those who were free and who provided for and protected women and children" (as cited in Dancy, 2013, p. 11).

In other words, African American men equated violent performances and supremacy over others, particularly women, with freedom, chivalry, and manhood. To embody this idea of masculinity meant many African American men abandoned and rejected African tradition and the idea of manhood and masculinity that once left them whole—enabling them to live with a sense of purpose, respect, and honor. Prior to being kidnapped Africans, many African men defined manhood and masculinity as responsibility for self and for others who possessed a natural regard for their family, community, and culture. However, colonizers brutally stripped this away from them for fear of retaliation towards an institution predicated on preserving white supremacy. The result of their actions left many African American men with a false sense of consciousness and a lack of regard for women, their family, community, culture, and identity.

Throughout history, the psychological effects from the institution of slavery in many ways still have many African American men in a state of psychological bondage in relation to the idea of masculinity. Currently, the way in which many African American men choose to fight for freedom is through violence, oppressive acts against women, embodying gender norms that caters to and mirrors the dominant narrative, through class, position and status, which weakens the collective. Mankowski and Maton (2010) define

masculinity as "a static, biologically based individual personality trait, then more commonly as a social role and most recently as a dynamic, socially constructed and institutionally backed form of power, independent of an individual's sex" (p. 73). Juxtapose to African tradition and masculinity, here, the idea of masculinity is based on the individual and not the collective body. In addition, masculinity is described as a static and singular performance, a by-product of a man's environment, the image or appearance he creates, and his ability to gain access to power and wealth (p. 74).

Needless to say, and I argue, this idea of masculinity currently gives African American boys and young men a false sense of masculinity, and in many ways, it gives them a false sense of hope. Many African American boys and young men in our schools have been conditioned and socialized to embody masculinity in this way, which is problematic and detrimental to their existence. Kivel asserts,

> By fulfilling the social expectations for the male role, men exercise power over women and other men who are not able to or choose not to enact hegemonic masculinity. Men use power and control over themselves to fulfill these expectations and against other boys and men to enforce the expectations. (as cited in Mankowski & Maton, 2010, p. 76)

Therefore, the idea of masculinity as African American boys and young men know and experience needs a transformation. To transform the current ideology of masculinity, people, especially African American men, will need to shift the way in which they think and experience manhood. By definition, manhood is a part of the male process within human development, which means with time and maturity young boys become men. Based on my experience, the process is not static or singular—the process is influenced

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by the human condition, parents (biological or not), their environment, culture, and society. However, the influence of hegemonic and patriarchal practices taints the process, which often leaves young boys with a false sense of manhood and a skewed view of masculinity.

McFarland (2013) states, "Hegemonic masculinity in U.S. culture is a limiting component to gender construction characterized by authority, control, independence, heterosexuality, aggressiveness, and violence" (p. 176). In other words, the way in which we (collective we) choose to define and experience masculinity limits and stunts the growth of men—not only as men but as human beings as well. Unfortunately, African American men in the United States never had the privilege to define and embody a sense of manhood and masculinity for themselves, not even under the gaze of hegemony and patriarchy, due to systematic oppression, dehumanization, and racist practices at the hands of white supremist. McFarland asserts, "Racial oppression prevents black men from fully embracing the privileges of hegemonic masculinity. This limitation can result in preventing black men from experiencing full personhood, personal competence, and humanity" (p. 178). Therefore, many African American men have adapted to the "phallic norm" or what bell hooks refers to as life threatening patriarchal practices that manifests through violent and hyper-sexed performances (as cited in McFarland, 2013, p. 178).

Due to this embodied experience of the "phallic norm," African American boys and young men have enabled the dominant culture to capitalize on its meaning. Resulting in, a narrative that perpetuates and justifies the inferiority of African American boys and young men. The dominant culture often shares this narrative with images that depicts

them as uneducated, aggressive, hyper sexed, and misogynistic brutes that need taming

and direction. Unfortunately, many educators in the United States have this narrative

etched in their thoughts and minds, which permeates throughout their schools and

classroom spaces. Brown and Kraehe (2011) mention,

> How visual culture represents the Black male speaks to the way dominant,
> socially mainstream discourses construct and imagine him. When these
> constructions travel globally, they frame how one makes sense of what it means to
> be a Black male. These frames discursively and materially fasten a narrative of
> Black masculinity that informs social responses to him (e.g. policy; media
> representations) and opportunities made available to him in society and in school.
> (p. 75)

Therefore, to resist this false sense of masculinity and to combat its social challenges, I

argue educators and mentors in school-based mentoring programs should explicitly

address and redefine masculinity in relation to African American boys and young men.

With the use of school-based mentoring programs educators and mentors can rewrite and

reframe the negative narrative and images portrayed and exploited throughout dominant

culture. Currently, in some colleges and university spaces, educators explicitly address

the current narrative by creating spaces to provide critical discourse around the idea of

Blackness, Black maleness, and masculinity through unconventional ways, like

television, film, and music. Therefore, I question, how can school-based mentoring

programs use unconventional ways to add to the conversation?

At the University of Texas at Austin, educators in the Department of Curriculum

and Instruction used the critically acclaimed Home Box Office (HBO) series *The Wire* to

deconstruct, dispel stereotypes and myths, and to create critical discourse around

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Blackness, Black maleness, and masculinity. Using *The Wire* as an educational tool,

enabled teacher educators within the program to witness the complexity of African

American men, the idea of manhood, and masculinity in a world that has historically

exploited and politicalized their bodies and existence. Brown and Kraehe (2011) assert,

> *The Wire* presents a complicated Black masculinity that defies easy
> categorization: i.e., moral/amoral, intelligent/streetwise ,wise/foolish,
> successful/unsuccessful. Simultaneously, Black manhood is situated in the context
> of larger political and socioeconomic factors, rather than only psychological
> influences that frame how Black males move in and across social worlds. (p. 85)

In addition, their analysis of the series enabled them to witness counter-story telling and

counter-tropes at its best. Emerging throughout the 20th Century, counter-tropes helps to

deconstruct, dispel stereotypes and myths, and in many ways, counter-tropes helps to

dismantle the culture of whiteness and white supremacy for a sense of true freedom (p.

79).

Another way in which educators used counter-tropes to rewrite and reframe the

narrative of African American men is through the artistry of rap and hip-hop culture. Rap,

I define as a vocal representation of language through rhyme, syncopated rhythms, and

performance, and hip-hop as a way of life. In many ways the culture of rap and hip-hop

depicts African American culture, manhood, and masculinity, which has become a vital

aspect to recent forms of pedagogy. From musical artists such as Tupac Shakur, Nas, Jay-

Z, and Common to J Cole and Kendrick Lamar—much of their style and use of music

subverts the status quo and resists and rejects the current narrative that smothers the

existence of African American men. Their music has also become a catalyst to redefine,

reframe, and create an alternative masculinity for men of color, specifically African American men. The idea of an alternative masculinity resists and rejects hegemony, white patriarchal norms, and violence, which currently defines masculinity for many African American men. McFarland (2013) states, "The deconstruction of hegemonic masculinities allows for resistance and enables the formation of a multidimensional and inclusive definition of masculinity" (p. 192). Therefore, to embody an alternative masculinity will require men of color, specifically African American men, to dismantle the current social system predicated on the dehumanization and demise of black and brown male bodies.

Currently, the way Dancy (2013) defines, and frames resistant masculinity gives African American men a false sense of freedom, manhood, and masculinity. The way he uses resistant masculinity perpetuates a social system constructed based on hegemony, patriarchy, and whiteness. Hence, the reason educators have begun to use unconventional ways like film and music to steer pedagogy towards an inclusive definition of masculinity as it relates to African American males. The idea of an alternative masculinity is a necessary undertaking for all educators. However, we cannot restrict its discourse to classroom lectures, textual analysis of literature, television, film, and certain genres of music. Contemplating, as an educator, mentor, protégé, and as an African American man, how does school-based mentoring programs fit into the paradigm of resistant masculinity? As educators move forward to transform our educational system, addressing the idea of masculinity in relation to African American boys and young men will be crucial to their human development and as we strive for social change.

Mentoring for Social Change

As I examine the idea of mentoring, specifically school-based mentoring programs and African American boys and young men, I realize not only is there a desire for them to mature into productive adult men and citizens—there is also a desire for them to become agents of change. Based on the literature and my experience as a mentor, mentors who engage and immerse themselves in mentorship do so not only to influence academic achievement and negative school behaviors, but they do the work as a commitment to the lives of black and brown male bodies and a commitment to social change. Statistically, African American boys and young men continue to trail their peers by drastic numbers. Per the Education Trust, 34% of African American boys and young men account for school suspensions with severe disciplinary policies. By the end of their high school career, African American boys' and young men's academic achievement equates to an eighth-grade achievement level of their White peers (as cited in Wyatt, 2009, p. 463). In addition, the Justice Policy Institute reports that 52% of African American boys and young men who departed from school prematurely had prison records by age thirty (p. 463). These staggering statistics are problematic, which affirms Marc Anthony Robinson's position and attitude towards school-based mentoring, as he advocates for less discipline and more mentors in relation to African American boys and young men.

In Robinson's (2018) article titled, "Black Boys Don't Need More Discipline, They Need Mentors," he chronicles his mentoring experience and relationship with Chris, his mentee, while bringing attention to the current academic crisis affecting many African

American boys and young men throughout our nation's schools and classroom spaces. His experience exposes a harsh reality—an educational system that struggles to educate African American boys and young men. Robinson (2018) states, "The Black student achievement gap is so bad that the local NAACP called it a state of emergency" (para. 2). Robinson goes on to mention the importance of addressing African American boys and young men holistically and the importance for educators to incorporate social and emotional learning into pedagogy. In addition, he explains the toxicity of masculinity and the way its meaning plays on the psyche of African American boys and young men. Robison asserts, "A toxic brand of masculinity that says boys and men are not supposed to exhibit emotion or feel pain has taken a hold in our society—it has a debilitating and often violent effect" (para. 7). Meaning, the way in which boys and young men learn and embody masculinity, specifically African American boys and young men, often compromise their quality of life and their approach to education with irrational thinking and impulsive behaviors.

Based on my experience, many African American young men have a false sense of masculinity rooted in the dominant idea of patriarchy and misogyny. Many of them define and embody the idea of masculinity through taking on the role and responsibility of an absentee father, an unhealthy relationship with their mothers, partners, and the way they embody the idea of the cool pose. Zamani-Gallahar and Callaway (2010) define the cool pose as "the adoption of a reactive masculine persona may induce anxiety regarding peer acceptance and group affiliations that are not supportive of a strong identification with academics" (p. 116). Like the phallic norm, a form of identity, the cool pose causes

many African American young men to withdraw from school and their academic studies—resulting in their underachievement in the classroom. In addition, the embodiment of the cool pose reinforces negative stereotypes and a narrative that positions African American young men as an inferior body to the dominant culture (p. 116). Like most behaviors, the cool pose and the performance of cool posing is socially learned behavior that disrupts and hinders African American boys and young men from experiencing true academic success within their spaces of learning.

As a professional school counselor, this performance often leaves them in a state of identity confusion, especially during adolescents, which prevents them from doing the work to develop an identity that is transparent and authentic. Erik Erikson, a psychologist, psychoanalyst, and theorist, through his work examines the idea of identity and its importance to human development. He purports once a person's identity is developed and established—people can create and engage in meaningful relationships (Bogat & Liang, 2005, p. 2). However, the idea of identity development has been complex and a challenge for many African Americans, specifically for African American men. I speculate the reason for this is at birth, an entire social system stripped them of their name, family, language, culture, and the idea of being human. This system redefines who they are on the sole basis of skin color, painting and situating them as being humanly, intellectually, and morally inferior to other people. To take it a step further, this system with purpose and with ease, intentionally tells and sells a narrative that distorts their image and personhood. Through literature, music, film, commercial advertisements, and sadly, through images and bodies who reflects them perpetuates a skewed narrative

people believe and accept as a cultural and social norm—including some African American men.

Historically, African American men have not had the privilege to authentically define, create, and develop an identity for themselves. Therefore, the idea of identity for many African American men, specifically during adolescents, take on characteristics like the cool pose to search for a sense of identity and to claim a sense of agency. In many ways, the idea of the cool pose enables them to disassociate with a culture of whiteness and resist an educational system predicated on inequitable school practices and practices that holds them to standards and expectations set forth by the dominant culture. However, to embody the cool pose is often at the expense of their education and future successes. Conversely, African American young men who choose not to take on the cool pose and for all intents and purposes, they gravitate towards and emulate school culture that favors a culture of whiteness—find their search for a sense of identity and agency challenging as well. Milner (2013) states, "The identity tensions that sometimes manifest among African American male students are a result of how they have been (and are still) categorized, named, and viewed in U.S. society and within the educational system" (p. 72).

In many schools throughout the United States, African American young boys and young men regardless if they are "at risk" or "gifted" find themselves in an identity conundrum without any hope of escape. I argue, our social systems, particularly our educational system, plays a major role in their state of identity confusion. The educational system, along with other systems, help to create and perpetuate a narrative that devalues and dehumanizes them—dismissing their sense of humanness. As a result,

many educators in our schools and spaces of learning view African American boys and

young men as being one in the same as they, simply refuse to acknowledge their

intelligence (regardless of the gifted label), experiences, differences, and the various

intersections that make them whole. Sadly, educators within our educational system paint

them with a broad stroke for fear of relationship and exploring the interactions that helps

to shape their identities. Robinson's work as a mentor, exposed this type of fear while

challenging the academic and social construct of his mentee's school. Robinson (2018)

states,

> Chris' school administrators were completely oblivious to his situation, most
> likely because he didn't trust them with the burden he was carrying. At his school,
> behavioral problems are addressed with office referrals, without the intent to
> address the heart of the matter. (para. 5)

Robinson goes on to mention the lack of trust students like Chris have towards

administrators, teachers, etc. was not solely their responsibility but a shared responsibility

with an educational system ill equipped to provide resources to fully educate all students,

especially students like Chris, (para. 5).

As a mentor, Robinson recognized the complexity and negligence of an

educational system that leaves black bodies behind academically and socially. In

addition, he recognized the over-policing of their bodies and punitive punishments as a

result of "frivolous" referrals was counterproductive and worked against social and

emotional learning and social transformation. Through his work, Robinson indirectly

addressed the need for educators to acknowledge the idea of intersectionality in relation

to African American boys and young men. He understands they are more than the color

of their skin and a jaded narrative that currently shapes their identity and who they are as people. Lastly, he reminds educators the idea of identity is not only for their students but for them as well. Milner (2013) asserts, "Teaching is identity work—intersections becoming aware of their own and their students' multiple and varied identities in order to enhance their classroom practices with African American male students" (p. 71). Therefore, as educators, paying attention to the intersections that helps to shape our identity is vital to our position in our schools, spaces of learning, and pedagogy and to some degree our intersections offer an explanation as to why we choose or choose not to humanize all students.

Currently, the idea of intersectionality is absent both in topic and in discourse within many classrooms. I argue the lack of attention we give to our intersections—including our students—sets us up for academic and social failure, especially regarding African American boys and young men. Howard (2013) asserts, "Educational research has often fallen short in examining race, class, gender intersections in schools and how they influence the schooling experiences of various populations" (p. 56). To advance school culture and the likability of school for African American boys and young men, providing a space for them to explore and question their identity and positionality will essentially ensure their academic and social success. I am reminded of James Baldwin's message to teachers—as he states,

> African American male students need to be provided space to examine the myths about them that are prevalent in society. Further, I am suggesting that African American male students deserve to be educated in social contexts that allow them to have a voice and perspective in the classroom and that also provide them with

the tools to critique and analyze what knowledge is according to whom and why. (as cited in Milner, 2013, p. 73)

In many ways, school-based mentoring programs like The Umoja Network for Young Men, The Brotherhood, REAL, The Kuumba Group, and Project 2000 have worked to transform the academic and social outcomes of many African American males they serve. By acknowledging the existence of intersections, the educators and mentors within these programs helped to shape their participants' sense of humanness and sense of identity to provide answers and solutions to a social crisis that affects us all within the collective.

As we examine the idea of mentoring for social change, as educators it is vital for us to raise the bar for African American males. Meaning, some educators still operate from a deficit mindset, thinking African American males cannot do or have trouble modeling social and cultural norms that the dominant culture deems appropriate and acceptable. Per the literature, educators low or lack of expectations for African American males in our schools and classroom spaces in many ways has contributed to their demise both academically and socially. Palmer and Maramba (2011) state, "In elementary and secondary education, teachers and counselors are far more likely to impose negative expectations upon African American men as it relates to attending college than their White counterparts" (p. 434). In many ways, this sign of neglect exposes their lack of responsibility and commitment to African American boys and young men, which negates the idea of "All children will learn because of what we do" (Kunjufu, 2013, p. 55). The idea of low or a lack of expectations in relation to their academic performance is often the result of deficit thinking and a belief in stereotypes that deem them uneducable,

dysfunctional, and dangerous. Educators who practice and believe in these stereotypes perpetuate their biases and a way of thinking that threatens the existence of African American boys and young men and education at its core. Palmer and Maramba (2011) explain, "Because perception creates reality, the misinformation conveyed in the depiction of African Americans is troublesome. Stereotypical presentations do a tremendous disservice to Blacks and the well-being of our society" (p. 445).

Using school-based mentoring to transform not only the scope of education but to transform the lives and human existence of African American boys and young men will require a shift in the way educators think, perform, and practice pedagogy. As educators, placing African American males in a position to acknowledge their intersections and recognize their potential through high expectations will be vital to educating them holistically. Carter (1998) recalls many influential messages Benjamin Mays blessed his students with; one message he recalls,

> Benjamin E. Mays reminded students: "They could be poor; they could be black; their ancestors may have been slaves; they may be segregated and discriminated against, but still be free in their minds and souls. No man is a slave until he accepts it in his mind…" (p. 201)

The relevance of Mays' words still resonates and, in many ways, currently defines the climate and culture of education regarding African American males and their education. Mays reminds us—in spite of the varied statistics and stereotypes that create deficit thinking and a skewed narrative, African American boys and young men can learn and will learn when they are honored and valued, and expectations are set high.

Summary

The idea of mentoring is action oriented, which requires cooperative and collaborative movement from all people engaged within the practice of mentorship. As a practice, it is possible mentoring dates back to 800 BC, with Mentor, a character in the epic poem *The Odyssey*, who positioned himself as a teacher, counselor, and confidant to Odysseus and later to his son Telemachus. Presented as an experienced and wise man, Mentor understood many aspects of life, which enabled him to teach, inspire, and empower other people to work towards a life filled with hope and promise. Surprisingly, throughout history the idea of Mentor and mentoring regarding young people, specifically African American boys and young men remains relevant in the 21st Century. Based on the literature, mentors positioned as experienced and wise people in formal and informal mentoring programs influence the lives of many school-aged children with hopes of transforming the human condition and the world in which they live.

Like many programs, formal and informal mentoring programs for school-aged children stems from a need—a need to address the human condition, social and economic disparities, and in many school-based mentoring programs the achievement and opportunity gap, and social and emotional needs that affects many students, especially African American males in their spaces of learning. However, while many school-based mentoring programs do admirable work regarding academic achievement and sustaining rational behavior—many school-based programs fail to address the idea of masculinity and a need to resist its current meaning. The idea of masculinity as presented in the 21st Century embodies a sense of patriarchy, misogyny, and power that historically African

American men have not been privileged to embody or claim. African American men know and understand the idea of masculinity through the lens of their oppressors, which often takes on a form of self-hate, hyper sexed performances, and violence. I argue, the way in which they currently understand and embody the idea of masculinity is false and debilitates their existence.

Therefore, to subvert the status quo, mentoring programs, specifically school-based mentoring programs for African American boys and young men have an opportunity to redefine masculinity and transform its meaning to reflect self-love, collectivism, and acceptance for all humankind. As an educator, I strive for social change and using school-based mentoring programs as a catalyst not only to transform education but to transform the lives of African American boys and young men is perhaps ideal to disrupting educational spaces. The idea of mentoring for social change is not a new phenomenon. However, to ensure some form of change or transformation, the need for educators to understand and embrace African American boys and young men, their intersections, and hold them to high expectations will be vital to their human development and existence.

CHAPTER III

THE TRANSITION OF THEORY INTO PRACTICE

As educators, we are often faced with the task of developing relationships with our students. In theory, many educators would agree that this is a vital part to obtaining academic achievement and success for many students. However, as an educator and professional school counselor, in practice this can be challenging and an overwhelming task once you take into consideration the counselor to student ratio. Based on my experience, to develop a solid and loving relationship with each student is a daunting task especially for teachers who must contend with pacing guides, the complexity of core academic standards, and time. Often, I hear concerns from teachers regarding relationship building with their students, with them eventually asking—when is an ideal time to forge an authentic relationship while balancing my responsibilities as a classroom teacher? My answer to them is never a definitive answer however, to be in an authentic relationship with our students will take time, patience, and intentional performances from educators, particularly at the high school level.

Within education, the idea of theory and practice remains complex and challenging for many educators, especially for educators committed to employing theory that is practical and makes sense within their spaces of learning. My experience has taught me, when educators employ theory that is practical and relevant, often they develop a positive regard for curriculum and instruction and the human condition. As a

school counselor, who regularly creates and implements academic and social and emotional programs, I rely on the practicality of theory or theories to strengthen and to help make sense of my practice, especially regarding the relationships I have established and sustained with many of my students. In this chapter, I further explore the idea of theory in practice through the lens of Effectiveness Theory, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). I unbracket the phenomenon of these theories in thought and closely examine them in practice. Additionally, I examine the idea of theory and practice in comprehensive school counseling programs and school-based mentoring programs within educational spaces throughout the United States. As an educator, I have learned that theory without a sense of practicality and a sense of relevance to the human condition—is just a bracketed or suspended thought.

Effectiveness, CRT, and CRP in Practice

When I hear the word effective or specifically, when people ask me was "it" effective? In that moment, I am hearing does "it" (whatever "it" is) work or did "it" work? I also begin to ask *why* or *what* caused "it" to work? The idea of effectiveness is to produce and to cause a desired or intended result—a result that leaves a strong or favorable impression on people, and lastly, in practice, it is a concept that is equipped for action (Brott 2006, p. 179). Often, regarding educational practices, the idea of effectiveness becomes the driving force for many educators who depend on its practice to determine whether or not "it" works or why "it" works, which commonly results in educators quantifying student data (e.g., student assessment scores and percentile ranges). Typically, educators quantify student data to determine the effectiveness of educational

programing, which does include some school-based mentoring programs, instruction, and

overall student learning. Gorard (2010) asserts students' assessment scores continues to

be one of the most popular factors when determining school success (p. 746). Meaning,

many school aged children are reduced to mere numbers on a data chart, which helps to

qualify the school and their experience as being high or low performing. To view

students this narrowly erases who they truly are, and it minimizes their human condition

to chance or happenstance failing to factor in the inequitable practices within our

institutions that leave many school aged children at a deficit.

 Morley and Rassool (1999) defines school effectiveness "as a notion based on

universal subject. Students, teachers and headteachers are a homogenized ungendered,

non-racialized or social classed group. They are disembodied players in a larger project"

(p. 122). In other words, the idea of school effectiveness becomes a concept that is

reduced to sameness, which typically quantifies bodies in a narrow and subjective

practice perpetuating the performance of deficit thinking among many educators,

especially regarding African American males. Angus suggests school effectiveness is

simply a model of input/output practices asserting,

> Family background, social class, any notion of context, are typically regarded as 'noise'—as outside background factors which must be controlled for and then stripped away so that the researcher can concentrate on the important domain of school factors…sexism, racism, and any other social and educational disadvantages and conflicts that surround and pervade schooling…may be remotely acknowledged, but they are sanitised in school effectiveness research, reduced to distant 'home background' and regarded merely as quality of input. (as cited in Morley & Rassool 1999, p. 122)

Twenty-one years later, in many schools throughout the United States and abroad, the human condition is still regulated to just mere noise regarding the idea of school effectiveness and the input/output value of school aged children. However, based on my experience, when our students' human condition is taken into consideration often it is seen through a sympathetic lens resulting in deficit thinking and low expectations of them, particularly students of color and those who are impoverished.

     As an educator, I have witnessed deficit thinking and performances that mirror low expectations firsthand not only from other educators but from many students, particularly African American males who have been conditioned to thinking that they cannot learn based on their home and community environment. I am convinced this mentality is due to the way many educators within our systems of schooling currently position and categorize school effectiveness. Arguably, the idea of school effectiveness and its scientific basis can be traced back to the well-known Coleman Report. Published in the 1960s, the Coleman Report challenged the status quo during a time of civil unrest and championed the idea that schools did matter (Scheerens 2015, p. 11). The report also revealed and positioned the idea of home and community as the sole determinate to academic achievement or failure regarding students of color, but the report failed to critically discuss the social and cultural disparities as an influential factor to the idea of achievement or failure (as cited in Eschmann & Payne, 2019, p. 55). Additionally, the idea of school effectiveness mirrors the idea of goal attainment, which simply means to put in the work. Scheerens (2015) explains,

The very concept of educational effectiveness is based on the rational idea of optimal goal attainment. The factors "that work" can be seen as an effective means to reach educational goals. This basic idea can be formalized by describing education as a contextualized production process, using the well-known context-input-process-output model, which is at the basis of the educational effectiveness models. (p. 17)

However, this idea of school effectiveness becomes problematic when educators solely use students' raw scores to measure, predict, and determine the success of course content knowledge as a means to qualify schools as either high or low performing. The idea also becomes problematic when educators do not honor or value the cultural and social experiences of their students when qualifying schools. Needless to say, the literature reveals that raw scores alone are not a true reflection of simply "putting" in the work.

Therefore, I argue for educators to rethink and reimagine the idea of school effectiveness in our learning spaces, particularly for African American males to explore experiential knowledge, without quantifying it, as another way to help determine school effectiveness. This is not to say, we need to completely abandon quantitative measures that help determine school effectiveness but including experiential knowledge from a student's home and community perhaps will grow them academically—thus expanding the idea of a high performing school. My engagement and participation with the young men in the Successful Team Aimed at Reaching Student Success (STARSS) mentoring program enabled me to rethink and reimagine the idea of school effectiveness regarding our schools and classroom spaces. Their stories, language, and criticalness of the world allowed me to question school effectiveness and examine the oppressive and power dynamics that is embodied in its practice.

To echo Gorard (2010), "School effectiveness is associated with a narrow understanding of what education is for" (p. 759). Hence, my reasoning for rethinking and reimagining this concept for African American males, specifically African American young men. As educators, the quantification of our students' deficient results, human condition, and placing them in disparity gaps to capture school effectiveness appears to be dated and ineffective. To help resolve this matter, I argue for the use of created spaces that allow educators to engage in critical conversations that unpack the internal and external causes for their deficits (e.g., racism, institutional racism, classism, oppression, etc.) and the use of assessments that honor and value experiential knowledge before attempting to determine whether or not learning for them is effective.

Another theory that I examined in practice is CRT, which is a practice some educators commit to using when attempting to create spaces to hear and validate marginalized voices. In practice, these voices counter the dominant narrative and ideologies as an attempt to disrupt spaces with their story and lived experiences (Ramos, 2013, p. 67). Ramos defines CRT as "a U.S. scholarly movement devoted to understanding the shifts in racial formation through analysis of the intersections of race, racism and power in everyday life" (p. 67). Commonly in CRT, people use counter-storytelling to expose and examine these intersections among other people, particularly people of color who may find themselves living within marginalized groups. Per Robertson and Chaney (2017), "By introducing their lived experience into discourses about social processes and institutional practices, minority persons challenge the dominant social reality; that is, the 'stock story' the dominant group uses to justify its

alter ego" (p. 265). In other words, people who challenge dominant norms and the sense

of reality they present within the culture of whiteness enables them to confront and

dismantle stock stories, stories that historically represent minority groups, particularly

those of color as inferior groups of people.

With established roots in law and an extension of critical legal theory, Darder

(2011) asserts that CRT in practice allows legal scholars to critically analyze and make

sense of oppressive societal norms regarding race that have historically been dismissed

within legal systems (p. 110). Gaining more visibility in the 1970s and momentum in the

1980s and 1990s, CRT became a movement that was unapologetically committed to

bringing attention to the idea of race throughout various systems and institutions,

specifically education within the United States (Vargas, 2003, p. 1). Believing that much

of the discourse centered around race happened within the context of education, African

American and Latino scholars like Gloria Ladson-Billings, Daniel Solorzano, Dolores

Delgado Bernal, and Laurence Parker began to frame their work and arguments using

CRT, stating

> The uncompromising insistence that "race" should occupy the central position in
> any legal, educational, or social policy analysis. Given the centrality assigned to
> "race," "racial" liberation was embraced as not only the primary but as the most
> significant objective of any emancipatory vision of education or the larger society.
> (as cited in Darder, 2011, p. 110)

This means, the idea of race, for them, become normalized and authentic through the

practice of CRT, which allowed them to openly address and bring attention to

inequitable, unequal, and oppressive practices within education on its multiple levels.

Vargas (2003) asserts, firstly, the premise of CRT is to explain race as a social experience that is embodied and experienced differently within different social groups. Secondly, the idea of race is theorized as an experience within these social groups, particularly those of color, as a superior construct that favors white culture, thirdly CRT gives us insight regarding the functionality of race, meaning how people choose to use race to govern their lives, social systems, and private and public institutions. Lastly, CRT examines the construction of race post-Civil Rights and how race has been used and maintained systematically throughout the United States to divide and isolate people on the sole basis of skin color, (p. 1). Therefore, CRT becomes vital in practice when attempting to educate people, specifically young people, on the complexities of race and to some degree the reasons why race does matter.

As previously mentioned, one of the tenets of CRT examines the construction of race post-Civil Rights and the many ways people choose to normalize and maintain its ideology. One way people choose to sustain the idea of race in the United States is through language—the way people choose to converse and communicate to other people often determines the level of access or privilege they receive within our social systems, particularly in education. For example, Rosa and Flores work to help reframe and rethink language by racializing language learning among Latinx students who are also heritage Spanish learners, and English language learners (as cited in Paris & Alim, 2017). To illustrate the use and complexities in their language, they focus on these learners in relation to the idea of asset-based pedagogy (p. 175). Per Rosa and Flores, asset-based pedagogy seeks to position students', in their case Latinx students, linguistic practices as

resources rather than deficits by building on them to facilitate standardized language learning (p. 175). Using asset-based pedagogy, they further explore the idea that their home languages coupled with academic languages are empirically discrete categories rather than ideological constructions, which is based on the presumption that students of color will become academically successful when they learn to employ the appropriate academic codes (p. 175). Meaning, when students of color learn to incorporate their cultural and linguistic practices into the dominant culture appropriately and in a way that meets their approval only then will they begin to experience academic success.

However, Rosa and Flores argue that regardless of the way or ways in which students of color choose to incorporate their cultural and linguistic practices into the dominant culture—they would not be fully accepted due to linguistic profiling in white public spaces, (p. 176). Jane Hill states,

> White public space [as] a morally significant set of contexts that are the important sites of the practices of a racializing hegemony, in which Whites are invisibly normal, and in which racialized populations are visibly marginal and the objects of monitoring ranging from individual judgement to Official English legislation. (as cited in Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 176)

In other words, people who participate in these spaces normalize the idea of power and dominance regarding race and linguistic practices, which often favors people who identify as white. Additionally, people of color are often marginalized and made visible becoming vulnerable to the white gaze and criticisms that devalue who they truly are. Rosa and Flores (as cited in Paris and Alim, 2017) suggests, the practice of language in this sense is grounded in raciolinguistic ideologies hat conflate people of color with

linguistic deficiencies that are irrespective of their empirical linguistic practices (p. 177).

They also assert, "raciolinguistic ideologies produce racialized language users who are

constructed as linguistically deviant even when engaging in linguistic practices

positioned as normative or innormative when produced by privileged White language

users" (p. 177). Meaning, when people of color (e.g., Latinx students) engage in the

dominant language they are considered deviant or non-conforming through the lens of

privileged White language users. I would also venture to say, based on my experience,

some of them are seen as being deviant among their peers too, especially those who

choose not to engage in their native language.

In the study, the purpose was two-fold (a) to bring attention to inequitable

linguistic practices like asset-based pedagogy and raciolinguistic ideologies in education

that marginalize students of color under the guise of whiteness and (b) to argue that our

language is not give or take or a compromise—there is room for our home language as

well as academic language within our spaces of learning that should not be met with

scrutiny or judgement. When Tamara, a participant in their study, was asked to share her

thoughts and feelings about taking a Spanish for Native Speakers class that was designed

to teach her and other long-term English Learners the Spanish deemed appropriate for

school, she responds,

> I felt like it was good. I thought that I was actually learning more about my
> original language that I have at home, and I think it was very helpful because I
> had to do some speech in church, so actually working in this class actually helped
> me with that speech. It was good.

In practice, CRT enables educators to explore other facets of race like our language to make sense of the world and who we are and what we mean to each other within the collective. Additionally, due to its practice, educators are able to engage in CRP as they work towards the idea of culturally sustaining pedagogies within our spaces of learning as well.

In the United States, many educators use various styles of pedagogy to introduce curriculum, expand instruction, and teach with hopes of their students becoming proficient in course content. Throughout my research, I have learned that all styles of pedagogy are not created equal and, in many ways, pedagogy can enforce rigid practices that leaves many students academically broken and traumatized. However, CRP in practice serves a different purpose and educators practicing CRP work to affirm their students' position and identity and promote a sense of criticalness that honors and values all people. In practice, educators engage their students in pedagogy that confronts and questions the social, political, and economic inequalities and disparities in their institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Educators also, specifically teachers who practice CRP do more than address school and classroom aesthetics that reflects a multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual world. They disrupt the status quo that is embedded in the climate and culture of many schools and classroom spaces with programs and teaching from curriculum that reflects their students' home and community.

Teachers who practice CRP engage and respond to their students differently in their spaces than their colleagues who prescribe to traditional forms of pedagogical and

theoretical practices. They engage and respond to their students with a sense of respect, value, and criticalness, which enables them to teach and respond consciously and responsibly. Milner (2010) states, "the construct suggests that students develop a critical consciousness and that they move beyond spaces where they simply or solely consume knowledge without critically examining it" (p. 68). Currently, educators like Christopher Emdin, an Associate Professor in Mathematics, Science, and Technology at Teachers College, Columbia University, uses culturally relevant pedagogy to engage his students in curriculum and instruction with the intent to connect them to their education and the world in which they live. I reference him due to his play on language, urban culture, and the use of hip-hop to educate his students. Once, he structured an assignment like a cypher, a lyrical rap battle commonly used among hip-hop artists to enlighten, to explore the complexities of various spaces, and to create safe zones for a coterie. The assignment had a slight competitive edge to it that connected his students to one another and the assignment—enabling them to explore, research, and critically think through concepts that challenged their traditional ways of learning information. Emdin (2016) states, "Bringing the battle into the classroom helps neoindigenous youth heal from traditional teaching and concurrently helps teachers to approach competition in the classroom differently" (chapter 8, para. 6).

Using CRP Emdin created a classroom space for his students that warranted full self-expression and an opportunity to experience a sense of liberation—as they took in, deconstructed, and created knowledge for new meaning. Milner (2010) asserts,

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Educators who create culturally relevant learning contexts are those who see students' culture as an asset, not a detriment to their success. Teachers actually use student culture in their curriculum planning and implementation, and they allow students to develop the skills to question how power structures are created and maintained in US society. (p. 69)

In other words, educators who practice CRP do not see their students as tabula rasa or blank slates, they understand their students arrive with a sense of knowledge, which enables them to engage in shared experiences and connect to language and discourse inside and outside of the classroom.

However, if we are not careful, like the construction of race, the use of language and discourse has the potential to divide us as well. Based on my experience, often the division is caused by educators who perpetuate institutional norms that privilege a culture of whiteness, which diminishes the idea of holistic education. Thurlow (2010) mentions, "Everyday metalanguage not only reflects attitudes and beliefs about language itself, however; it is also powerful in constituting ideologies of difference and structures of social inequality" (p. 7). Therefore, it will be vital for educators to pay attention to and address the various nuances in language and discourse that can be controversial in many classroom spaces. Often, many educators ignore language and discourse for fear of exposing their biases, disrupting social norms, and embracing and accepting their students' differences. Like Django Paris, an associate professor of language and literacy in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University (MSU), I also question—what are educators willing to sacrifice, relinquish, or give up to truly honor and value their students in the classroom?

D'Jango Paris grounds his work in CRP however, he does not believe culturally

relevant and responsive pedagogy is enough. He argues culturally sustaining pedagogies

(CSP) gives teachers and students an opportunity to access dominant cultural norms

while maintaining the essence of their core value and who they truly are. Therefore, he

extends Gloria Ladson-Billings work by introducing the idea of culturally sustaining

pedagogy. Paris (2012) asserts,

> The term culturally sustaining requires that our pedagogies be more than
> responsive or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—
> it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic
> competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to
> dominant cultural competence. (p. 95)

To illustrate his work, Paris collaborated with April Baker-Bell, an assistant professor at

MSU, and Devena Jackson, a high school English teacher and doctoral student at MSU to

extend the concept of language and literacy in the classroom with students of color in

Detroit. Through their collaboration, Paris, Baker-Bell, and Jackson were able to divest

from the idea of whiteness and unjust practices of power in the classroom to create a

culture of learning that valued and honored the language and discourse used by students

of color in their home and community. The project not only gave students an opportunity

to embrace the idea of cultural pluralism it also enabled them to exercise and preserve

true democracy within their space.

Paying attention to this growing trend in education, Gloria Ladson-Billings, a

professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison embraced Paris' extension of CRP and

has personally added to the conversation of CSP in *The (R)evolution Will not be*

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Standardized: Teacher Education, Hip Hop Pedagogy, and Culturally Relevant

Pedagogy 2.0. In the chapter, she revisits CRP and gives us a personal glimpse into its

current practice. Ladson-Billings admits, when she began the conversation and

implementing the work of CRP years ago, educators did a great job of working to

increase students' knowledge and pride of their history, heritage, and culture, but they

failed to take into account the influence that youth culture has on education, (as cited in

Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 147). She states,

> I realized that I was missing an important part of what mattered to students—their
> own organic, self-generated culture. And what a culture it was! Students'
> expression of their identities showed up in their dress, their language, their dance,
> their art, their fascination and facility with technology, and above all their music.
> (p. 147)

After coming to this realization, she closely began to work with student teachers in the

First Wave program on her campus who felt like, based on the initial program structure,

they would not be equipped to engage and connect with school aged children, specifically

those from urban areas. She described many of the student teachers, as students who

survived and persevered difficult schools, communities, and circumstances themselves

and students who wanted to return back to their home community as educators to ensure

a quality education for students who looked like them (p. 148).

With assistance from Willie Ney, the First Wave program director, Ladson-

Billings was able to create and implement two courses entitled *Pedagogy, Performance,*

and Culture and *Pedagogical Flows: Hip Hop in the K–12 Classroom*. The structure of

both courses enabled them to bring in prominent and relevant scholars, artists, activists,

and lecturers such as Anna West, a spoken word organizer, H. Samy Alim of Stanford University, who discussed linguistic inventiveness of Hip-Hop youth, Christopher Emdin to discuss his experience with urban youth and the influence Hip Hop has on learning, etc. From the experience, Ladson-Billings was able to rethink and reimagine CRP and realized that the work of learning applied to her as well, stating, "I had to learn how to reinvent my practice in the context of new cultural forms and cultural practices" (p. 150). In other words, in practice, CRP enables educators to evolve past its initial position that solely acknowledges students' history, heritage, and culture in our classroom spaces. The (R)Evolution that Ladson-Billings currently speaks of in 21st Century schools will require educators to pay close attention to all styles of language and discourse regarding our students, which can be complex.

Bakhtin (1981) states,

> Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every one of its factors, from the sound and image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning. (p. 294)

The performance of discourse, specifically in classroom spaces, goes beyond scripted responses to content. The performance of discourse captures and embraces lived experiences that cannot be confined to black and white occurrences. My experience with the young men in the STARSS mentoring program, often, enabled me to engage in an eclectic style of discourse, which momentarily gave me access into their world. From their use of "street" slang, to assist them with interpreting and understanding course content and the world in which they live, to the cadences in their voices that helped to

situate their position, feelings, and thoughts, to engaging in the Hip Hop culture and their music, I learned to appreciate the conversation as we deconstructed difficult topics. Nystrand (2006) states,

> Discourse is dialogic because it is continually structured by heteroglossia, the productive tension and conflict between the conversant. It is this juxtaposition of relative perspectives and struggle among competing voices that gives shape to discourse and hence governs comprehension as a dynamic, dialogic event. (p. 400)

Therefore, to incorporate and embrace select styles of discourse into classroom spaces that honor and value all students will not be an easy feat, but it remains vital to CRP in practice and to the idea of effective learning within these spaces. hooks (1990) explains discourse in a postmodern era in terms of:

> Language is also a place of struggle. Dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same voice? Dare I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of domination—a language that will not bind you, fence you in, or hold you? Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. (p. 146)

Meaning, the way we use language and engage in discourse, at times, may cause us to become unsettled or uncomfortable within learning spaces, especially classroom spaces. However, to completely understand and accept people, educators and their students will need to actively engage in language and discourse that is authentic, honest, critical, and relevant across disciplines within shared spaces of learning.

Comprehensive School Counseling Programs

As I examine Effectiveness Theory, specifically school effectiveness, CRT, and CRP, particularly CRP, teachers are not the only educators who are engaged in culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. In many school districts throughout the United States, school counselors who work in comprehensive school counseling programs are helping to address and to find a resolve for the lack of diversity and multiculturalism in our schools and classroom spaces, inequitable classroom practices, and the marginalization of African American boys and young men. Since the 1700s, advocacy for the downtrodden led to movements that brought attention to the human condition such as mental illness, inadequate living conditions, education, etc. In the 1900s, Frank Parsons, the father of guidance, infused the need for advocacy into our educational system and established school guidance programs that focused on the vocation and the social development of all students. Additionally, in the 1970s Transcendent Counseling (TC) began to unfold, which addressed the social and emotional needs of African Americans. In theory and in practice, TC focused on themes that were culturally relevant to African Americans at the time like mind, body, and spirit. Presently, the theory focuses on six areas, which include survival, holistic health, human/ethic relations, self-efficacy, meaningful and productive work or activity, and self-regulation of body and energy (Harper et al., 2009, p. 222).

With the growing demands on school counselors to become culturally and socially conscious and multifaceted, it is not enough for us to solely rely on theories and practices that are exclusive to the counseling profession. In 21st Century schools, the practice of counseling in comprehensive school counseling programs have become more

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complex, which requires us to look beyond the three most commonly used theories such as person-centered, cognitive behavioral therapy, and psychoanalysis that are universally taught in counseling programs (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004, p. 103). Currently, our role as school counselors in these programs requires us to glean from other academic disciplines to grow our knowledge of theory and practice. Rarely using the term guidance, school counselors, not only focus on counseling, coordination, and consultation, they focus on student advocacy and the social, psychological, and emotional well-being of all students. However, within the last 15 years, school counselors have begun to advocate for multiculturalism, social justice, equality, and equitable school practices (as cited in Bemak & Chung, 2005, p. 196). In addition, Paisley and McMahon (2001) state, "School counseling programs are increasingly anchored in proactive interventions associated with comprehensive, developmental, and collaborative approaches" (p. 110). D'Andrea and Daniels assert, "counselors must contribute to the evolution of a more just, democratic, accepting, and respectful society" (as cited in Paisley and McMahon 2001, p. 112). Therefore, the responsibility to educate our students from a holistic and culturally relevant, and responsive way no longer falls on the shoulders of teachers.

Professional school counselors who work in comprehensive school counseling programs have been charged to enhance the quality of education for all students too. They are also placed in a position to subvert school and classroom practices that damage and weaken the school experience for many students, specifically African American young men. Zamani-Gallaher and Calloway (2010) state,

It is critically important for counselors to be culturally competent; hence, teacher education, educational administration, and counseling education programs must purposefully design curricula to promote cross-cultural knowledge and skills necessary to improve counselors' effectiveness in resolving the challenges facing African American males. (p. 112)

Culturally relevant and responsive counseling is essential to pedagogy and to the education of African American males. Fusick and Bordeau (2004) suggest that the idea of school counseling practices that cater to traditional tenets such as individuality, uniqueness, and survival of the fittest, regarding African American students, conflicts with many African traditions that promote unity, collectivism, and group survival, (p. 103). As a result of traditional ideology and based on my experiences as a professional school counselor, I believe this has caused a disconnect between many African American young men and their education that I have witnessed firsthand.

For many of them, there is no "buy-in" due to the unwelcoming nature of some teachers and administrators and the spaces they are asked to learn in fail to reflect their lived experiences. Conversely, African American young men who feel welcomed and buy into the schooling experience often find themselves and their connection to school compromised. Therefore, professional school counselors have to find themselves in a position to promote and practice CRP through ethnic identity development training and workshop opportunities for themselves and their students. Additionally, they have to position themselves to practice intrapersonal development that teaches students self-efficacy, resilience, and perseverance, and advocate and develop programs that support their students' home, family, and community, etc. If professional school counselors wish to grow their practice—expanding their concept of theory beyond their prescribed

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discipline will become beneficial as they work to educate all students, specifically African American males within our school and classroom spaces.

School-Based Mentoring Programs

As mentioned, many African American boys and young men throughout our educational system are disconnected from education and in many ways the world in which they live. The disconnection is perhaps due to various reasons however, many educators are responding to this social crisis through the creation and implementation of school-based mentoring programs that centers them academically, socially, emotionally, and culturally. In Chapter II, I referenced several mentoring programs (e.g., *Umoja Network for Young Men*, *The Brotherhood, R.E.A.L., The Kuumba Group, and Project 2000*) that engaged and connected young boys and young men of color, particularly African American males, to their family, community, schools, classroom spaces, and to their education. With an exception to *The Kuumba Group*, a community-based mentoring program, all of the programs focused on school aged children and helped to illustrate culturally relevant and responsive learning. These programs began out of a need to educate African American boys and young men in a way that spoke to their differences and experiences. Like curriculum and instruction, the creators of each program relied on theory to frame their work and to justify best practices. From Empowerment Theory, to Afrocentric Theory, Critical Race Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy, these programs offered their participants a chance— a chance to be educated, critical thinkers, young people, and human.

In practice, many of the coordinators intentionally aligned their program to positive principles that influenced program outcomes. The coordinators of *The Brotherhood*, *The Kuumba Group*, and *Umoj*a *Network for Young Men* used Nguzo Saba, the seven principles in Kiswahili to connect and engage their participants to African history, heritage, and culture while implementing their program objectives. The seven principles consist of Umoja (Unity), Kujicihagulia (Self-Determination), Ujima (Collective Work), Ujamaa (Co-Operation), Nia (Purpose), Kuumba (Creativity), and Imani (Faith). Hall, the coordinator of *R.E.A.L.*, also used similar principles that loosely represented these principles as well. While examining these programs, I have learned that by connecting and engaging their program participants in set principles, the coordinators gave them an opportunity to explore their dreams through collective work and responsibilities, which fostered group success. Additionally, embracing these principles enabled them to embody a sense of self-value and self-worth and enabled them to claim a sense of agency. Hall (2006) states, "These critical life lessons teach males of color that there are constructive approaches for articulating their issues and making social changes, however large or small, without jeopardizing their lives and futures" (p. 48). Hall's approach to education simply gave his participants an opportunity to take hold of their education when nonparticipants did not appear to care.

Identifying key principles within theory, whether rooted in cultural tradition or not is perhaps a best practice that practitioners could add to the framework of school-based mentoring programs. The idea of principle and the way it was used in these programs suggests growth, forward and upward movement, and cycling through a

process that was designed to strengthen personal and collective experiences. Wyatt (2009) asserts, "The Nguzo Saba's seven principles were chosen because its rites of passage into the adulthood system support the transformation of the Brotherhood" (p. 465). The seven principles were incorporated into the Kuumba Group along with four other principles-harmony, balance, interconnectedness, and authenticity—to build a sense of spiritualness and to embody a healthy identity among its participants (Washington et al., 2006, p. 54). The phenomenon that grounds these principles is centered around human connections, the idea of relationship, and an ethos of love and care. The principal investigators in the Umoja Network for Young Men defined the idea of love in terms of reciprocal love—a love that extends beyond loving thyself. Additionally, they defined an ethos of care as an interest in and a responsibility for other people (Jackson et al., 2014, p. 399). Framing their program in principle, the coordinators were able to create a sense of brotherhood, collective responsibility, trust and open discourse, as they expanded their capacity to aspire for greatness.

The idea of principle in these programs appeared to be a vital part regarding program practices and effectiveness. When many of these programs were faced with adversity, it was principle, a fundamental truth that cemented the participants' goals and admiration for one another. Unlike the programs that were mentioned, the STARSS mentoring program did not have a formal set of principles to govern their participants. However, the program did have a vision and a mission that cemented the program and positioned its mentors and advisors to educate their mentees on the basis of acceptance, collectivism, and hope. Lastly, I have learned that many school-based mentoring

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programs in practice uses principle to cultivate a culture of gratitude the mentee has towards the mentor and vice versa.

Summary

The idea of theory and how theory translates into practice is pivotal to the educational success of all students, specifically to African American males within our spaces of learning. In practice, educators are able to determine the strengths within theoretical frameworks and most importantly, rethink and reimagine its flaws. In theory and in practice the idea of Effectiveness, CRT, and CRP enables educators across disciplines to create and implement programs that challenges their position and sharpens their sense of criticalness as they educate students towards a state of consciousness. In practice, CRT and CRP give students of color, specifically African American males, an opportunity to become comfortable within educational spaces as they embrace themselves, differences, and their education. Additionally, these theories, particularly CPR has captured the attention of not only teachers, but it has captured the attention of professional school counselors as well. In practice, CRP enables school counselors to grow comprehensive counseling programs, advocate, and promote the academic, social, and emotional wellbeing for all students within their spaces.

Lastly, in practice CRP gives educators an opportunity to collaborate and to lead initiatives to disrupt educational practices that often leave African American males behind. One way they have come together to combat the crisis is through the creation and implementation of school-based mentoring programs. In many of these programs, educators have gravitated towards theories and practices that have enabled them to teach

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and respond in culturally relevant and responsive ways. They perform and respond with a sense of urgency, respect, empathy, and value for their humanness. In theory and in practice, they use CRP to empower them, which gives them the resources and confidence they need to redefine education for themselves.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research study is twofold: firstly, to study the mentor's influence on the young men in the STARSS mentoring program and their influence on the climate and culture at Excellence High School. Secondly, the purpose is to reveal the lessons that were learned, and the experiences gained from the African American young men who actively participated in STARSS. To do this, I employed participatory action research (PAR), a form of qualitative research, which is defined as "a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. Simply stated, this is a systematic approach that seeks knowledge for social action" (as cited in Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008, p. 424). Baum et al. (2006) explain that PAR is also a reflective process aligned with action and a sense of understanding of history, culture, and local context embedded in social relationships (p. 855). Lastly, the idea of PAR is inclusive and in practice involves people (e.g., African American young men) who are marginalized or excluded from the research process (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 108). Using PAR to frame my methodology, enabled me to use semi-structured interviews as a method to collect my data. With the participants' interviews, I was also able to employ the idea of counter-storytelling, which gave me an opportunity to position them as primary agents in their story and in their world.

As a professional school counselor and mentor to the participants in the STARSS program, I realized it was time and imperative that we begin to tell our story. It was also time we begin to address the dominant narrative that often leaves many African American young men at a deficit and leaves them with a false sense of identity and consciousness. The participants' interviews, especially the mentees' interviews, will help me tell a story that dismantles the dominant narrative and tells a story that honors and values their experiences relating to their education and their position as African American young men. Therefore, I approached the study with clear goals, which were (a) to bring attention to the practice of Effectiveness theory, Critical Race Theory, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy regarding the STARSS mentoring program and (b) to assist in telling a story honoring and valuing the experiences of the African American young men in STARSS and the other young men of color who attend Excellence High School. In this chapter, I highlight the research questions that ground the study, I give a historical overview of the STARSS mentoring program, explain the research method, the idea of counter-storytelling, and I conclude with the research procedures, the research instrument, and my positionality statement.

Research Questions

Since its inception, the STARSS mentoring program for African American young men served as a catalyst to address the social disparity between them and other students at Excellence High School (EHS), particularly their white peers. At the time, many African American young men at Excellence did not have the space to voice their concerns and to claim a sense of agency. From its initial program goal that addressed

their social needs to implementing programming that eventually addressed their academic and emotional needs, the program has been able to sustain its presence at EHS. However, without any formal documented data to validate the relevance of the program, the advisors and mentors found it challenging to gage their level of effectiveness and influence on the student participants. The literature reveals documenting the effectiveness of the program is vital due to the lack of attention school-based mentoring programs have historically received (Spencer & Rhodes, 2005, p. 8). Therefore, I asked the following questions, which guide my curiosity and ground the research study. The questions are:

1. How did mentors in the Successful Team Aimed at Reaching Student Success (STARSS) mentoring program for African American young men at Excellence High School transform or enhance the quality of life for the program participants?

2. How did mentors in the STARSS mentoring program for African American young men influence the climate and culture within Excellence High School?

3. Lastly, what did the young men involved in the STARSS mentoring program learn from their program experience?

Through face-to-face and semi-structured interviews, I was able to address the research questions with hopes of telling a story that adds to the conversation regarding mentoring and mentorship and African American males and their education. These questions helped to frame the interview questions, which gave the program participants and I an opportunity to critically engage one another in conversation during their interview session. In conversation, we were able to discuss topical issues that surfaced during the interviews, which would later serve as themes to help code their interviews. These

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themes were desensitization, identity development, student and teacher relationship, cultivating high expectations, and the idea of brotherhood in safe spaces, which I discuss and unpack in Chapter V.

Successful Team Aimed at Reaching Student Success (STARSS)

The STARSS mentoring program for African American young men was birthed out of community unrest and a desire to address the social disparity gap at EHS. EHS, a predominantly white high school both in climate and culture, is a place of affluence steeped in southern tradition and politics. The initial purpose of STARSS was to focus on African American young men who were disconnected and socially isolated within the school. Their disconnect and sense of isolation was partially due to a school redistricting plan implemented by members on the local school board who decided to discontinue the high school reassignment plan during the 2005–2006 school year.

The new school redistricting plan heavily affected them, their families, the EHS community, and other schools in their city. School redistricting is a process that redraws neighborhood lines or boundaries in school districts to create an equitable distribution of school and district resources. As a result of school redistricting plans, many students from urban, underserved, and rural neighborhoods have access to schools like EHS to experience and engage in equitable and quality education. They also have access to build, contribute, and to experience a school community that reflects a multicultural and multiethnic world in which we live. In theory, school redistricting plans sound like the ideal plan to redistribute social and cultural wealth however in practice and based on my experience these plans are often met with opposition, which leaves black, brown, and

poor communities struggling to find a sense of self, value, and agency within new spaces. This held true for many students, parents, educators, and the surrounding EHS community who were affected by the decision from district representatives who served on the local school board.

At the time, the implementation of the school redistricting plan disrupted the existing EHS community and the lives of many students who were bused in from urban, underserved, and rural areas within the city. As a result, many of them entered into an unwelcoming space. Mrs. Justice, a Social Studies teacher, a current advisor, and mentor to students in STARSS, reflects on the climate and culture during that time at Excellence. She recalls,

> The climate and culture at Excellence High School prior to the STARSS mentoring program was exclusive. It was exclusive from the standpoint of, it was not a welcoming environment for African Americans. When I first started working at Excellence High School in 2005, there were protest signs around the building. Um, the community was against the redistricting that had occurred, that included, uh, African American neighborhoods. They did not want students here, um, from those African American neighborhoods in this community.

Mr. MoMa, a former administrator at EHS and an advocate for the STARSS program, reflects on the climate and culture as well in reference to our "new" students, specifically African American young men. He states,

> They came in and they were really sort of disenfranchised and didn't feel connected to the school. They felt like they were um...I think that...I don't know how they felt but, it appears as if they were just disjointed...disconnected um...the way that I sort of look at it is...if you look at a picture frame that has a mat and then you have the inside...the actual image...I think that a lot of the way that I saw...mostly African American males were outside of the picture frame—they

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were not even a part of the frame. They were not a part of the mat; they weren't a part of the image...they weren't.

Unfortunately, the opposition and backlash the students faced from the redistricting plan did not only affect them socially, it affected their psyche and academic performance, which caused many of them to disconnect and disassociate themselves from EHS.

However, these students were not the only people feeling the effects of the redistricting plan. Many teachers on staff were not prepared or equipped for the climate and cultural shift, which made it difficult to retain some teachers in critical content areas. Another pressing concern that disrupted the space at EHS were biased and racist performances shared by many of the teachers on staff, which translated into an increase in disciplinary referrals for many African American students, specifically the young men. During this time, many African American young men received both in-school and out-of-school suspensions at disproportionate rates for infractions that ranged from questioning their teacher's authority to violent acts, like engaging in fights with each other. Therefore, the focus and attention to retain teachers became secondary to the goal at hand, which was to create an inclusive and safe space for our students while shifting and transforming the mindset of the teachers who remained on staff.

Another caveat to the school redistricting plan ushered in unsuspected gang violence and irrational behaviors from some of the African American young men. Taken aback with the newness of this cultural shift, many of my colleagues responded with fear, anger, and judgement—using at times excessive measures to redirect ill behaviors. Realizing, our school could no longer sustain this level of tension and resentment, Mrs.

Action, a teacher at EHS in the Exceptional Children's program, created and proposed the STARSS mentoring program after watching the documentary *Beyond the Bricks: A New Era of Education* (Koen, 2010). The documentary highlights the lives of Shaquiel Ingram and Erick Graham, two African American high school students who were challenged with the nuances of school in the Newark Public School system and the perils of life. Influenced by the documentary, Mrs. Action wanted to create a program at Excellence for African American young men who lived and experienced life similar to Shaquiel and Erick. She wanted to expose them to resources and a group of people who would offer them a sense of support and a sense of belonging while they navigated and made sense of their high school experience.

To help implement her vision, she received buy-in and support from administrators, counselors, and many teachers. However, some teachers, students, and their parents did not buy into her vision for various reasons. Their biases, fears, and skepticisms or doubts would not allow them to see her vision and understand her *why*, especially since she appeared to claim agency as a white middle class woman. Many of them questioned her, thinking to themselves and for some aloud, what were her intentions with STARSS? Did she embody a "white savior" complex? What did she stand to gain from the experience? And lastly, how will this program disrupt the climate and culture of a school that traditionally and to a degree unapologetically works hard to preserve the status quo?

Unfortunately, I was not able to interview Mrs. Action due to several failed attempts to connect with her. Therefore, I was not able to address these questions and her

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initial thoughts behind the creation of the STARRS program. However, Mrs. Action's attention to a glaring gap within the educational structure at EHS and her efforts to dismantle this gap, is to be commended. In the inaugural year, with the help of administrators and counselors, Mrs. Action identified and paired more than 80 students with several teachers who volunteered as mentors to assist with the program. The students were identified based on a grade point average that fell below a 2.0 or "C" average and their behavior. They were randomly paired with some exceptions—teachers who were familiar with or had previously taught a young man, they were able to specifically select them as a mentee. With some teachers receiving more than one mentee, the only criteria, at the time, to become a mentor was teachers had to possess a desire and a commitment to the program.

As mentors, they were encouraged to meet with their mentees at least once a week to discuss behavior, school and community engagement, and their grades. However, many of the mentors found meeting face-to-face with their mentees challenging due to time constraints and their teaching schedule. Many of the young men who embraced the program responded well to their mentor but, there were some who were challenged by the idea of mentorship and the level of intrusion they witnessed from their mentor. For some of the mentees, this level of attentiveness was too much and as a result they resisted the program and their mentor. Due to the makeup of EHS, some of the young men also were challenged by the cultural differences of their mentors, which placed some strain on the relationship.

Recognizing this disconnect and reflecting on the experience, Mrs. Action

solicited the assistance of Mrs. Justice, who, at the time, was independently working with

administration to incorporate African American History and Studies back into the

curriculum. As a mentor in the inaugural year of STARSS, Mrs. Justice recognized a

disconnect as well but not so much the disconnect between the mentor and mentee

relationship. To her, the disconnect was a cultural and historical disconnect between the

mentees and their history and by addressing this aspect would perhaps help resolve their

present condition while making sense of their past. Hall (2006) states, "Students of color

bring different histories and values into the classroom. As such, they must be presented

with a curriculum that is rich in cultural images and that helps them affirm and celebrate

their education" (p. 18). Meaning, students of color, especially African American young

men need to establish a clear understanding of their historical presence, if they wish to

make sense of the world and their education. Therefore, with their collaboration and with

the addition of African American History and Studies, Mrs. Action and Mrs. Justice,

were able to grow STARSS in a way that began to meet the cultural needs of its

participants.

The purpose of incorporating African American History and Studies back into the

curriculum was twofold: (a) to reconnect the STARSS participants back to a rich history

of Kings and Queens and cultural and social wealth they possess, and (b) to address their

academic performance with an attempt to ensure career and college readiness. To

implement and to grow this aspect of the program, Mrs. Justice asked Mr. MoMa, a

colleague in the Social Studies department and someone who had previously taught the

course, and me to help co-teach and facilitate classroom lectures and activities. This aspect of STARSS was unique, the course was offered once a year, in the Spring, and restricted to 12 mentees. We identified and selected these mentees based on their active participation in STARSS, previous classroom behavior, academic performance, and counselor and teacher recommendation. Due to our student-centered and constructivist approach, we wanted to maximize student learning, ensure the richness of the course, and create a space to produce knowledge and create new meaning, which would have been challenging to do with many students.

Mrs. Justice and Mr. MoMa's experiences in African and African American History and Studies, and my experience in history, Cultural Anthropology, and counseling, enabled us to teach and examine course content from different perspectives and through different lenses—making the course interdisciplinary. Our experiences also enabled us to address and examine topical issues that currently influence the cultural and social climate of African American young men in the United States. Through the course, we practiced and embodied culturally relevant and responsive teaching as we wanted to create an open space for critical discourse and academic creativity. The incorporation of African American History and Studies afforded us an opportunity to introduce the culture, tradition, history, and a sense of consciousness that many of our mentees had forgotten existed in their family, homes, and community.

Lastly, with the incorporation of African American History and Studies introduced back into the curriculum, Mrs. Justice also noticed the young men needed a space, a space that was inviting and exclusive to them, which I find to be an important

element in the creation of school-based mentoring programs. Hall (2006) states, "When mentors provide boys with a public space to vent their thoughts and emotions to others, we implicitly teach them that a large part of the educative experience can be directly translated and exercised within the larger society" (p. 48). Baldwin (1963) also suggests, African American young men need a space to examine and dismantle the social and cultural myths perpetuated and exploited by the dominant culture (p. 1). Therefore, trailer six, or as the mentees in STARSS fervently called "T6," became their space to commune, to discuss topical issues that affected them, and to center their lives and express who they truly are.

Always reflecting on the program and ways to grow the young men in STARSS, in its fourth year Mrs. Justice proposed the STARSS Honors Academy (SHA) as another addition to the program. Similar to the structure in the Freshman Academy at EHS, we identified a group of young men and gave them an opportunity to take several courses together during their sophomore year of high school. The courses consisted of Honors English 10 taught and facilitated by Mrs. Woolf, Honors Civics and Economics taught and facilitated by Mrs. Justice, and African American History and Studies co-taught and facilitated by Mrs. Justice and me. The purpose and goal of the academy was to focus on academic achievement, career, and college readiness within the program. Due to the nature of the academy, it was important for the program advisors and cooperating teachers to select mentees who were serious about making their college plans accessible and a reality. Therefore, we intentionally solicited the support from the mentees' parents and other stakeholders to ensure these young men would *be in* the program one hundred

percent. Meaning, we did not want the mentees and their parents to just *buy into* this aspect of the program we needed them to be in and to assist us with fulfilling the mission and vision of STARSS and the academy.

To take education and learning in this direction at EHS was unprecedented, challenging, yet rewarding in the sense we were disrupting the status quo at our school. While in the academy, the young men were exposed to a style of learning that allowed them, some for the first time, a sense of agency. I vividly remember in Mrs. Woolf's Honors English class the young men in STARSS engaged in a conversation around the idea of stereotypes with another young man who was a graduating senior, Hispanic, and gay. The young man, I will call him Pedro, was placed with the tenth-grade cohort to finish his English 10 requirement for graduation. While conversing with the young men during a group discussion on the idea of stereotypes, Pedro could not empathize with their frustration and dislike for stereotypes especially when it appeared many of them fit the profile assigned to African American young men by the dominant culture. Therefore, when Pedro communicated his thoughts, the young men in STARSS responded with frustration and for some with anger. Mrs. Woolf reflects on the conversation,

> Um, and I remember the kids were talking about, well, it's just not fair that people view us this way and, you know, stereotypes...And this student jumped in and he said, um, well, when you give people the reason to believe that's how you are by how you act, how can you blame them for thinking that way? And there was nearly a fight, you know, I don't know. I think you were in there. And, uh, it was so great because they fired back at him. They're like, you couldn't possibly understand how we feel. And he said, I am Hispanic, and I am gay. I know what it means to be stereotyped. And there was this like, an Aha moment where all of a sudden, they all saw the same thing and they were like, oh my gosh.

This conversation exchange was one of many the mentees experienced in the SHA. Teachable moments such as the one mentioned above enabled them to unpack debilitating language and constructs that keep us divided within public spaces like our schools. The conversation also enabled them to move past the idea of tolerance and towards the idea of universal acceptance and freedom.

Unfortunately, the STARSS Honors Academy did not survive past its inaugural year due to a change in administration, scheduling needs, support, and a lack of resources. However, the academy gave us insight into another aspect of mentoring, mentorship, and education in relation to African American young men. From the academy, my colleagues and I were able to use our experiences to educate mentors and teachers who were not affiliated with the STARSS program on the nuances of teaching and mentoring African American young men at EHS. My participation and experience in the academy gave me an opportunity to co-create and co-facilitate a 10-session workshop with another colleague entitled *Mentoring Is a Verb*, which was designed to help teachers and other adult stakeholders understand that mentoring and mentorship can be a viable educational practice to grow students within their classroom spaces, especially African American young men. Lastly, the academy experience expanded my scope of mentoring: it allowed me to become intentional with my mentees and our interactions. It also ignited my interest to formally document and tell an authentic story of the African American young men in STARSS and their commitment to education and understanding of their world.

Research Method

With the class of 2019 fulfilling their graduation requirements and completing STARSS with post-secondary plans, STARSS is in another phase of transition. Therefore, the question still remains: How effective is the STARSS mentoring program and did the advisors and mentors accomplish their goal to positively influence the lives of its participants? To answer this question and the three questions that help to frame the research study, as a data collection method, I used the interviews of 17 program participants, which were semi-structured and face-to-face. Baker and Charvat (2008) explain, "Typically, a semi-structured protocol is developed, composed primarily of open- ended questions and in which participants are guided through an exploration of their feelings and expression of their beliefs with specificity and in detail" (p. 254). Therefore, I chose semi-structured interviews as a collection method with hopes of effectively answering the research questions and to give the participants an opportunity to share their program experiences either as a mentor, mentee, or program advocate. Additionally, an interview study is designed to qualitatively capture the essence of personhood and the life and world in which they choose to live in (p. 254).

Often used as a research method, interviews are closely aligned with the idea of counter-storytelling and critical race theory—enabling people to claim a sense of agency and to venture away from the dominant narrative. Joost and Vries (2015) state, "Interview participants are practitioners of everyday life...meaning is constituted at the nexus of the how's and what's of experience, by way of interpretive practice – the procedures and resources used to apprehend, organize and represent reality" (p. 104). In

other words, interview participants have a perspective that gives us insight into their world, which is usually through an unfiltered lens. Using semi-structured interviews, the participants and I reflected on the past six years of the STARSS program allowing us to engage in critical conversation. The method also allowed us to examine our *why* for STARSS and further explore the need for culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogy in our spaces of learning. Lastly, the method allows us to reflect on our educational journey, which essentially creates an opportunity for students to tell their story, especially African American young men.

The Idea of Counter-Storytelling

The inherent nature of interviews is to gather information with hopes of settling a person's curiosity regarding their lived experiences. When used in a non-positivist way, the interview gives us an opportunity to explore and examine a person's experiences, which helps to validate, value, and honor their existence. Ultimately, it gives them a sense of control and ownership over their story, which helps to define who they truly are. Using the participants' interviews, I formulate a counter-story to disrupt the dominant narrative regarding African American young men and their education in the United States. Hughes-Hassell (2013) defines it as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told, including people of color, the poor, and members of the LGBTQ community" (p. 212). Often, in practice, it is used to either negate a narrative or add to it—validating people and their experiences. Ramos (2013) states, "Critical Race theorists describe counter-storytelling as a method of speaking truth to power and pointing out the ruptures in dominant racial narratives in the U.S., namely

those of race-neutrality, meritocracy and equal access to opportunity" (p. 67). Meaning, in practice counter-storytelling gives people autonomy and a sense of power to claim agency and to do so unapologetically.

Currently, the dominant narrative of African American young men in our system of schooling reveals that they are low academically, they are less likely to be identified as academically gifted students and be considered for advanced academic programs, they are more likely to receive in-school and out-of-school suspension in comparison to their white peers, and more likely to be labeled as the nation's problem. With this narrative and deficit way of thinking, educators have been conditioned to experience them through a narrow lens. Based on my experience, this has perpetuated an educational system predicated on power and control, which endorses inferior and superior norms. Hughes-Hassell (2013) asserts,

> Teenagers of color as well as indigenous people are often victims of a single story. Latino teens are routinely depicted in the mainstream discourse as low achievers, high school dropouts, teen parents, or violent gang members, all stereotypes that paint a picture of an unassimilated population marked primarily by exclusion and difference. (p. 216)

Therefore, the practice of counter-storytelling becomes essential to telling a story that offers another perspective and a different version of truth regarding students of color, particularly African American males. Additionally, it helps to expose, analyze, and challenge the majoritarian stories of racial privilege (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).

Richard Delgado states, counter-stories "can quicken and engage the conscience," stirring the "imagination in ways in which discourse that is more conventional cannot"

(as cited in Hughes-Hassell, 2013, p. 215). In other words, counter-storytelling gives

people an opportunity to become aware of the human condition in a way that often loses

its meaning in simple conversation. He also states,

> By telling and hearing counter-stories, members of marginalized groups: (1) gain healing from becoming familiar with their own historic oppression and victimization; (2) realize that they are not alone; that others have the same thoughts and experiences; (3) stop blaming themselves for their marginal position; and (4) construct additional counter-stories to challenge the dominant story (as cited in Hughes-Hassell, 2013, p. 215)

Constructing additional counter-stories to challenge the dominant story resonated with

me, which is revealed through the work of many critical race theorists. Often, students of

color, especially Africa American young males are at the heart of dehumanizing stories

and propaganda, which many people have been conditioned to believe regardless of their

academic prowess, socioeconomic status, or position within their community. Therefore,

it is imperative for educators to position their classroom as spaces for students to become

counter-storytellers and reject cultural norms that deem them less than, specifically

students of color.

David Stinson, an assistant professor of mathematics at Georgia State University

grounds his work in a broad examination of mathematics achievement and a sense of

personal agency regarding the sociocultural and sociohistorical ways in which people

think, behave, reason, and understand the world by examining the construction (but not

the determination) of four academically (mathematically) gifted African American males

students (Stinson, 2008, p. 976). Motivated by his position as a white mathematics

teacher in a predominantly African American high school, during his tenure as a high

school teacher, Stinson experienced firsthand the intellectual prowess of African American young men and young women in his classes. Based on his experience, they outperformed many of their white peers on standardized assessments. Stinson (2008) asserts,

> This experience with academically successful African American students was counter to much of the research literature about African American students, and African American male students in particular, in that the literature about male African Americans most often focuses primarily on their social pathology. (p. 977)

As a result of his experiences, Stinson wanted to create space for a different story and bring attention to their academic abilities, particularly the academic abilities of the young men. To frame his work, Stinson used Danny Benard Martin's multilevel framework for analyzing mathematics socialization and identity among African American students. The multilevel framework included, an analysis of sociohistorical context, community and school forces, and individual agency; however, he argues and eventually transitions towards a more eclectic approach, which includes poststructural theory, critical race theory, and critical theory (p. 979). These theories helped to answer Stinson's research questions and position his participants as primary agents within their story.

To frame his methodology, Stinson uses participative inquiry, a version of PAR that allowed him to collaborate with the participants while they served as active researchers and subjects (p. 982). As active researchers, they engaged in self-reflection, experiential learning, learning to be and learning from being, and an extended epistemology, suggesting that experiential knowing arises through engagement with

others (p. 982). Meaning, his approach is the epitome of reciprocal learning and the

process of producing knowledge for the creation of new meaning. Additionally, to collect

his data, Stinson used literature to help his participants unpack the vocabulary in the

research, a demographic survey, written artifacts, and the participants' interviews, which

were face-to-face, semi-structured, and by phone. These methods helped to frame their

counter-stories of success. Stinson reveals,

> Nonetheless, no matter how the participants conceptualized success, implicitly or
> explicitly stated throughout their conversations was the undisputed need for
> education, whether it was to pass knowledge on or to ensure that one could
> financially care for loved ones. The valuing of or need for education, specifically
> formal education, was a common theme found throughout the participants'
> counter-storytelling as they discussed success. (p. 988)

To say the least, Stinson's regard for education, his students, and for social change,

provides educators with evidence that listening to and engaging in a story that is not your

story is vital to subverting the negative narrative that surrounds students of color,

especially African American young men.

Counter-storytelling not only raises our level of consciousness, it also dispels

cultural myths, and dismantles societal norms that keeps us stagnant and disconnected

from the idea of understanding and accepting of human differences. In theory and in

practice, our perspectives and experiences should add to a collective story, while being

careful not to parade any given story as *the* truth. When educators embody and promote a

story as *the* truth verses *a* truth it reduces other peoples' perspectives and experiences to

just circumstantial—a performance that is not authentic or worth validating. Stone-

Mediatore (2003) states, "When a group's perspective on events does not match the

representation that has circulated as for instance, 'the American perspective,' then they must acknowledge that their view is a particular group's story, not a general truth" (p. 6). In other words, counter-storytelling does not ask us to reject or accept any given story rather than it asks us to listen and empathize with the storyteller with hopes of understanding their position as they assert a sense of agency. Arendt states, "For only when we can present claims about the historical world without claiming logical necessity or absolute truth can we 'think in community with others'" (as cited in Stone-Mediatore, 2003, p. 60). Meaning, our students walk through our schools and classroom spaces with a sense of history, culture, and prior knowledge that deserves validation and to do otherwise would undermine the idea of their human existence.

Research Procedures

The Population Sample

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Boards from my respective university and Excellence County Schools (ECS), I was able to distribute a formal letter asking the mentors, mentees, and other personnel who advocated and participated in STARSS to participate in the study. The participants were a part of a purposive or a selective sampling group, meaning I was intentional in the selection process in relation to the participants. I selected and interviewed participants who actively participated in STARSS from 2012–2018. I relied on my role as a STARSS advisor and mentor to determine who was an *active participant*, which I define as a person who served as a mentor, mentee, or an advisor and as a person who attended majority, if not all, of the programs and activities sponsored by and designed for the STARSS participants such as

the HistoryMakers celebration to begin the academic year, the monthly Breakfast for Champions celebrations, the STARSS Honors Academy, professional development opportunities, etc.

As the Principal Investigator, I sent research information packets to a total of 25 participants asking for their participation, 14 participants who served as a mentor or an advisor and 11 mentees. The research information packets consisted of the following: a cover letter that introduced the study, a project invitation letter for mentors and former mentees, a consent to act as a human participant form from my respective university, and a consent form from ECS. The consent forms explained the participants' rights, their role, and responsibility, and their protection regarding privacy and confidentiality. In their packets, I also included a mentor and mentee demographic data form. The form helped to authenticate their presence and involvement at EHS, and it also added a level of credibility to the study. Of the 25 requests, I received 10 packets from mentors and seven packets from mentees volunteering to participate in the study, for a total of 17 participants.

Data Collection

Once the participants received the research information packet, read through the materials, and contacted me expressing their interest, I scheduled an interview. I began the interviews in May 2018 and concluded them in August 2018. Each interview was individual, face-to-face, and semi-structured, meaning the interviews allowed for open-ended questions that encouraged conversation—allowing each participant to explore their feelings and engage in critical conversations that helped to unpack topical issues such as

race, gender, privilege, inequitable school practices, etc. The mentors' interviews took place in several locations based on their convenience; however, the mentees' interviews took place at EHS in trailer six (i.e., T6).

To begin each interview, I engaged each participant in casual conversation, which appeared to place them at ease before their interview began. However, some of the mentees appeared nervous by the setup and ambiance, which affected their performance. Additionally, I began each interview with an overview of the research study and ensured the participants understood the documents I gave to them in the research information packet and I also made sure they signed the appropriate documents before I read the first interview question. Once I established protocol, I began to audio record, and I had the participants state their name, occupation, and their role in the STARSS mentoring program. Overall, they were attentive and more than willing to share their experience in the STARSS mentoring program. Each participant was asked the same 15 questions based on their mentee or mentor classification. However, the last question (question 15) for each mentor was constructed differently. Their last question was uniquely crafted, which focused on their responses and experience during the interview session.

Data Analysis

Additionally, the interviews were audiotaped using a hand-held recording device. The interviews were also transcribed for accuracy, 12 interviews were transcribed manually using oTranscribe, a free web application, and five of them were outsourced to the program called *Temi*, an online system that converts audio recordings to text. After transcribing the interviews, I read through each one, including the program-generated

interviews from *Temi* for accuracy, which also helped to confirm each theme. Next, I began the coding process. I was able to code each interview based on the themes that were revealed in the participant demographic form and in the participants' transcription. Lastly, I analyzed the data using content from the participants' interview, which helped me formulate a counter narrative.

The interviews ranged between 40–71 minutes in length and although the time allotted was not achieved by many of the mentees, their responses to the interview questions, conversation during the interview, and reflection of their experiences in the STARSS program were thoughtful, rich, and well stated. Baker and Charvat (2008) state, "The primary advantage of interviewing is that the findings are rich, often fascinating, and can provide the researcher and audience with the 'felt shared experience' of the participants" (p. 255). In other words, their performance did not compromise the integrity of the project, in fact they contributed in a way that honored their voice and commitment to the research study. Overall, the participants' interviews were insightful, and they gave me a better understanding into the vision and goals set forth by Mrs. Action and Mrs. Justice.

<div align="center">**Research Instruments**</div>

Guiding Interview Questions

The following interview questions I used with the participants are displayed in the Table 1. I designed these interview questions to answer the research questions that ground the study. Additionally, I use the content or responses from these interview

questions to counter the dominant narrative regarding African American young men and their education at EHS.

Table 1

Interview Questions for Teachers/Administrators and Former Students

Teacher/Administrator Interview Questions	Former Student Interview Questions
1. What is your philosophy of education?	1. What attracted you to the STARSS mentoring program?
2. Before the creation and implementation of the STARSS mentoring program, how would you describe the climate and culture at EHS?	2. What were your goals and aspirations before participating in the STARSS mentoring program?
3. Before the creation and implementation of the STARSS mentoring program, what was your perception of African American young men in 21st Century Schools and has your perception changed?	3. How would you describe your academic and social interest before participating in the STARSS mentoring program?
4. What was/is your experience while working with the young men in the STARSS mentoring program?	4. How would you describe your academic and social interest while in the STARSS mentoring program?
5. How do/did you ensure the STARSS participants' academic and social engagement aligns with Excellence High School's and Excellence County School's goals and expectations?	5. How did the STARSS mentoring program transform your approach to education?
6. What is your definition of difference?	6. Before participating in the STARSS mentoring program, what was your perception of African American young men in 21st Century schools and has your perception changed?
	7. What is your definition of difference?

7. How do/did you shape, negotiate, and accept student differences within the STARSS mentoring programs?

8. How do/did the STARSS participants' differences influence

   your style of teaching, rapport, and engagement with them and other students?

9. What barrier(s) do/did you face while teaching or supporting the young men in the STARSS mentoring program?

10. What influence did or does the STARSS mentoring program have on curriculum and instruction at EHS?

11. Currently, what is the influence of the STARSS mentoring program at EHS?

12. Through the STARSS mentoring program, what did you learn or are learning about its participants and 21st Century schools?

13. Based on your experience, what changes would you make (if any) to the STARSS mentoring program?

14. How do you see mentoring programs like STARSS transforming the scope of 21st Century schools?

15. This question was different for each teacher/administrator participant. The question was based on their response and conversation during their interview session.

8. How did your mentor(s) in the STARSS mentoring program help to shape, honor, and accept your differences?

9. On a scale of 1–10 (one being the lowest and 10 being the highest), what was your level of engagement and commitment to your education while participating in the STARSS mentoring program?

10. On a scale of 1–10 (one being the lowest and 10 being the highest), what was your level of engagement and commitment to your mentor?

11. What did you learn about yourself and others while in the STARSS mentoring program?

12. As a participant in the STARSS mentoring program, how did you influence the climate and culture at EHS?

13. How has the STARSS mentoring program influenced your worldview?

14. Based on your experience, how would you change the STARSS mentoring program?

15. How do you see mentoring programs like STARSS influencing the scope of 21st Century schools?

The Role of a Researcher

Based on my experience, the role of a researcher is complex regarding the moving pieces that consume the research study to ensure its validity. Here, I use validity in its simplest form, which is to be sound, rational, and logical. In research, the idea of validity is critical and as the principal investigator it was important for me to garner a level of soundness between me and my participants. As the principal investigator, to embody a sense of soundness, I clearly presented the purpose and goals of my research to the participants. The purpose and goals are referenced in the consent form and I verbally state them before I began the interview session. This step is important (a) to gain the trust of the participants and (b) to reassure them that I would remain ethical and engage in ethical practice throughout the research study.

Another aspect of the role of a researcher is reassuring your participants that you are capable of conducting a comprehensive study. To display my knowledge of the research topic and my capability, I examined the existing literature regarding mentoring, mentorship, and school-based mentoring programs. Coupled with my experience as a mentor and an advisor in STARSS and also my experience as a mentee, I was able to enhance my credibility, which reassured the participants of my benevolence and integrity toward them and the study. Additionally, my work ethic, genuine curiosity, and commitment to STARSS and mentoring enhanced my credibility, which reassured them as well—making the communication and our conversations during their interview session effective and meaningful.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, it was important for me to ensure the integrity of each participant, their work, and voice. To accomplish this goal, I maintained a sense of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout the study. Shenton (2004) mentions that credibility in a qualitative study is internal validity—it ensures that the study measures and assesses the intended study. Transferability is external validity, meaning with the knowledge learned from the study, I can transfer my findings to a similar study. Dependability means I can repeat the research procedures and receive similar results however, in most qualitative research variables are subject to change. To accomplish dependability, taking accurate and detailed field notes was important, as well as transcribing audio recordings accurately, and meticulously documenting research procedures. Lastly, confirmability is to ensure objectivity, which means I addressed my findings or evidence objectively, and I created a space for the participants to articulate their experiences and tell their story (p. 73).

Additionally, I worked to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants. In this case, the idea of privacy and confidentiality is different and should not be used synonymously. Beauchamp and Childress define privacy as a person's ability to limit access to their information and they define confidentiality as a person's ability to control access to the information they have shared (as cited in Glosoff & Pate, 2002, p. 22). Complex in nature and in its meaning, the idea of privacy and confidentiality enabled me to gain the trust and confidence of the participants and in practice it ensured them that I would value and bring honor to their story. As a best practice, before each interview, I

made sure the participants received and signed a copy of the consent form that highlighted the description and purpose of the research study, the importance of their participation and responsibility as a participant, my methods to collect data, potential risks and benefits, and the idea of confidentiality and privacy.

In addition to the consent forms, I assured them that field notes and their transcriptions would be stored on a password protected computer and the school, school district, and their identity would be given a pseudonym, meaning the participants, are not identified by their given names. The pseudonym I gave to each participant was based on a character trait and my interactions with them throughout their tenure in the program. Lastly, to ensure the integrity of the study, the participants were emailed an encrypted electronic copy of their interview transcription to check the accuracy of the transcription.

Positionality Statement

As an African American man, educator, and professional school counselor, I am engaging in this research through an unfinished lens. Unfinished, in relation to my education, learning, and sense of humaneness. Paulo Freire (2000) refers to an unfinished state of being as conscientization—an unfolding process that awakens our sense of critical consciousness (p. 149). In practice conscientization keeps people connected within the collective and enables us to empathize with the human condition, which gives us an opportunity to perform righteously against unjust social and cultural practices. For example, the current narrative and images of many African American males within our system of schooling. Currently, the narrative in the United States positions them as an academic and social problem in many schools and classroom spaces. Being African

American and a man who identifies with many of them, I feel disheartened and, in many ways, I feel angry by this biased narrative and images that fail to acknowledge who they truly are and see the value in their existence.

Additionally, and based on my experience, many educators and stakeholders within our schools, fail to see their humanness due to fear—the fear of knowing African American young boys and young men are human. They are humans who deserve our attention, advocacy, protection, and love. Therefore, I examine and use STARSS as a catalyst to subvert the biased narrative and images that are narrow and one dimensional regarding African American males. Based on the literature and personal experience, school-based mentoring programs that are culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining, allows them to assert their voices and tell their story as public intellectuals. This performance is a form of democracy and a sense of freedom in its purest form therefore giving them an opportunity to speak and engage in critical thought that contributes to our sense of humanness. Freire (2000) mentions, "Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world" (p. 88). Meaning, as educators, we have a responsibility to create spaces for people, especially those people who have been marginalized, to give them an opportunity to speak an authentic truth and tell a story that adds to a collective body.

Like many of the participants in STARSS, I am also a mentee. I have several mentors who I admire and depend on for guidance and support. I empathize with their eagerness, hunger, and need for success but most importantly, I empathize with their need for access to more opportunities and a space to tell a story that illuminates our intellect,

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our sense of resilience, and our need for critical conversations to assist and console us. West (2004) states, "A grand story and a large narrative—especially democratic ones— can channel their longings into mature efforts to contribute in a meaningful way to making the world a better place. This longing is the raw stuff of democracy matters" (p. 177). In other words, our stories can serve as a form of action, a democratic practice, that ultimately frees us from the dominant narrative—giving us an opportunity to grow and transform the world in which we live. Arendt mentions, "With words and deed, we insert ourselves into the human world and this insertion is like a second birth" (as cited in Biesta, 2014, p. 105). Meaning, our words and our stories do not only help to define who we are—they also bring new meaning to an existing world allowing people to see us and engage us as human beings.

The literature reveals that in practice mentoring and mentorship has the potential to transform the lives and trajectory of African American males and their education. Agreeing with the literature, my hope with the study is to add to the existing literature by illuminating the participants' voices and by positioning the STARSS program as a viable school-based mentoring program. As an educator, with cultural and social intersections that parallel many African American males, I am charged with the responsibility to secure spaces that allows them to speak unapologetically, to live without fear, and to secure spaces that validate their experiences. Lastly, my hope with the study is to begin a collective conversation around the idea of acceptance of people and their differences as a way to sustain us holistically.

Summary

In the chapter, PAR is presented as a qualitative methodological approach. In practice, I was able to focus on the validity and reliability of the research study. To collect the data, I used face-to-face and semi-structured interviews, a method that is commonly used in qualitative research to steer the data collection process. Additionally, the research questions that frame the study are mentioned, a historiography of the STARSS mentoring program is given, and I examine the idea of counter-storytelling, which coincides with the research method. I also give an overview of the research procedures, research instrument, which includes the role of the researcher, explain ethical considerations, and lastly, I state my positionality. The positionality statement takes into account my *why* and gives people insight into my work with African American males and mentoring programs like STARSS.

Another aspect of the chapter is an emphasis on the idea of counter-storytelling. Stemming from collective conversations, questioning cultural and social norms, and interviews, the idea and practice of counter-storytelling can add to a narrow or skewed narrative or it can completely negate a narrative. In practice, counter-storytelling gives people an opportunity to explore, reflect, and help tell a comprehensive story about their experiences, especially people who feel marginalized or devalued within our society. Lastly, the chapter serves as a reminder that education is not a performance in transferring knowledge, but a performance in sharing knowledge and creating new meaning from lived experiences. Using PAR as a qualitative approach and interviews as a method, the hope is to expand and contribute to a broader conversation that brings

attention to the idea of school-based mentoring programs, and marginalized voices,

specifically those of African American males.

CHAPTER V

RESEARCH RESULTS

In Chapter IV, I defined and introduced participatory action research (PAR) as my methodological approach and face-to-face and semi-structured interviews as my research method to collect the data. Per the literature, both approaches are common and are widely used in qualitative research, which is evident in some of the research studies I present and examine regarding school-based mentoring programs throughout the dissertation. Like the other researchers, I gravitate towards these approaches due to the opportunity it affords people to claim a sense of agency, especially African American young men. These approaches also give them a sense of ownership and shared responsibility in knowing they are a part of scholarship that has the potential to transform many lives. Listening to the young men in STARSS articulate their experiences validated my reasons for working towards academic and social change for all students. In many ways, their experiences were a reminder of my experiences growing up Black and male in a system of schooling that relied on dominant mediums to tell my story. Therefore, the use of PAR in the study was an appropriate and effective measure—creating space for African American young men, a traditionally marginalized group, to claim their voice and tell their story.

In practice, PAR gave the STARSS participants, especially the young men, a sense of consciousness regarding their world and an opportunity to engage in the research

process. Additionally, and contrary to some critics, PAR in practice did not exploit the

participants' human condition, compromise or reject traditional forms of scientific

research, or compromise my work as the principal investigator (McNicoll, 1999, p. 52).

The use of PAR enabled me to determine the effectiveness and influence the STARSS

mentoring program at Excellence High School had on its participants, especially the

African American young men. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to feature the

application of PAR and the content from the participants' semi-structured interviews, and

the influence these methods had on my research. Additionally, I give a description of the

population sample group, the results of my research using PAR and semi-structured

interviews, and I present the data analysis.

The Application of PAR and Semi-Structured Interviews

Using PAR as a methodological approach positioned the participants in the

STARSS mentoring program as knowledgeable researchers, agents, and as agents who

were invested in personal development and growth. This methodological approach

enabled them to help identify and unpack the problem as a collective, enabled the

mentees to examine their experiences through a neoindigenous lens, and collectively take

action by telling their story. Additionally, in practice, the participants embraced their role

as my co-researchers and intentionally shared their stories to help transform the climate

and culture at Excellence High School and the scope of 21st Century schools. Duncan-

Andrade and Morrell (2008) assert,

> In traditional research, indigenous populations, to the extent that they are involved
> at all, are generally positioned as the *objects* of research. They may be
> interviewed, video tapped, followed around, observed, examined, or tested. Their

role is to provide information to experts who can then figure out how best to help them (or understand them). (p. 108)

Meaning, often traditional research does not take into account its participants sense of humaneness to engage and enhance scholarship through lived experiences and through their sense of agency. As the principal investigator, partnering with my participants, especially the mentees, gave us an opportunity to produce knowledge and create new meaning with hopes of resolving the overarching concerns regarding African American males, which is their academic achievement. Ozanne and Sattcioglu (2008) suggest, "Action research must demonstrate outcome validity—the research must lead to a successful resolution of the relevant problem" (p. 426). Meaning, practitioners who apply this approach are invested in solution oriented work—a work that not only addresses the concerns but takes action to find a resolve.

The literature states, the operative word in PAR is "action," which challenges its participants to move beyond critical discourse pertaining to topical issues they deem problematic, and it encourages them to move towards action. In Duncan-Andrade and Morrell's work, they use PAR to examine the South City High Futures Project, a summer seminar program situated at the University of California, Los Angeles. Similar to STARSS, the participants consisted of urban teens, teachers, and parents. However, they were apprenticed as critical participatory action researchers who focused on urban and educational inequalities, the relationship between students and teachers, and the relationship between students and the world in which they lived (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 110). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell framed their work using Paulo

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Freire's idea of popular cultural notebooks, which illuminates the experiences and cultural practices of their students and the idea of teaching from and through lived and shared experiences.

From 1999 to 2004, the student researchers in this program engaged in critical theory, cultural studies, educational sociology, which allowed them to participate in our political system, by attending the Democratic National Convention in 2000 as concerned citizens and researchers. They also addressed legal history by examining the political, economic, and social implications of Brown vs. The Board of Education. They addressed social theory and engaged in qualitative research that explored the idea of access and equitable practices regarding students who attended Los Angeles public schools (p. 113) To say the least, PAR in practice empowered them to take ownership of their school, home, and community, which helped to position them as public intellectuals. Based on my experience, the idea of public intellectuals are people who actively engage in the disruption and dismantling of inequitable social systems such as our political, economic, and educational systems that often leaves people of color, the poor, and working poor disenfranchised. Their participation in the program and work helped to change and shift the culture of young people and the idea of youth activism. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell states, "Changing the nature of instruction or changing the ideology of effective practice has direct implications for what it means to teach" (p. 129). In other words, educators who engage our students in non-traditional ways, make teaching and its practice authentic and tangible for many students.

Even though the initial goal of STARSS was to socially engage the young men in activities that made them feel connected to EHS currently, the structure of the program is reminiscent of the focus and action of the young people who participated in the South City High Futures Project. However, the call to initiate change and a cultural shift regarding education in the United States and African American young males happened organically for the participants in STARSS—meaning it was not an initial goal. Through the evolution of the STARSS mentoring program the young men learned to claim agency and voice. Hence the reason purpose of PAR, the young men were able to assert their voices during the interview and take action by embodying the role as public intellectuals and counter-storytellers. The content in their interviews gives insight into the academic and social crisis that plagues many African American young men in public schools throughout the United States. Additionally, their interviews are a part of a growing trend in qualitative research and in the social sciences. Anastas (1999) mentions, in all of its varied complexity, interviews account for at least 90% of social science data that is collected and presented (p. 350). This statistic tells me that there is a desire and a need to hear directly from people, especially our youth and to examine experiences through various lenses. Based on my experience conducting face-to-face interviews with the STARSS participants made the research experience authentic, thus validating their experiences and my reasons to document their story.

Description of the Population Sample

To assist with the study, I had an opportunity to interview a total of 17 participants (see Table 2) who actively participated in the STARSS mentoring program at

EHS. As previously mentioned, an active participant is defined as a person who served as a mentor, mentee, an advisor, or advocate in the program and participated in the activities and attended the events designed for the program. The participants consisted of 10 mentors and seven mentees. Of the 10 mentors there were seven teachers who taught courses in Social Studies, World Languages, science, English, and mathematics. The other three mentors were a Professional School Counselor, an Administrator, and Media Specialist. Their educational experience ranged from six to twenty-five years with an age range of 25–65 years old. The gender and cultural makeup of the mentors included one identified as male; nine identified as female; four identified as African American/Black; five identified as white; and one as Latina. Lastly, their philosophy of education consisted of common words and themes such as culturally relevant education, high expectations and standards, collaboration, student-centered, engaging in a healthy teacher and student relationship, and responsibility.

The seven mentees consisted of six participants who attended EHS all four years, and one participant who attended EHS for three years. Their graduation years span from 2015 to 2018 and their age range is 18–21 years old. The mentees all identified as male and African American/Black, and five of them are enrolled in college, either a two- or four-year institution, with two participants established in the workforce. Many of their goals and aspirations are to become successful and to live a life that is pleasing to their family and community. In addition to the STARSS program, many of them were involved in athletics, and based on the information they provided on the demographic form, they overwhelmingly believed their teachers and administrators supported, valued,

and honored them while attending EHS. They also viewed their experience in STARSS as a sense of brotherhood, a safe space, a time to live up to their parents' and teachers' expectations, and as a space to explore their identity. These themes help to frame and analyze the data that I collected from the participants' interviews.

Table 2

Description of Interviewees in STARSS

Description of Adult Interviewees in STARSS:	Description of Student Interviewees in STARSS:
• *Mr. Activist* – Principal Investigator, Advisor, Professional School Counselor, Co-Facilitator in the STARSS Honors Academy and Mentor • *Mrs. Advocacy* – Professional School Counselor and Mentor • *Mrs. Beacker* – Science Teacher and Mentor • *Mrs. Compassion* – Former World Languages Teacher-Spanish and Mentor • *Mrs. Ivory Coast* – World Languages Teacher-French and Mentor • *Mrs. Justice* – Social Studies Teacher, Creator of the STARSS Honors Academy and Co-Facilitator, Advisor, and Mentor • *Mr. MoMa* – Former Administrator and Student Advocate • *Mrs. Pupil* – World Languages-Spanish and Mentor • *Mrs. Read* – Media Specialist, Co-Facilitator in the STARSS Honors Academy and Advocate • *Ms. Swoosh* – Mathematics Teacher	• *Mr. Driven* – Mentee, Peer Mentor, and 2017 graduate • *Philia* – Mentee and 2016 graduate • *Mr. Westbrook* – Mentee and 2018 graduate • *The Intellect* – Mentee and 2018 graduate • *The Mayor* – Mentee, Peer Mentor, and 2017 graduate • *The Poet* – Mentee and 2018 graduate • *Young Malcolm* – Mentee, Peer Mentor and 2016 graduate

and Mentor • *Mrs. Woolf* – English Teacher and Co-Facilitator in STARSS Honors Academy	

Findings

In the literature review, I use three themes that help to explore and unpack mentoring and mentorship. The themes were (a) mentoring as a verb, (b) the idea of resistant masculinity and mentoring, and (c) mentoring for social change. Here, I revisit these themes, however, I make them applicable to the STARSS program, and I use them to frame the content in the participants' interviews, which answers the three questions that ground the study. Under the guise of PAR, they are also similar to its three principles, which are (a) the idea of collective investigation of the program, (b) indigenous knowledge to understand and examine the problems that are the greatest concern to indigenous researchers, and lastly, (c) the desire to take individual or collective action to resolve the problem (McIntyre as cited in Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008, p. 109).

Currently, African American males trail behind many of their peers academically, which is problematic. Additionally, and based on my experiences, many educators in various positions are working in isolation versus taking a collaborative approach to combat this social crisis. Lastly, many educators solely focus on cognitive development—neglecting their social and emotional needs or their need for wholeness. As a school counselor, I realize their social and emotional needs contributes to and

influences their academic achievement and failing to address this aspect of their schooling is also problematic. Many African American young men who are being schooled within our schools are falling victim to these glaring problems that permeate their classroom spaces and school experiences. However, the research findings begin to combat these systemic problems by illustrating a need and the importance for educators to honor, shape, and accept the differences of African American young men.

The STARSS Mentoring Program as a Verb

Before the creation of STARSS, it was important for the advisors and mentors to have a shared vision and agree to being involved in a program that would essentially disrupt the status quo within EHS. As previously mentioned, the STARSS mentoring program began out of a need to address the lack of social involvement for some of the African American young men who attended the school. At the time of its creation, many of the advisors and mentors were only hoping to influence their social behaviors but unbeknownst to them, their influence and commitment to STARSS grew the young men in ways that shifted their need from focusing on the young men socially, eventually focusing on their academic performances. I attribute the effectiveness and success of the STARSS mentoring program not only to the advisors' and mentors' shared vision but also to the varying ideas that make up their philosophy of education—two in particular: Mrs. Justice, an advisor and mentor who also teaches Social Studies and African American History and Studies, and Ms. Swoosh, a mentor who teaches mathematics. Mrs. Justice states, "My philosophy of education is discovery learning. I believe that hands-on learning is the best approach that prepares students for the real world after

graduation." Having worked with Mrs. Justice throughout the program, her philosophy of education is more than words. With each lesson, activity, and encounter with the young men, Mrs. Justice modeled her philosophy daily, thus being a positive influence in many of the mentees' lives.

Additionally, Ms. Swoosh asserts,

> Um, I have a very relationship-centered philosophy of education. I feel like the one constant thing between every student that I've ever taught, no matter their grade level, no matter their ability level, is that they respond better and they're more comfortable and they get more out of, um, any type of education when they feel like they have a relationship and someone who really cares about them as a whole, not just as a student, um, in a classroom. So, my philosophy of education starts in the heart of, it revolves around building relationships with my students.

In other words, her philosophy of education focuses on the idea of relationship building, which the literature revealed is a contributing factor in the academic achievement and success of many African American males within our schools and classroom spaces. The commonality in both philosophies focuses on the idea of learning from a vantage point of experiential learning, relationships, a sense of criticalness, and wholeness.

The advisors' and mentors' shared vision and their philosophy of education enabled them to unapologetically address the culture and climate at EHS, which to some, it appeared to be exclusive and divided. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the idea of exclusiveness and divisiveness was partially due to the redistricting plan that affected many families in the EHS community. Mrs. Beaker, a science teacher and a mentor, recalls her experience prior to the STARSS program. She mentions,

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I have only ever taught at Excellence, so the only climate and culture I have to compare it to is my own high school experience several decades prior. So, I feel like coming into Excellence it was a very...it's a school divided in that there's lots of different groups of people and I felt like those students did a really good job keeping themselves separated despite what the teachers might have done otherwise.

The students Mrs. Beaker refers to here are African American students who were directly affected by the school redistricting plan. Her sentiments were shared by other teachers at EHS who believed, at the time, they were doing their best to create an inclusive environment, particularly for these students. However, some teachers and students of color felt that their best was not good enough. This research supports their sentiments and reveals many of the teachers' cultural and social biases and perceptions regarding them, specifically African American males was a contributing factor as to the reason many of these students separated themselves.

During the participants' interview, I asked them the following question, "Before participating in the STARSS mentoring program, what was your perception of African American young men in 21st Century schools and has your perception changed?" Some mentors and advocates in the program gravitated towards a familiar answer, which echoed the cultural and social myths that historically define and marginalize most African American young men. Mrs. Read, a media specialist, a co-facilitator in the STARSS Honors Academy, and an advocate of STARSS, explained her perception, which shifted and changed as she became involved and began to develop a relationship with the young men in STARSS. She explains,

Just from what I saw. They tend to score lower. They tended to not be as driven to read and like, check out books as their Hispanic and their white counterparts. So, the present, my perception, first of all, I've gotten to know, um, lots of African American boys. Yeah, so I am much more conscious of what my thoughts are. When I see a student with his pants down below his hips—I guess my perception, like if I had seen that out on the street before being here, and how much of it is in the STARSS program and how much of it is just being here...I don't know that I could sift that out necessarily, if that's fair enough.

In her explanation, Mrs. Read acknowledges that her work with the young men in STARSS and the work to forge a sustaining relationship enabled her to see past their style of dress and see them for who they truly are—young men who deserved access to an equitable education. Her revelation reminds me of Mr. Westbrook, a mentee and scholar in the STARSS Honors Academy, and Mr. Mayor, a peer mentor, both of who remind us that it is not wise to judge a book by its cover or people based on their appearance, intellect, etc. Additionally, Mr. MoMa, a former administrator, advocate, and a person who identifies as an African American male, along with Ms. Swoosh, and I, the Principal Investigator (PI), advisor, and mentor in the program, explain the idea of perception at EHS regarding African American young men through a different lens. They state,

[Mr. Moma:] My perception was that African American males needed more support, they needed more structure, they needed more specific instructions in terms of content, they needed more social skills just really specific instructional social skills and development—I tell you the STARSS program really changed my perspective on what can be done to assist African American males and how effective it can be.

[Ms. Swoosh:] I really didn't have a specific perception. Um, because being an African American woman, I've grown up around African American men all my life. So, I know that there is no, um hard and fast rule when it comes to the stereotypes that a lot of people put on African American men. Um, and so there was never a perception.

Additionally, my perception of them coincided with my childhood upbringing and conditioned thoughts that were opposite of the dominant narrative regarding African American males. Meaning, I perceived them to be intellectuals, "street savvy" accountants and entrepreneurs, lawyers, etc. However, my perception often did not align with my reality—I saw fear, young men who wanted to be loved, and untapped potential and ambition. Realizing, our perception can cause us to miss the good in many students, particularly African American males and if we are not careful, we may find ourselves perpetuating cultural and social norms and biases that often places them at a deficit within our spaces of learning. Based on my experience, as educators, we often operate between two extremes. Either, we are placing African American males in a position to receive *special* attention and learning without educating them towards a sense of criticalness and wholeness, or we have become desensitized to their state of existence— making us numb to the reality of how they are perceived.

Surprisingly, some of the mentees also had difficulty answering this question and like some of the mentors and advocates of STARSS they relied on a conditional state of familiarity as well, which leads me to believe educators are not the only people who have become desensitized to the way African American males are perceived in our spaces. With an unprecedented amount of turmoil surrounding African American males in the United States, from police brutality to violent performances among themselves, some of the mentees were oblivious to how they are being perceived. However, some were conscious of how they were being perceived and they understood that the idea of perception, in relation to them, under the gaze of the dominant culture was false and

unjust—an untruth that positioned them as being one dimensional. Young Malcolm, a

2105 graduate from EHS, a peer mentor, and mentee, states,

> I saw us as you know...a disadvantaged group. I saw us like you know...if it was a race we were in last basically. We didn't really care about school; where was school gonna get us? We can ball; we can go and try to play sports in college; you know...go pro or you know...a lot of people want to rap. I never saw you know...African American men going to school and earning a PhD and becoming professors, becoming doctors, or becoming lawyers…that's why it was always like a blessing, especially with the STARSS program; you guys brought through like plenty of successful African American men who have been in the same shoes as us that have you know...beat the barriers.

Young Malcolm, along with a few other mentees and mentors, captured the essence of

the question through their answers. Here, Young Malcolm acknowledges the advisors,

mentors, and guest lecturers who spoke with him and mentored him contributed to a new

way of thinking, which shifted his thoughts and images regarding African American men.

Now, he realizes despite the dominant narrative, African American males are more than a

disadvantaged group, more than athletes and entertainers—they are a group of people

who care about school and their social well-being.

Young Malcolm was not the only mentee and peer mentor who began to shift his

thinking after participating in STARSS. Mr. Driven, a mentee, peer mentor, and a 2017

graduate from EHS, prior to his STARSS experience admitted that he helped to

perpetuate a skewed and ill image of African American young men. He states, "Um,

socially, I basically stayed to myself and quiet, I just sat in the back of the room. Like I

said before ahh...on an academic level it was...I was trying to pass with the lowest grade

and just make it through." Another mentee, I call him The Intellect, a 2018 graduate from

EHS and mentee, shared a similar experience. He asserts,

> I didn't really have any major goals for myself. My academic interest, it's sad to
> say, my academics I felt like a "C" was okay to me but the social part—it's like I
> just wanted to have fun. What I was focusing on...like in class...talking and just
> laughing all the time but I wasn't involved in my educational purpose.

These academic and social performances in some ways validate the authenticity of their

teachers' skewed and ill images of them. In fact, some of the mentees I mentored in the

program were not conscious of their behaviors and for the mentees that were conscious,

they did not begin confronting these hindering behaviors until the advisors and their

mentors began to intentionally work with them on changing the behaviors. Mr. Driven

recalls, "My grades started getting better, from like D's and C's to B's and C's, and some

A's. I started studying more and I had more help from my teachers." The Intellect also

recalls his experiences while in STARSS, he states,

> It became like a "C" started to look like a "D" to me. A "C" started to look like a
> "D" to me because I saw a "C" as something worse now, and socially whenever I
> was talking in class most of the time it would be about the work.

While in the STARSS mentoring program, Young Malcolm, Mr. Driven, and The

Intellect abandoned the idea of cool-posing or the need to downplay their intellectual

abilities just to simply be a part of the status quo. With the assistance, commitment, and

patience from their mentor, they began to understand the importance of not only an

education but the importance of being educated.

As previously mentioned, Mrs. Justice was instrumental to the continuous

movement of the STARSS program from year-to-year. Her progressive way of thinking

enabled us to integrate African American History and Studies into the program during its

second year and with the assistance from teachers like Mrs. Woolf who taught tenth

grade English and support from administration, they created the STARSS Honors

Academy (SHA). The academy coupled with the mentoring program for a select few of

the mentees was effective, which gave them space and an opportunity to claim a sense of

academic agency. The idea of academy also helped to shift and move the needle on

curriculum and instruction at EHS. With African American History and Studies already

in place, Mrs. Woolf along with Mrs. Read was able to implement Guided Inquiry, a

research-based method that focused on literacy, writing, and research that specifically

interests the students. The implementation of this method ignited the mentees' curiosity

and their desire to learn. Mrs. Read mentions,

> When I worked with Mrs. Woolf, we were doing the guided inquiry project and so
> we were of course following the curriculum. Guided Inquiry is a structured form
> of research. We were very new at guided inquiry at that moment...We were
> teaching them research skills, informational study skills, informational research
> skills...One of our main goals, like our overarching goal was more of a character
> goal. We wanted them to feel empowered. So, we decided to empower these
> young men to feel like they can make a change.

The idea of empowering our mentees and working towards academic and social change

was their focus. In practice, Guided Inquiry allowed the young men to focus on social

justice topics such as childhood soldiering, food deserts, poverty, etc. Mrs. Woolf and

Mrs. Read's work with the students in the academy gained honorable recognition and as a

result, other teachers outside of the academy began differentiating their practice. They

began paying close attention to their classroom practice and the way their practice may

have been hindering their relationship with African American young men and their

academic achievement. Mrs. Compassion, a World Languages teacher who taught

Spanish and a mentor, reflects on the way she influenced curriculum and instruction

while working with the young men in STARSS as well as other students. She explains,

> Constant monitoring and realigning and um sometimes you have to move the
> finish line a few inches further or you have to make the scope a little wider but,
> finding ways to engage the students um and finding different types of assessments
> tools that brought out the best in each of them. I had a student who was very
> artistic and so, this student would not do very well on any paper test or any
> project unless it was artistically inclined. And, the student, I gave him projects
> and not only him, but I gave projects to the whole class because I didn't want him
> to feel excluded right but, once he got the um...inspiration to create there was no
> stopping.

The inspiration to create was modeled by the advisors and many of the mentors in

STARSS. In many ways, the inspiration to create was woven into their internal drive,

which connected them to their mentees and kept them engaged throughout the program

and in school. Their involvement and commitment to STARSS enabled them to shift their

classroom practices to meet their students where they were, and they also learned to value

and accept their differences in the process.

The STARSS mentoring program as a verb positioned its participants to move

towards a state of physical agency, meaning, movement beyond discourse and into a

realm of action. The mentors illustrate this through their engagement with their mentees

as they helped them connect to course content and learned to accept, negotiate, and honor their differences. Mrs. Justice mentions,

> I would say to shape that difference is to instill a sense of confidence in students. It is not my place to impose, uh, you know, any kind of views or expectations of who they should or should not be onto them. Um, so to shape is to listen, to question, to expose...expose them to a world outside of their own. So, shaping is connected to that negotiating...I think as a line to development perhaps...We're talking about moral development, we're talking about cognitive development, we're talking about...just where they are. Acceptance...I accept where they come from...So I accept and celebrate...You're from the hood. That's a beautiful thing because culture comes from the hood. It is not something with a negative connotation to be ghetto fabulous or come from the ghetto.

In other words, Mrs. Justice's idea of physical agency manifested itself in the form of tirelessly working towards building a trusting relationship with her mentees and embodying the idea of acceptance. However, as an educator, the idea of acceptance does not happen instantly, it takes time, patience, and a sense of genuineness to ensure students feel comfortable engaging in your practice. Therefore, as a verb, the STARSS mentoring program in practice engages its mentees in healthy relationships and healthy and critical movement. Meaning, in practice, STARSS offered its former mentees a space to develop and nurture a sense of trust, their identity, and acceptance and love for thyself, especially as young people who identified as being African American and male.

The Idea of Resistant Masculinity in the STARSS Mentoring Program

The concept of masculinity in STARSS was never a priority or an intentional focus. Aside from the occasional conversation and discussion around the topical issue of healthy and unhealthy relationships and the idea of treating women with respect—the topic of masculinity remained in the periphery. Ironically, I found this topic positioned in

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the peripheral in many of the mentoring programs I examined that intentionally focused on African American males, particularly during their adolescent years. If you recall, in the literature review, I alluded to the idea of redefining masculinity, especially for African American young men. I mention and make reference to the toxicity of masculinity and the false sense of consciousness that its current meaning gives to African American young men. Historically, the idea of masculinity has been positioned to represent patriarchy, specifically patriarchy that advantages men who identify as white, straight, and able body. In an interview in *GQ* magazine Pharrell Williams, a musician, performing artist, and business music mogul mentions,

> I think the truest definition of masculinity is the essence of you that understands and respects that which isn't masculine. If you ask me, when we talk about masculinity, it's also very racial, this conversation. Because the dominant force on this planet right now is the older straight white male. And there's a particular portion of them that senses a tanning effect. They sense a feminizing effect. They sense a nonbinary effect when it comes to gender. (p. 4)

Here, Pharrell is suggesting that the current and traditional meaning and model of masculinity that most men have come to know, understand, and embody is not authentic. He also argues that when the traditional and historical idea of masculinity is threatened some men who ascribe to this model become fearful. Additionally, and based on my experience, the idea is not only fearful for some, it can be confusing and misleading, especially for most African American men who struggle to find their place and sense of agency in the world.

As I reflect on the participants' interviews, Mr. MoMa's interview alludes to a shift in the mentees' nonconforming behavior regarding masculine norms while visiting

Washington, DC. During his interview, I asked Mr. MoMa to expand on the shift he witnessed and the nonconforming masculine behavior the mentees engaged in with each other, such as the signing, the laughter, camaraderie, etc. on the trip. He states,

> When we saw them...there's that kid that wants to play and have fun and wants to really just enjoy life and they had gotten to a point to where they were so comfortable with each other and there was...I don't feel like there was any kind of...there's so much competition in schools, there's this need for people to be a certain way to be buttoned up or just be "thugged out" or whatever and to have this image and that was just stripped away at that time because it wasn't even about anything like that it was about them having fun together and it was also a learning time. I think that they were learning, still even in that moment.

Mr. MoMa is explaining an aspect of masculinity of "which it is not." He alludes to a different meaning, a meaning that does not have to be stringent, hard, and it goes beyond the idea that men cry too. I witnessed this brief shift as well during our time in Washington, DC, and for the first time, as a participant in the program, I experienced a carefree spirit among the young men—a spirit that resembled a true sense of freedom.

After speaking with Mr. MoMa, I realized the advisors and mentors in STARSS may have missed an opportunity to redefine masculinity and the idea of being African American and male with our mentees or the opportunity to simply gage their thoughts regarding the idea of masculinity. The Poet, a 2018 graduate and mentee during his interview plays with the idea of being a man in relation to his feelings and emotions, which further suggests we missed an opportunity to unpack the unevenness of manhood and masculinity. As he reflects on the second trip to Washington, DC, with Mrs. Justice, he details an emotional moment during a workshop session one of the facilitators gave him the space to experience. The Poet states,

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Like...I can tell somebody this…they don't want to listen to it...somebody else can tell them something they'll listen but they don't want to listen to me. You know what I'm saying...that always used to hurt me and I used to stop caring, but he brought that out and I just started crying you know what I'm saying...and I realized that my mentors sent me on this trip for a reason and that reason was to find myself.

Like many of the young men in STARSS, The Poet finds a sense of self while experiencing and wrestling with his blackness and boy/manhood through a complex lens. After listening to him recall and claim this moment, I also realized the advisors and mentors in STARSS could have unpacked the unevenness of manhood and masculinity a bit more. Meaning, the way young men, specifically African American young men, have been conditioned to position their bodies regarding their emotions, the way they choose to love, care, and express compassion toward each other, and lastly, their feelings and thoughts toward women can be a crippling experience if not reimagined. In hindsight, the young men in STARSS would have benefited from a reexamination and a redefining of masculinity and the idea of Black boy/manhood. This idea appears to be a gap in many of the male mentoring programs I examined, including STARSS, which could make for a sobering and soulful experience for many African American males in mentoring programs.

The STARSS Mentoring Program and Social Change

When we think about the idea of social change often, I wonder about its place of origin—thinking where do people begin to make the changes that are needed within our spaces? After interviewing the participants in STARSS, I find that one of the places to begin with is understanding the idea of difference. During each interview session, I asked

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each participant to define the word difference and to no surprise, like our human make

up, the participants defined the word in eclectic ways. Interestingly, many of the

participants, specifically the mentors defined the word difference based on the subject

they taught or currently teach. For example, Ms. Swoosh defines difference in terms of

subtraction. She states,

> As soon as you said, difference I was like well, we subtract them out. When you
> make a difference, I feel like sometimes you are subtracting out. Um...an element
> of something, you know, like...when you make a difference in someone's life um
> a lot of times that difference is made by subtracting out um a negative element.
> Um, when I see a difference in the way a student um progresses over a semester
> or over a year's time I can see um the negative...you know negative people,
> negative mindsets, and things like that subtracted from their lives.

In other words, Ms. Swoosh's meaning suggests taking away the negative aspects of life

that are not conducive to a person's growth. Mr. Moma also explains, "Difference has to

do with variations along a continuum and change of certain aspects or qualities of

being—appearance, acting, culture, um...thought." Additionally, Mrs. Woolf states,

> I think that difference is everything that's outside of my own experience. So, the
> question really should be—what is actually the same? Like how do you, how can
> you be the same as somebody else in any way? So, I think that everything is
> different. I think that um, but I do think that society doesn't like that because it's
> so abstract.

Their definitions and criticalness of the word difference aligns well with the STARSS

program. Additionally, their interpretations encompass the mentees who needed negative

aspects of their lives extracted out and mentees who are on a varying continuum. The

mentors' idea of difference enabled them to value and honor their mentees, which

contributed to a sustaining relationship with some of their mentees. However, the process

of them understanding and accepting their mentees' differences did not happen instantly.

Firstly, the mentors created and participated in learning and social activities such as the

Breakfast for Champions, a monthly breakfast gathering, one-on-one sessions, team

building exercises, etc. that fostered a relationship with their mentees. Secondly, they

established high expectations for their mentees, which enabled the mentors to see them

with a sense of clarity and understanding. Mrs. Ivory Coast, who teaches French in the

World Languages department, reflects on her experience and the influence of differences

have on classroom instruction. She states,

> It definitely made me think more about a variety...you know, I think about
> learning styles...differences, but it goes beyond that so, um it did make me...it did
> affect my teaching as far as learning styles making sure I'm meeting all of
> those...and then you know...every year I've noticed I had to change depending on
> the student's different ways. I've learned I've had to have even more transitions
> and giving more flexibility and choices.

Working to understand her mentee's differences enabled Mrs. Ivory Coast to adapt her

pedagogy to meet not only her mentee's needs but the needs of other students.

When I asked the same question to the mentees their responses were similar to

many of the mentors. For example, Mr. Westbrook, a 2018 graduate and mentee, explains

his meaning of the word difference as, "Um...being yourself; um...not following people."

The Intellect defines difference as "not having the same thoughts or you may have the

same interests, but not having the same thoughts, different views on somethings." The

way the mentors and mentees define the word difference gives credence to the

intersections that many of them embody, particularly the mentees. Therefore, educators

who view people as being one-in-the same, especially African American young men

negate the idea of difference and the intersections that make them whole. As a follow up

question, I asked the mentees to describe the ways they felt their mentors shaped,

honored, and accepted, their idea of difference, and to my surprise, most of them gave

authentic and passionate responses. Mr. Westbrook states,

> Um, basically, they shaped me like...I came to high school like you know...like I ain't gon say messed up but, you know...not on the right track. They basically just talked to me. They honored it by like...they saw me make improvements, like...when I made improvements, they told me like...you are doing good and stuff like that. Like...keep it up, and all that...ahh...they were just talking to me like you smart; you um don't let nobody tell you different. I'm going to talk about my um...emotions. My emotions, they never made me feel bad about it just like...I mean they'll get on me if I tell them what I said to my mom or sometimes they'll be like...why do you say that? They never got on to me, you know bashed me; they'll just like you know...they'll listen and just you know...talk to me.

The Intellect reflects and responds to this question in a way that speaks to his mentors

validating his thoughts and voice. He states,

> One way they ahh shaped it was by playing like...devil's advocate. Because, they would say the total opposite of what I'm saying and then of course that would make me think. They honored it by something that I said—they understood, and they added on to it instead of just trying to change me. They accepted me by...they helped me thrive in different ways that I wanted to.

Mr. Westbrook and The Intellect were two of many mentees who felt and believed their

mentors heard them and made them visible. They both recalled the sense of humanness

their mentors displayed in their classroom performances and in their responses as they

were encouraged to do well academically. Additionally, they appreciated them for not

minimizing their emotions and correcting wrongs without judgement. Lastly, the

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gratitude, respect, and love they have for their mentors is apparent and telling throughout

the responses, which appeared to be shared by their mentors as well.

Another aspect of implementing social change is recognizing that it requires

critical conversation, intentional strategizing, and action, especially for school-based

mentoring groups and other forms of mentorship. The advisors and mentors realized they

needed to do more than socialize, assimilate, and condition their mentees to the EHS

way. Therefore, they intentionally changed their educational approach and practice to

reflect a culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. Mr. MoMa reflects on the

experience and states,

> Well, I think that the evolution of it and the eventual development of the STARSS
> Academy really made a difference you know having those African American
> males in the language arts class together, having them in the um African
> American Studies class together eventually, they were in an engineering class
> together. One thing that comes to mind is when Mrs. Woolf had that project that
> she did with them um about social um...some social justice kind of issue that they
> did projects on. Um, those kids would never have had an opportunity to develop a
> Prezi presentation based on something that was meaningful to them that they can
> write a plan for.

As one of the co-facilitators in the African American History and Studies class, I was

intentional with my lessons and planning as I worked to ensure they learned from a

historical and cultural perspective—introducing them to multiple voices and ideologies

regarding the course. One of my favorite lessons involved the young men researching an

activist who influenced American culture and Young Malcolm choose Malcolm X. I

vividly remember his commitment and excitement for the project as he would deliver a

presentation that honored the life and legacy of Malcolm X, which ignited his sense of

activism. Additionally, many of my lessons challenged them to examine their historical

presence through an economic, political, and social lens regarding topical issues such as

race, youth activism, police brutality, and perception. My experience with my mentees in

different spaces enabled me to appreciate them holistically.

From addressing the mentees' social needs to positioning them as public

intellectuals, the advisors' and mentors' active involvement in STARSS not only

influenced curriculum and instruction, their involvement also influenced the climate and

culture at EHS. During Mrs. Compassion's interview, she reflects on the influence

STARSS had on EHS and her students. She reminisces about Black Futures/Black

History Month and the importance of immersing the month in the culture of Española.

She mentions,

> The Black History month...the awareness um in my classes—I try to also, through
> the years, have my Black History month in Española. And, ahh because we go
> hand-in-hand—you have um Jackie Robinson next to Roberto Clemente. Roberto
> Clemente was also black, but he was Puerto Rican, and nobody thought of him as
> black they thought of him as Puerto Rican. Well, maybe they did I don't know?
> But I never thought of him as a black ball player, you know...I thought of him as a
> Puerto Rican so they…they face the same struggles, they face the same things
> um...just about the same time.

The immersion of the two cultures was important to Mrs. Compassion, it enabled her to

expand the Española culture by paying homage to African American History. In her

interview, Mrs. Compassion also explains that she was intentional with this particular

lesson. The purpose and goals were to empower her students and to have them create new

meaning, particularly the African American young men she taught and mentored in

STARSS.

Empowering our mentees to produce knowledge and create new meaning looked like taking ownership of their education, it looked like identity development and identity comfortability, and brotherhood. Additionally, it looked like the young men in STARSS claiming a sense of physical agency and becoming the students who we, the advisors and mentors, knew were there from the beginning: intelligent young men who needed a space to access their intellectual prowess. Mrs. Advocacy, a professional counselor, mentor, and advocate in STARSS explains the influence of STARSS both at EHS and in the lives of our young people. She states,

> The STARSS program still has an impact at Excellence High School they're reaching out to their counselor saying help me or you know what are my next steps and I've seen a lot of kids come and ask questions. Like, okay...I've applied to college, what's next? Um, I've had kids who are in your program come and say okay I was selected for verification, what does that mean? I mean they're talking to each other about that...they're telling other kids to come up and ask questions that you know that the other kids are sometimes afraid to ask or embarrassed to ask. The greater influence on the student population is that they're sharing the information that they're learning just by being in STARSS.

As public intellectuals, the young men in STARSS actively worked to change the perception of African American young men, particularly the African American young men who attended EHS. The mentees' presence and actions were complementary to some of the goals at EHS and appreciated by faculty and staff and among their peers. The Intellect asserts,

> People began to see that I was getting involved in many different extracurricular activities besides sports and other people began to do it. I'm not saying I was the most popular guy on campus but, they saw like oh, he's doing that and it seemed fun; it seemed cool like when I did the ahh African American Quiz Bowl. Friends that I didn't think even wanted to do that they got mad because they weren't asked

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>to get in that quiz bowl so it was like...they stepped their game up cause they were like...if he can do it...I can do it.

Additionally, Philia, a 2016 graduate and mentee simply subverted spaces within EHS by helping others. He states, "From helping, I pave the way to what we can do um... in this school for us, African Americans." Per Mr. Driven, the faculty and staff at EHS began to see him stating, "Like when people see me, they didn't see me as just another student they actually saw someone that had potential and they respected me, and I respected them." In other words, young men like The Intellect, Philia, and Mr. Driven began to make conscious decisions not to live and embody the dominant narrative as they worked towards the idea of social change.

In addition to recognizing differences and taking action to implement social change, reflecting on our experiences and the knowledge gained from the experience is another aspect to implementing and sustaining social change. During their interview, the participants in the STARSS program were excited to reflect on their experience and in many ways humbled by the knowledge that they gained from one another, especially the mentors who gained a wealth of knowledge from their mentees. Many of the mentors attributes the change in climate and culture to our mentees, which in many ways they single handedly inspired them to shift their mindset, a culture, and pedagogical practice by creating an ambiance of vulnerability. Meaning, the mentees' presence and actions demanded that their mentors and teachers acknowledge their humanness and accept them holistically for who they are. Mr. MoMa explains,

What I learned about them was that they just had so much more capacity for growth and compassion and care and concern for each other and for the school. I learned that if given the opportunity to be leaders and to take the lead and develop programs they could do it and do well like the basketball tournament. You know, these are the kids that would have not been in student council or any of the other student organizations, but they ran programs that was above the level of some of the things that student council did.

Here, Mr. MoMa references the mentees' abilities to plan, organize, and implement programs and events like the 3-on-3 basketball tournament, which helped to raise money for STARSS. Their ability to implement a fundraiser and raise money was a performance that aligned with the advisors' and mentors' goal, which was to instill self-sustaining behavior but under their terms of comfortability. Meaning, as I mentioned before, the goal of STARSS moved beyond the idea of socially assimilating or conditioning them to a culture that was not always welcoming and appreciative of their presence. We wanted to empower them in a way that inclusiveness and the acceptance of other people became automatic and without question. The last question I asked Mrs. Read regarding the idea of social change was, "What are you doing to shift the mindset of other people?" She states,

That's hard. I talk, I talk, and I talk, and I talk. I talk to my white friends. I talk to my family. Um, the biggest thing is I just talk, I mean, I talked to my husband...talked about police brutality and stuff. "Well, if they would just lay there" and you know...I'm like it's not always that easy. Yeah, so it's that...it's that talking about it and to whoever will listen. And then, my work with the diversity collection and it reflects the kids and their stories and stories that they're going to identify with. So, I just talk...I just stand up.

If nothing more, the young men in STARSS have inspired people like Mrs. Read to initiate conversations with other people that perhaps would not have otherwise taken place. Often, the first step to implementing social change is to engage in critical

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conversations around difficult and uncomfortable issues like race, bias, privilege, perception, stereotypes, and cultural myths.

The young men in STARSS were an inspiration to their mentors, but most importantly they became an inspiration to themselves. During their interviews, I noticed the joy they embodied while reflecting on their STARSS experience. They were all grateful for the opportunity and the experience and for some, through their admission would have remained in mental and physical isolation if Mrs. Justice and I had not provided them with a space to access their thoughts, share their language and experiences, and access their freedom. The Poet mentions,

> It started to show me that I needed an education for life; for things; for my goals; for my goals that I always wanted to have in life. From the STARSS program, I see that education is more than just sitting in a classroom, talking to some people, and learning something on the board. Education is everything you know what I'm saying...you don't have an education, it's just hard and life is hard...period…. for real.

The Intellect also mentioned that the STARSS program changed his worldview by dispelling cultural myths and stereotypes regarding African American males, which allowed him to gain a sense of self-worth. He asserts,

> They were trying, other races were trying a lot harder than ahh African Americans because we didn't see our worth in this world so, STARSS began to show me my worth and that I can be as good as the next man no matter the skin color or even.

Regarding the idea of social change and the STARSS program, The Mayor asserts,

> Ahh, it made me realize how messed up the world is. Ahh, people...just the way people judge. You don't know anybody's story, I keep saying the same thing,

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cause it's so true. You just don't know, you never know what somebody is going through and the way we judge people...you think you might...ahh nah you judging them even if you don't think you are and it's just sad that's what we go through, especially as African American males.

In the program, advisors and mentors were intentional regarding the spaces we created—we made room to hear our mentees' voices. Here, The Mayor's response is honest and challenges us to question why some people within our spaces rely heavily on judging other people before deciding to accept them? Having the privilege of fostering a relationship with the The Poet, The Intellect, and The Mayor throughout their time in STARSS enable advisors and mentors to see them grow into young men with clear and concise thoughts. Their reflection of STARSS validates our work, commitment to the program, and to them. These young men learned to view life and the world in which they live through a conscientious and critical lens.

My experiences with the participants during their interview sessions were rich and meaningful and the content in their interviews answered the three questions that ground the research study. The content in their interviews also revealed several themes that echoed throughout our conversations, which I discuss in the analysis. The participants' candidness and honesty allowed us to talk openly regarding our educational system and the inequitable school and classroom practices that hinder many students, particularly African American young men who attend EHS. During the advisors' and mentors' interviews, we were able to discuss their internal challenges such as race, personal biases and privilege, and their mentoring relationship with their mentees as they attempted to find a position to navigate their body within their world. Additionally, I was able to have

an open conversation with the mentees regarding the idea of perception, their public image, masculinity, and their academic achievement. Lastly, their interviews allowed me to extract a sense of vulnerability from all of the participants while they reflected on a collective work and the inroads they made, specifically the mentees while actively participating in the STARSS programs.

Data Analysis

As educators, we often miss the mark when it comes to listening to African American young men and giving them an opportunity to claim a sense of agency. My experience, within educational spaces, suggests many educators dismiss their story, historical relevance, and humanness with skewed and subjective views of African and African American history and culture. Educators also dismiss many of their stories and performances by calling it "ghetto," "hood," or "ratchet" when we fail to place them neatly into the dominant culture's box. It is only when we provide them with a safe space that they feel comfortable asserting themselves and finding value in who they truly are. Bell (2010) states, "Students are hungry for spaces and curricula that provide context and historical knowledge to help them ground their own experiences and analyses" (p. 69). I witnessed this eagerness and hunger when the advisors of STARSS expanded the program to include African and African American history, studies, and culture, resulting in our mentees transforming their way of thinking. They began to resolve their present situation and most importantly they began to engage in collective discourse, which enabled them to reconcile their differences while acknowledging their sameness.

After transcribing and reading the participants' interviews, the content in their interviews were coded using the following themes, the idea of desensitization, the importance of identity development, student and teacher relationships, high expectations, and the importance of declaring brotherhood in safe spaces. These themes appeared as patterns throughout many of the participants' interviews. However, they are not a new phenomenon regarding African American young men and their academic achievement within our schools. These themes are explicitly displayed throughout many of the school-based mentoring programs I examined, with the exception of desensitization. From what I gathered, the current literature does not position the idea of desensitization within the context of school-based mentoring programs. However, I do. The participants' interviews revealed that there is a disconnect or a numbing effect between some of the participants and an authentic sense of consciousness. Additionally, I use these themes to aid in my analysis of the interview questions and the participants' responses to the questions. I illustrate these themes in practice with hopes of adding to a broader conversation regarding school-based mentoring programs, mentorship, and the academic achievement of African American males.

The Idea of Desensitization and STARSS

To begin with, I explore the idea of desensitization. I define desensitization as the lack of or a decrease in the levels of emotion and empathy people embody after experiencing or being exposed to violent language, performances, images, environments, etc. Henning et al (2009) state, "Physiological desensitization to real-life violence decreased sensitivity to happy facial expressions compared to angry expressions, lower

empathy, decreased prosocial behavior, and decreased school performance" (p. 171). In other words, when people who experience violent performances, regardless of its form, they may become desensitized to the human condition. Based on my experience, when people become desensitized to the human condition it becomes difficult for them to understand and to empathize with other people, especially with school-aged children. In this case and for my research purposes, I frame the idea of desensitization around inequitable school practices regarding the young men in STARSS who were expected to learn from their teachers and other professionals and perform in classroom spaces at EHS that were not conducive to their learning.

The literature reveals that 80% of African American children live in distressed communities, which includes high levels of poverty and violence—resulting in displaced anger, irrational behavior, and desensitization (Jipguep & Phillips, 2003, p. 387). Additionally, in 2001 the Surgeon General's report revealed that excessive exposure to violence, which is defined as an immediate or chronic injury to the psychological, social, or well-being of a person or group, can disrupt normal development for children and adolescents with grave effects on their mental, physical, and social and emotional health (p. 380). If we fast forward 18 years, I argue that children and adolescents who live in violent and impoverished communities, specifically African American young men, continue to encounter and experience mental and emotional anguish—resulting in many of them becoming disconnected, numb, or desensitized to "real world" experiences, which also affects many of the young men in STARSS. One of Mrs. Read's first

encounters with the young men in the STARSS Honors Academy was a bit telling. She

asserts,

> I think one of the biggest barriers that we faced, like in Mrs. Woolf's class was
> first of all um It almost felt like their drive was taken out of them. Um...like they
> um...and I don't know if this is conditioning. It makes me sad for them. Um, they
> just...they were so disengaged from school. Um, that's a huge obstacle because
> you know, of course, going back to my philosophy, all students can learn and it's
> our responsibility to reach down where they are and reach them. But by the time
> they get up to us in high school a lot of them are so beat down and disengaged.

In other words, she experienced a harsh reality for many African American young men.

When they become desensitized to the human condition, by way of poverty, violence, or

inequitable school practices within our school systems, it is my experience they lose their

sense of consciousness, zeal for life, and interest for learning.

During the mentees' interviews, I asked them the question, "Before participating

in the STARSS mentoring program, what was your perception of African American

young men in 21st Century schools?" Thinking, at the height of violent and egregious

acts against black and brown bodies, specifically black and brown male bodies, the social

and cultural disparities, and inequitable practices they may have experienced at

Excellence, I am thinking the question would warrant a fluid response followed by

critical conversation. However, and surprisingly to me, the question was difficult for

some of them to answer, as they appeared to be challenged by the idea of having to

reflect on and to identify with a social and cultural crisis that is currently threatening their

existence. Mentees such as Philia stated, "Honestly, I never thought of it like any type of

way honestly." Mr. Driven stated, "I didn't really think too much about." And The

Intellect stated, "I could say that my perception of African American young men was...I really can't say that I have one of African American young men because I was so focused on myself."

As the mentees and I continued to converse and unpack the question, all three stated that the STARSS mentoring program enabled them to see African Americans, particularly African American young men in a positive light after research and exposure to positive images within the culture, self-reflection, and building a rapport with other mentees and African American young men at Excellence. I asked the mentors a similar question pertaining to their perceptions of African American young men in 21st Century schools, and it appeared to me that some of them had difficulty answering the question as well. Some of them talked around the question until they reached a personal meaning, and some avoided the question altogether. Mrs. Woolf stated, "I had thought before about the differences between males and females, but I had never taken the opportunity to think about the different perspectives and experiences that races have in education and it didn't even occur to me to have those thoughts." And Mrs. Pupil, a World Languages teacher who taught Spanish and a mentor, states, "That's a hard question...um, I try not to think about people differently." During their interviews, Mrs. Woolf and Mrs. Pupil explained that the critical work and relationships they established while actively participating in the STARSS program helped them to subvert personal biases, stereotypes, myths, and personal fears regarding African American young men and their education.

The idea of desensitization is an authentic phenomenon that affects not only our physical, mental, and emotional well-being, but it affects our sense of consciousness and

our ability to exist with a sense of freedom. Currently, many African American young men, including the young men in STARSS, are experiencing desensitization throughout the United States. They have become numb to their human condition as a result of the dominant narrative that insists on making them the problem. The dominant narrative in relation to African American young men fails to show images and tell stories that reflect who they truly are, and they fail to uplift them spiritually. Here, I use spiritually in a non-religious way, I use spiritually as a form of connection and having access to a collective body that values and appreciates their worth. Additionally, due to a state of desensitization, many of them struggled to find a sense of self, a sense of self-worth and value, and a sense of identity. Listening to and engaging in conversation with the participants, especially the mentees, regarding the perception of African American young men, I realized that for many of them establishing and embodying a sense of identity was an important goal to accomplish while in STARSS.

The Importance of Identity Development and STARSS

When I think of my identity, I think of the intersecting threads such as my family, community, ancestors, maleness, blackness, and culture that works in unison to shape who I am. Maalouf (2003) states, "Identity can't be compartmentalized. You can't divide it up into halves or thirds or any other separate segments" (p. 2). In other words, our identity is like a synecdoche, a phrase that represents the whole that we cannot place into brackets or suspend in space. The concept of identity implies that in many ways people are unique and people are different, however it also reveals a single wholeness in people. Maalouf describes this single wholeness or identity as a pattern drawn on a tightly

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stretched parchment (p. 26). Hence, the importance for this kind of research. Giving the mentees an opportunity to embody their identity and share their experience enabled them to claim a sense of agency and to make sense of the human condition. It enabled them to own their narrative and, in many ways, divest from the narrative that is told by their adversaries.

As a professional school counselor, the idea of identity development is complex and arguably more complex and challenging for adolescents than any other developmental stage throughout our human existence. Additionally, when the idea of race is inserted as an identifier and in many cases a qualifier that makes up the total sum of our existence, the idea of identity is no longer a unique, intersectional, or singular experience for people, especially African American young men. The idea of identity, for many of them, is more complicated due to the dominant narrative that devalues and dehumanizes their human existence. Therefore, the idea of identity development was vital to the mentees at Excellence who participated in the STARSS mentoring program. It enabled them to confront, and in many ways, it gave them an opportunity to work through the different aspects of their identity, particularly unpacking the idea of being Black or African American and the idea of being a young man and embodying a sense of masculinity that they define under the social and cultural construction within their world.

Many African American young men at adolescence lack the experience and exposure to fully understand and embrace their positionality. W.E.B. Du Bois (2003) speaks on the idea of twoness but in relation to being American and a Negro. He speaks on these two warring ideals—two ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone

keeps it from being torn asunder (p. 5). In comparison, Du Bois's explanation of twoness

in relation to being American and Negro share the same undertones of being Black or

African American and a young man. These two warring ideals are in one dark body,

which is equipped to sustain the harsh penalties of life. The mentees' interviews in many

ways, exposed these two ideals. When asked I asked Mr. Westbrook to speak on the

perception of African American young men in 21st Century schools, he responded with,

"As African Americans...people you know put *stuff* on our backs like oh, he this and he is

that. It's some people out here that just...you know make us targets."

Although Mr. Westbrook does not explicitly explain his meaning of *stuff,* I

inferred that the *stuff* he was talking about were stereotypes and cultural and social myths

that perpetuates a narrative that paints him and other African American young men as a

social misfit or as a problem. In the interview with The Mayor, asking a different

question, he vividly remembered a situation where his presence was examined and

questioned within a space of shared ownership and responsibility. The Mayor begins to

tell his story, which involves an older white gentleman who insisted that he did not

belong in their neighborhood. The Mayor recalls,

> I'm driving through my neighborhood; this old man looking at me like I don't
> belong here...this is my street you know...So, it's just *stuff* like that. I pulled over
> and asked him, why are you looking at me like this? He said, "You don't belong
> here, this isn't your neighborhood." I said, "Sir, your neighborhood is built where
> my house is built." ...so, he didn't know.

Mr. Mayor goes on to tell another story that involved him and a white police officer who

stopped him while walking through an adjacent neighborhood to play basketball with a

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friend. He recalled the police officer pulling him over to examine and to question his presence. The Mayor responds to the officer with, "Sir, I live here, this is my neighborhood." The Mayor ends this part of the conversation by reminding me that as an African young man it does not matter your position or accomplishments—people like the older gentleman and the police officer only see black.

Mr. Westbrook's and The Mayor's stories validate Du Bois's idea of twoness, which also illustrates their frustrations and challenges with being young men and African American. Often, their identity is reduced to *just* being African American due to the *stuff* other people have been conditioned to believe about them. Due to the countless interactions with biased and racist people within their community and at Excellence, the mentors and advisors did their best to counter these experiences and to incorporate experiences that grew and developed the mentees' identity. During the interviews, The Poet references an overnight trip to Washington, DC, when Mrs. Justice introduced them to a program that gave them the *momentum* to move past their current state of isolation and societal rejection. The activities throughout the program enabled them to acknowledge their value and affirm their self-worth. The Poet mentions, "I learned how to trust myself and, I learned how to trust others." The Poet later credits Mrs. Justice and the STARSS program for giving him the opportunity to push boundaries, to find himself, and to claim agency not as a man, but as a Black man—a Black educated man.

The Importance of the Student and Teacher Relationship

Another theme the mentors' and mentees' interviews revealed was the idea of relationship. To have and be in a relationship is essential to our social makeup and human

development. As an educator, the student and teacher relationship in many ways helps to develop and shape our identity, hold us accountable, and if they are formed genuinely with an authentic basis, a healthy student and teacher relationship contributes to the academic achievement of many students, especially the achievement of African American young men. Harmon and Ford (2010) suggest, "African American students must have meaningful relationships with their teachers if they are to succeed academically" (p. 10). I also find this to be true with the young men in STARSS however, I take this idea a step further, not only does a meaningful relationship influence their academic performance—a positive and caring relationship influences their sense of consciousness and allows them to claim physical agency, agency that transitions into action within spaces of learning. Like the student and teacher relationship, the mentee and mentor relationship in STARSS I defined in terms of radical love. Kennedy and Grinter (2015) define radical love "as the empathetic, active, and passionate impulse to transform social relationships in ways that seek justice and freedom" (p. 44). Additionally, Gómez (2015) defines radical love through an eclectic lens and in a nondefinitive way. He describes this form of love in four terms:

> (1) The radicalization of modernity, which shows that love is a quest that aims to overcome the obsolete institutions of the industrial society through the full use of communicative strength; (2) the protagonist's role that we recover through individualization, causing us to rewrite our own life stories; (3) the role of dialogue and consensus in which communicative rationality replaces instrumental rationality, thus allowing egalitarian dialogue that aims for a consensus to achieve profound thought; (4) the re-encounter with emotions and feelings through a type of communication that seeks new types of relationships and the enchantment of the freedom to choose, all through dialogue, and even, arguments. (p. 45)

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Gómez refers to these four tenets as optimistic love, which helps to frame the idea of

radical love. In its simplest form, Gómez argues these four tenets will also set the tone for

people to embody radical love in the future (p. 45).

In practice, the advisors and mentors in the STARSS program used radical love to

promote a sense of trust and care, empathy, culturally relevant pedagogy, equitable

school practices, and they embodied radical love to advocate for programming that

supported their mentees' interest. The idea of radical love is reflected in many of the

participants' responses to the interview questions, especially the mentees. For example,

when I asked the mentees the question, "On a scale between one and ten (one being the

lowest and ten being the highest), what was your level of engagement and commitment to

your mentor?" Mr. Driven explains,

> Um it was a ten. I um I was committed all the way like...whenever I see him or
> her around, they made sure I was doing the right thing or just...in general I was
> always doing the right thing, so I was fully committed. Um, just doing what I was
> supposed to do...as in like studying, paying attention in class, doing my work and
> turning it in on time, and just doing what had to be done.

Mr. Westbrook reflects on the question, and he states,

> To my mentor um ahh...to my mentor it was probably like...it wasn't bad...it
> wasn't bad at all...it was probably a seven. When I got older like...junior and
> senior year—ten. I came to them every day, we talked, just like...you know we
> have good conversations you know...he'll keep me on track, he'll ask me how I'm
> doing, not even in school but even out of school and he calls me outside of school.

Based on their responses, the relationship they established with their mentors happened

organically, with time, and patience. Their relationship also appeared to be authentic,

trusting, and honest, which increased the level of comfortability between them and their

mentor making it less challenging for them to follow instructions.

They also used this style of relationship to disrupt spaces at Excellence that

perpetuated cultural norms rooted in bias and racism. Since its inception, the advisors and

mentors worked to establish a relationship with the young men in STARSS that would

grow their social and cultural capital. From the HistoryMakers kickoff, to meeting with

them one-on-one, to engaging them in critical conversation during the Breakfast for

Champions and other special programs, advisors and mentors in STARSS wanted to

establish a healthy and an authentic relationship that sustained the mentees' positionality.

Mrs. Beaker's interview illustrates a candid and authentic explanation in reference to

teaching her mentees the necessity of navigating or surviving social systems that did not

always work in favor for African American young men. Her words were honest yet,

difficult for me to hear. Mrs. Beaker referred to the navigation process as "playing the

game," which I am familiar with. However, coming from a white, privileged, but allied

position, the message she argued landed differently for me at that moment. She states,

> The game, navigating the rules of others to get yourself positioned so you can do
> what you want. The fact that the dominant culture exists and that there are rules
> and there are expectations that being in the dominant culture you don't even blink
> because you don't even recognize that they're there until you start saying well,
> hey look at that they really are and so, to take people who are already feeling
> marginalized by a culture, recognizing that it's there and then still hoping to
> navigate. I mean everybody has to navigate rules they feel less unfair...unless,
> maybe, if you're in the dominant culture? But to these young men, they still have
> to navigate it...to make a difference, to make a change; to get out; to make
> themselves the men they want to be.

Here, Mrs. Beaker acknowledges a system of rules that is unfair for many African American young men and to survive she suggested and encouraged her mentees to play the game, resulting in, to me, a false sense of normalcy and acceptance. However, Mrs. Beaker's sentiments are a recognizable truth, which I find problematic, even if it is shared by many people of color. The idea of playing the game to survive is thrust upon many African American young men—it teaches them the art of compliance and submissiveness to survive, which often strips them of their boyhood, youth, and freedom. To play the game means to perpetuate monolithic ideas in relation to race, gender, and socioeconomic status that elevates the dominant culture and reinforces systems that exude power and control. However, to Mrs. Beaker's argument and credit, I would rather see the young men in STARSS live another day than succumb to reckless acts of violence at the hands of white supremacy.

Conversely, Mrs. Justice used her relationship with the mentees to disrupt their spaces with conversations and performances that divest from the idea of survival. Through her lectures in African American History and Studies, giving the mentees an opportunity to plan and implement the Black Futures/Black History program, and her experiences as a mother, who raised a Black boy, Mrs. Justice taught her mentees there was more to life than just survival. To shape their relationship and sense of existence, she knew they needed more than acquiescent strategies to navigate a world that finds them problematic. From teaching them the nuances of civil disobedience, to critically questioning topical issues, to holding them accountable for their actions, to exposing them to humble and resilient people, Mrs. Justice knew relationship development

encompassed many of these tenets the young men needed. Additionally, she also knew

that by exposing them to people and spaces that would make them feel uncomfortable

and question their sensibilities would grow them as people.

During her interview, Mrs. Justice reflects on a college tour experience with some

of her mentees. She explained the importance of relationships in terms of trust, care, and

accountability. She recalls,

> One student was saying the most inappropriate things right there at the College. I
> didn't say a word...two of the other STARSS students redirected him. They didn't
> chastise him, they said, "Friend, you're very inappropriate and disrespectful. Mrs.
> Justice is sitting right here." I said nothing.

Mrs. Justice further explains the value she found in their conversation and this style of

relationship that holds people accountable for their actions. To embody this style of

relationship, requires a sense of trust and genuine care for other people. Mrs. Justice

states, "They will recognize certain things about themselves and each other and they

create this bond in this relationship that allows them to criticize each other and to uplift

each other like no other group or individual." Meaning, when educators establish a

relationship and share this idea of radical love with their students essentially, they are

nurturing them to become conscious people who are comfortable with themselves and the

people they connect with.

The beauty behind these two illustrations of relationship in terms of radical love is

that Mrs. Beaker and Mrs. Justice wanted the best for the STARSS students and their

mentees. Their intentions were different but genuine, and they both wanted to enlighten

the mentees' regarding school, their education, and the world in which they live. I recall

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Young Malcolm's appreciation for Mrs. Justice—Young Malcolm credits her for him successfully completing high school with the opportunity to attend college. He states,

> I tell everyone who went to Excellence and graduated from Excellence, I tell them all the time, I would not be where I am today without Mrs. Justice. I could tell she was really instilling in my head, you got a bright future, you can really go places, and do things, and so for the most part I never want to let her down.

It is this kind of relationship that enabled Young Malcolm to not only attend college but excel socially and academically. This kind of relationship also enabled the advisors and mentors to create and implement expectations the mentees followed without hardly any resistance.

Cultivating High Expectations for the Young Men in STARSS

The ideas of relationship and expectations work in unison. Based on my experiences, school-aged children who have a relationship with their administrators, teachers, counselors, etc. are more inclined to adhere to and live up to their expectations due to genuine and intentional interactions. This holds true for many of the mentees in the STARSS program. If the student and teacher relationship is not established, more than likely expectations are absent and if they are established and absent from the idea of a relationship then I question the level of the expectations. Expectations are the beliefs, attitudes, and values people, in this case, the advisors placed on their mentees (Harmon & Ford, 2010, p. 11). However, it is the level of the educator's expectations that may determine the academic and social achievement of their students, specifically African American young men. In many school systems in the United States, some educators'

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expectations for many African American young men are often lower than their expectations of their white peers.

I speculate, some educators' low expectations for African American young men is a result of their biased, racist, and sympathetic attitudes towards African American young men. It is by condition, some educators believe that human differences such as race attributes to our academic and intellectual differences, which often places the culture of whiteness at the helm. This way of thinking is called deficit-deprivation, and Fergeson suggests, "Teachers who subscribe to such beliefs hold low expectations of African American students' academic performance, which can result in poor performance, self-doubt, and the belief that academic achievement is the sole province of Whites" (as cited in Harmon & Ford, 2010, p. 8). In the literature, Ferguson also reveals that many educators, particularly white teachers who ascribe to this way of thinking, their classroom practice reflects preferential and privileged treatment towards their white students whom they willingly advocate for and support academically and socially (p. 11).

However, I argue white teachers do not wear this burden alone. Surprisingly, there are many teachers of color, who have low expectations and buy into the dominant narrative regarding African American young men and their achievement. Therefore, when educating African American young men, the race of the teacher is not always my concern per se rather it is the teacher's intentionality and their willingness to unlearn and shift their mindset to believe that African American young men can and will learn when given an opportunity. Due to the teacher demographics at Excellence High School, which was not diverse in terms of race, gender, or culture, the advisors had to rely on the idea of

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intentionality and the mentors' willingness to unlearn social norms to ensure expectations

for our mentees remained high.

In many of the interviews, the idea of expectations was mentioned by the mentors

and mentees. The mentees insisted, the high expectations that were placed on them

individually and collectively contributed to their growth and overall success and the

effectiveness of the STARSS program. The Mayor, who served as a peer mentor, he

recalls an encounter with one of his mentees who was performing inappropriately in Mrs.

Justice's class and as a result Mrs. Justice placed him in the hallway outside of her

classroom to reflect on his actions. The Mayor recalls,

> I said, Mrs. Justice, why is he out of class? She said, "Oh, he thought it would be cool to call me out of my name." I said, are you serious? She said, "Yeah. And don't worry I'm calling the principal." I said, let me talk to him real quick, let me see what I can talk to him about. He was talking about I'm having a bad day bluh...bluh...bluh… I don't want to hear any of that nonsense bruh...You're old enough to control yourself and not talk to teachers like that.

The Mayor reminds his mentee of the expectations that were agreed upon as he talks with

him regarding the concept of right and wrong and about the disrespectful language he

used when speaking to Mrs. Justice. The Mayor did his best to repair the damage that

occurred between Mrs. Justice and the mentee, which she greatly appreciated.

My tenure in the STARSS mentoring program enabled me to witness other

mentor and mentee performances that involved holding one another accountable

regarding their expectations. Ms. Swoosh, during her interview, explained one of the

expectations required of her mentees. Ms. Swoosh, explains,

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> I would have them stay after school with me. I wanted them to get comfortable, not only asking for help... Because I felt like a lot of our African American males feel the pressure um...to just...They have a hard time reaching out to ask for help when they need it. Um, so even if they did, even if they were in a place academically, um, to not need or come to tutoring, I would um, ask them to come to tutoring. And, if they really understood a concept, I would have them teach other students.

Another teacher who established and embodied high expectations from the beginning was Mrs. Woolf. She worked tirelessly to grow the mindset of the mentees in the STARSS Honors Academy. She states,

> Good is not great...good is the enemy of great. So, for me as a student and a teacher who always wants to be the best at everything because I am a perfectionist and a Type "A" personality and you know...um, It was a little bit of a challenge for me to find some common ground with them. Um, and so I had to shift my thinking a little bit and find ways to help them realize that they can exce.

Mrs. Woolf explains that she had to shift her thinking, which enabled her to encourage these young men and expose their greatness. She did this by switching the course from a college prep course to an honors course, which added academic weight to their GPAs. Additionally, the switch also raised the expectations and rigor of the assignments that were given to the young men, which they gradually embraced.

The idea of high expectations regarding the young men in the STARSS program was vital to their human growth and development and to their academic and social achievement. Each story illustrates the benefits of establishing and modeling high expectations within our schools and classroom spaces, especially with African American young men. As educators, it is imperative that we divest from the dominant narrative that perpetuates deficit-deprivation or thinking and divest from narratives that condition us to

think narrowly about this group of students. Embodying high expectations within our spaces of learning, I witnessed this firsthand from Mr. Mayor, Ms. Swoosh, and Mrs. Woolf. I also witnessed firsthand that African American young men have the capacity to learn and the capacity to embrace their education when they have genuine and honest support from people who are truly invested in them.

Cultivating Brotherhood in Safe Spaces

When I think of the idea of brotherhood, I reflect on my childhood and the relationship I have with my biological brothers. I also reflect on my fraternal brothers and the relationships I have cultivated with them. The commonality between the two is being able to cultivate these relationships in safe spaces or counter spaces within a world that I often find difficulty navigating. To know that we share a common bond and a growing space, in many ways helps to shape my identity. Therefore, I define brotherhood as a bond between two or more males who are not necessarily connected biologically and share commonalities within a growing space. Estrad et al. revealed in their research with Latino students that brotherhood was a meaningful aspect of their male identity that gave them an opportunity to help one another in a time of need (as cited in Brooms, et al., 2018, p. 54).

In many ways, the mentees in STARSS ascribed to these two meanings of brotherhood, which they modeled throughout the program. Many of them were familiar with the idea of brotherhood however aside from the idea of athletic engagement or being on a sports team—many of them had never experienced this kind of brotherhood in school. Mr. Westbrook recalls his brotherhood experience in the program, he states

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> People come to this program not knowing each other than end up um...leaving the program and actually being like brothers almost...If you never had a brother, it gives you an experience like...what it could be like...you know...you could actually love this person...you know...care about them like...you don't want to see them in danger or nothing...you know... y'all talk every day, and stuff like that so, like brothers; like closeness.

The Poet reflects on the experience in reference to one of his mentors and peer mentor and this idea of brotherhood, "Sometimes they cried, sometimes they smiled, sometimes they called me out of class to come down there and speak what my problems were... sometimes they just showed that they were a big brother." In other words, the Poet is speaking to the practice and the act of brotherhood, which he found solace in. Many of the mentees did not take their interactions with one another and their sense of brotherhood lightly. Through STARSS, they learned to support, love, and grow through one another from their current position.

Over time, this sense of brotherhood became a need for many of the young men. They relied on this sense of brotherhood to simply carry them through their day. Additionally, this sense of brotherhood became a part of their identity, which helped to shape their future selves. I attribute this to the advisors and mentors affording them the opportunity to commune and gather in a safe space that was counter to their conditioned classroom spaces. Trailer Six, or T6, was their meeting place, which helped them to shape not only their presence at Excellence, but it helped to shape and grow the people who attended Excellence High School. In many ways, T6 freed them from the oppressive and rigidness of the school and their classrooms; T6 gave them a breath of fresh air, and a space to cultivate discourse, knowledge, meaningful relationships, and a sense of identity.

Milner (2013) asserts, "Thus, teachers must provide spaces where African American males can develop a keen sense of their identity and how their identities have shaped in order to avoid "becoming schizophrenic" (p. 72) Meaning, African American young men need a space, especially within predominantly white spaces to unpack and work through their frustrations and to release this false sense of manhood that often holds them hostage.

Unfortunately, many African American young men are not given an opportunity or the space to become vulnerable to this idea of brotherhood. My experience suggests that without relationships and opportunities to bond with one another, many African American young men will find navigating our system of schooling, specifically high school more challenging than their peers. While listening to several of the mentees' during their interviews express their need and love for STARSS and I heard many of them say, if it was not for the program, they would not have been as successful at Excellence. The Poet mentions, "Even though it came to times where I was about to quit...But, I always had mentors...I always had that big brother that came to me and they pushed me...they pushed me...just to be better." The Poet's experience was one of many mentees who embraced the STARSS program and this sense of brotherhood that his peers provided. His experience in the program also enabled him to return the trust, support, and love that many of the mentees longed for.

Summary

In this chapter, I answer the research questions that ignited my interest and the need to conduct this kind of research. From how the mentors in STARSS embraced the lives of the mentees, to the way they influenced the climate and culture at Excellence, to

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the knowledge shared and gained by the mentees while in STARSS, the program is and was a success for the young men featured in the study. Framing the study using Effectiveness Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy appeared to serve as a best practice for the STARSS mentoring program. Additionally, my use of Participatory Action Research gave the mentors and mentees an opportunity to actively engage in the research study, share their experiences, and take ownership of their narrative. Using this as a methodological approach, I was able to employ semi-structured interviews and use the content to create a comprehensive picture of STARSS. This approach also adds to the success of the program and validates the need to structure other school-based mentoring programs using these theories and research methods.

The structure of the interview process allowed the participants and I to make sense of their experiences, discuss and unpack topical issues such as race, privilege, maleness, inequitable school practices, and pedagogy. The content in their interviews also revealed several themes that I use to frame the analysis. The idea of desensitization, identity development, the importance of the student and teacher relationship, high expectations, and cultivating safe spaces to establish a sense of brotherhood were the themes that echoed throughout the participants' interviews. My findings from the research are supported by the current literature, which suggests school-based mentoring programs work, and they are effective regarding school-aged children, specifically African American young men. Lastly, the research findings suggest that more work is needed around issues of race, the idea of black maleness and masculinity, protecting

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African American males in spaces of learning, and differentiated learning that leads to a

culture of acceptance.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION, RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND

CONCLUSION

Discussion

Mentoring is an act of communion and relationship, which helps to shape and

develop people especially adolescents. To aid in eradicating many of the academic and

social ills that plague them, especially African American young men in our schools and

classroom spaces, the existence of school-based mentoring programs like STARSS is

vital to have and to sustain in those spaces. In my research, I speak of a universal

overhaul that needs to take place within school systems throughout the United States. I

speak of this overhaul in terms of inclusivity, holistically serving our students, and

learning to honor and value differences students embody, especially the differences of

African American young men. School based mentoring programs have the potential to

not only showcase their differences but help to bridge and dismantle the disparity gaps

and most importantly subvert the dominant narrative in relation to them.

The idea of honoring and valuing differences is often overlooked or minimized in

education, especially regarding African American young men. In Mr. MoMa's interview

I referenced a conversation he had with a colleague centered around the STARSS

program and the idea of creating a specific space for them. Mr. MoMa's colleague

approached him in the hallway and in conversation subtly reminded him that the only

time clothes should be separated is when we do laundry and Mr. MoMa responded to his colleague by stating, "Yes. And, we also have to separate and place some of our laundry on a delicate cycle." Meaning, we have to intentionally give our attention to students and to the human condition even if that means to temporarily separate them from the collective. Ms. Swoosh explains it in terms of mathematics—if you recall, she explained the idea of difference as subtracting an element out to garner a greater reward or in the case of our mentees a transformative change that honors their position.

Evans (2005) mentions, currently, educators fail to address the differences of African American and Latino students. This includes their social, cultural, and learning differences that may affect them in our classroom spaces (p. 583). Many educational practices fail to acknowledge and welcome their differences into these spaces leaving many of them, specifically African American young men to assimilate to dominant conditions by playing the game or resisting the system of schooling altogether by simply disconnecting. In many cases this looks like, non-compliance to expectations and rules, a decrease in school attendance, failure to complete assignments, or adhering to a cool pose that does not represent their true intellectual prowess.

In my findings, I noticed the mentors in the study did not find difficulty in defining or understanding the term difference, but they did find difficulty in aligning or incorporating the idea of difference into their educational practice. I speculate this is perhaps due to their perception of African American young men and their implicit support of the dominant narrative and culture. For example, many of the mentors and teachers in the STARSS Honors Academy, like Mrs. Woolf and Mrs. Read did not

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recognize the mentees' value or worth until they began to work with them. Working with the young men in STARSS enabled them to witness firsthand the importance of acknowledging and incorporating the mentees' differences into their practice. They realized their differences afforded them an opportunity to infuse culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogy into their practice as well. Their acknowledgement of the differences the young men embodied allowed them to work towards sustaining their presence, which gave them access to dominant cultural competences. Paris (2012) asserts,

> A pluralistic society needs both cultural pluralism and cultural equality. Without such resistance students will continue the age-old American saga of being asked to lose their heritage and community ways with language, literacy, and culture in order to achieve in U.S. schools. (pp. 95–96)

In other words, the idea of cultural pluralism is essential to our students, especially to African American young men. Educators, like the advisors and mentors in STARSS, who work to sustain a pluralistic culture by acknowledging differences give students a sense of confidence and ownership in their learning and future achievements. In STARSS, this performance helped to dismantle barriers and forge relationships between advisors, mentors, and mentees. A relationship that the participants would not have had access to without becoming vulnerable to the idea of differences, the acceptance of one another, and learning from shared experiences.

Research Limitations

The limitations to the research study were minimal but worth an honorable mention. To begin with, I chose a purposive or selective sample, which may give other

researchers an opportunity to question the sampling group (e.g., its size, selection criteria, etc.). The subjectiveness of the sampling group has the potential to discredit my findings and give a skewed view of the research study. Another limitation is that many of the mentees' interviews fell short of the 45–60 minutes allotted time, which may negate the idea of an effective interview. Based on my experience, some boys and young men find engaging in face-to-face conversations difficult to have, especially if they are being interviewed and audiotaped. Additionally, the experience can be intimidating and challenging to navigate for some of them. However, the mentees did answer the interview questions, engaged in critical conversation, and articulately told their story, including the mentees who were intimidated by the experience.

I also decided to abandon the idea of a focus group that would have potentially helped to collectively unpack the themes I identified during the interviews. In practice, focus groups can be beneficial and like interviews they serve as an effective method to collect data in qualitative research, which enables participants to tell rich stories as well. However, I wanted to avoid research saturation and just focused on the semi-structured interviews as a method. Lastly, I designed a research study to focus on African American young men and school-based mentoring programs however to fully understand mentoring and mentorship, I may need to expand my scope to include other students of color and young women.

Research Implications

As I reflect on the research, Young Malcolm's story comes to mind, his sense of resilience and commitment to his education is admirable. In the eighth grade, Young

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Malcolm experienced the divorce of his parents and found himself navigating middle school alone. The divorce forced Young Malcolm to quickly mature and abandon some parts of his childhood to care for his younger brother. At the age of thirteen, he had the responsibility and duties of an adult while attempting to manage the nuances of school and keeping up the appearance to teachers and administrators that all was well. In many ways, Young Malcolm found this the most challenging—keeping up a false facade kept him occupied and distracted from focusing on an empty stomach and the two to three-day rotation of tattered clothes. Through his admission, Young Malcolm states that the situation affected his school attendance and his academic performance, which followed him to two neighboring high schools before transferring to Excellence his sophomore year.

When he transferred to Excellence, Young Malcolm instantly noticed many of his teachers were holding him accountable for classwork, attendance, and other irrational behaviors, especially Mrs. Justice who taught him Civics and Economics. She noticed Young Malcolm's brilliance and intellect and began to nurture his gifts and talents. Recognizing his academic ability, likability, and influence on other students, during his senior year, Mrs. Justice requested that he become a mentee and peer mentor in the STARSS mentoring program. Learning from previous experiences and now, embodying a sense of maturity, Young Malcolm accepted the invitation, realizing he needed the support from like-minded people and mentors who truly believed in him to make his college dreams a reality. While in the program, Young Malcolm was a "game changer" not only for the students he mentored but for the program. It was Young Malcolm who

inspired Mrs. Justice and I to create the STARSS Honors Academy, he inspired me to

collaborate with another colleague to co-create and co-facilitate the *Mentoring Is a Verb*

workshop series, and lastly, he inspired me to partner with peer mentors like The Mayor

to help grow the young men in STARSS. He also inspired me to formally document the

program and the participants' experiences with hopes of transforming the scope of

education in the United States.

Therefore, to answer the research questions and to settle my curiosity, the

STARSS Mentoring Program for African American young men positively influenced

Young Malcolm and the other mentees. Young Malcolm states, "I tell everyone

this...everyone who knows you two that went to Excellence and graduated from

Excellence, I tell them all the time I would not be where I am today without The Activist

and Mrs. Justice." The Intellect also states, "Before I came, I wasn't giving it my all. In

the STARSS program it gave me a whole new purpose towards education and others."

Young Malcolm and the Intellect were not the only participants who were positively

influenced—the mentors also found value and relevance in the program. In Mr. MoMa's

interview, he tells the story of when Mrs. Justice asked him to display pieces of art from

his collection at an event sponsored by STARSS. Apprehensive at first, Mr. MoMa

agreed, and this vulnerable performance not only enabled him to forge a relationship with

the STARSS participants it also enabled him to personally grow. Mr. MoMa asserts,

> Mrs. Justice said "Mr. MoMa, I want you to bring your art and show it; show it to
> our students." I had never pulled all of my art together at that point prior to that
> and I was just like no...no! I don't want to do that and she really sort of and this
> you know is...umm...sort of a testament to her; she really encouraged me to grow
> and this program was sort of the vehicle that helped me to sort of grow and get

my work out there and talk about my work and feel a little more confident about it.

The STARSS mentoring program stretched and grew many of the participants, including myself. As a professional school counselor, I began to restructure my practice and focus on people specifically African American young men holistically. I began to collaborate with colleagues who genuinely wanted to subvert the status quo and transform the lives of this population of young men. It is the STARSS mentoring program that enabled me to embrace unapologetically the idea of love. Like Baldwin (1993),

> I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. (p. 95)

In other words, the STARSS program enabled me to educate and cater to the social and emotional needs of not only African American young men but to other students who needed my advocacy, presence, and love. The program also served as a catalyst for me to ally with people who wanted to address social and cultural disparities that hindered education at Excellence and in other social spaces throughout the United States. Therefore, the idea of mentoring and mentorship in practice has the potential to positively influence the education of African American young men as well as transform our schools and classroom spaces. However, to do this work, I conclude the chapter with recommendations asking and charging educators, specifically professional school counselors to shift their way of thinking in relation to advocating and supporting African

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American males in our spaces of learning. I ask and charge them to engage in the practice of cultural pluralism, to unapologetically confront a culture of whiteness, rethink school funding and school accountability measures, and to protect our students' bodies at all cost, particularly African American male bodies within these spaces.

Recommendations

Cultural Pluralism

The idea of cultural pluralism, in practice, helps to create space for culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. In practice, it also gives educators, specifically teachers and professional school counselors, an opportunity to sustain pedagogy through our students' ideas, language and culture. Cultural pluralism enables us to venture past the idea of multiculturalism and the idea of group identity and group self-servitude. It enables us to become inclusive and accepting of other people, even of dominant norms that have shaped the existence and experiences of many people. Morrison (1981) states, to honor and to value people, specifically our students, educators have to do more than participate in *once-a-year* calendar events like Black History/Black Futures and Hispanic Heritage month as an attempt to educate the masses on the idea of celebrating differences. Additionally, Morrison states that school systems have to intentionally diversify school staff, attitudes, mindsets, and educational practices to positively grow the students we teach, (p. 184). Realizing, Morrison's message is 38 years old however I still find his statement to be true, relevant, and applicable.

People who choose to live in a society that honors, values, and accepts other people for who they truly are, do so with an expectation to fully co-exist, to learn, and to

position themselves as unfinished within the collective rather than to assimilate to dominant norms as a way to just exist. Sidney Ratner asserts, "Americanization...involved not the destruction of all the distinctive cultural group traits' but rather 'the cherishing and preserving of every ethnic group's cultural heritage" (as cited in Tillette, 2008, p. 231). Meaning, people, specifically people living in the United States may want to abandon the idea of borders both physically and mentally if we wish to exemplify the idea of freedom and democracy. The idea of freedom and democracy are ideologies that Mrs. Justice and I often examined and unpacked with the young men in STARSS. Often, we provided access to opportunities that enabled them to not only discuss these concepts but to live through and infuse them into their daily practice. Understanding the concept that they are only as free as the person who continues to experience a state of marginalization, dehumanization, and oppression by the hands of people who embody superior and inferior cultural and social norms.

Living in an eclectic and transient world, the idea of cultural pluralism may be the answer to helping sustain our students, specifically African American young men. In practice, cultural pluralism helps to bridge home, community, and school together— making their educational experiences meaningful. This idea reminds me of D'Jango Paris' work with culturally sustaining pedagogy and as an essential principle within the practice cultural pluralism, it helps to cultivate spaces that also sustains linguistic and literacy principles as a way to promote democracy in our schools and classroom spaces (Paris, 2012, p. 93). At its inception, the focus and expectation of the STARSS program was minimal, which was to acclimate and connect its participants to a place where they

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were not fully accepted. I do not believe the creators and advisors of STARSS envisioned a program that would eventually evolve into a justice seeking; world changing; experiential; and socially transformative opportunity for African American young men. In other words, the process of becoming and embodying a cultural pluralistic program happened organically but became an intentional practice once we began to nurture and build relationships with our mentees.

I give Mrs. Justice credit for helping to move the program in this direction. Mrs. Justice and I began to envision STARSS as a program that was more than a practice in resource pedagogy. Meaning, we aspired to do more than dismantle deficit thinking by connecting them to aspects of their culture and the world in which they lived. We aspired to educate them from a space of acceptance not only of themselves but of other people and who better to embody this than African American young men. They have the capacity to care, love, and to educate many people when given the space and opportunity. Like Paris, a pluralistic society needs both within-group cultural practices and cross-group cultural practices to authenticate our education and experiences (p. 95). However, it is my experience that when programs are introduced to address the academic and social needs of African American young men often it is done from a place of sympathy, guilt, or a need for them to abandon aspects of their culture for the sake of assimilation and upward mobility. Rarely do we find programs for African American young men that teach them to embrace every aspect of their culture while also teaching them not to condemn other people for being different.

Therefore, Mrs. Justice and I were careful not to situate the young men in STARSS in this way, which would have caused more harm than good. The idea of cultural pluralism is not an easy feat and it is just as important for educators to experience this exchange in cultural learning, self-identity and consciousness, and human development in relation to their home, family, and community. The idea also requires educators to embrace differences and not condemn people for being different, especially their students. When I asked each participant, specifically the mentors, to define the word difference, all of them defined the term with clarity and in a non-definitive and nonbinary way. However, their idea of difference, for many of them, is lacking in their daily practice, which makes implementing and sustaining culturally relevant pedagogy in a pluralistic way even more of a challenge. Therefore, I recommend that educators face and confront a culture of whiteness if they wish to completely embrace transformative change.

Confronting a Culture of Whiteness

Throughout the course of this research, I have become intrigued by the idea of whiteness and its culture. I am also intrigued by the people who ascribe and succumb to the culture in some form. Often thinking, how do I begin to divest from the culture? Is divesting from the culture even possible? Lastly, what and who is sustaining the culture and why? After confronting these questions, I slowly realized that attempting to divest from the culture of whiteness is easier said than done considering it is embedded in almost every aspect of our lives. From our political infrastructure and institutions, to our financial, housing, and educational institutions, the culture of whiteness is prevalent and

appears to be inescapable—even for someone like me who continues to embody a sense of *wokeness* or consciousness. Rodriguez (2000) states, "Whiteness has historically been appropriated in unmarked ways by strategically maintaining as colorless *its* color (and hence its values, belief systems, privileges, histories, experiences and modes of operation) behind its constant constructions of others" (p. 1). Meaning, many people have convinced themselves that the idea of white and whiteness is invisible and comes without culture or identity.

In many ways, this ideology is a false sense of consciousness and the idea of invisibleness is problematic not only for the people who position themselves in the culture but for the people who self-identify as being white. Sara Ahmed (2006) states, "Whiteness lags behind such bodies. White bodies do not have to face their whiteness; they are not orientated 'towards' it, and this 'not' is what allows whiteness to cohere as that which bodies are orientated around" (p. 136). Meaning, the privilege that is typically given to white bodies also places some of them in a position of luxury, which gives them the freedom to choose where and with whom they position their bodies around. Juxtapose to people of color, specifically African American young men, who are not given the choice of direction in relation to their bodies. Instead, they are often directed by the mere thought and presence of white bodies. In many ways, the advisors and mentors in the STARSS mentoring program worked to dismantle this sense of insecurity by working to help them see their lives beyond the white gaze.

The idea of confronting the culture of whiteness is not a new phenomenon. However, based on my experiences, I rarely witness white people who identify with this

culture, boldly confront its nuances and take responsibility for their performance and role, whether active or passive. Two of the most popular anti-racism activists and educators who have worked tirelessly to expose this culture have been Jane Elliot and Peggy McIntosh. Their work has helped to dismantle this culture and has influenced other educators like Paul Gorski to confront the culture of whiteness and white privilege or what he refers to as the luxury of whiteness through a self-reflective narrative. As a doctoral student and multicultural educator, Gorski failed to self-examine his identity while encouraging other people to "do the work" and explore, unpack, and make sense of their identity.

Not wanting to be labeled as a hypocrite, Gorski began to explore his "why" for engaging in such critical work as a multicultural educator and from there he began to explore the idea of whiteness through a personal lens to make sense of his existence. Gorski (2000) explains, "As an educator, I have a dual responsibility for developing and actively undertaking a process of introspection and self-examination regarding my race and other dimensions of my identity" (para. 1). Gorski also mentions that as an educator, he has a responsibility to students, workshop participants, and community groups to present himself as authentically as possible and to do otherwise would dilute his work (para. 1). He came to this revelation after reflecting on one of his conversations in high school between, at the time, two close friends. Gorski recalls driving his friends Aaron and Rich home from basketball practice and Aaron who is African American was sitting in the back seat and listening to Rich, who is white, express his frustrations about his estranged girlfriend who was dating an African American young man in which Rich

referred to her as a *nigger lover* (para. 18). Gorski recalls his feelings after the

conversation,

> It was horrible, just so painful. I dropped Aaron off, and didn't confront Rich at
> all. I just took him home. As I drove home, I remember this incredible pressure
> filling my body until I just burst into tears. I wasn't even crying because I knew
> Aaron was hurt. I was crying because I realized that there was a piece of Aaron's
> existence — a considerable piece — that I had no concept of, and probably didn't
> want any concept of. (para. 19)

Reading Gorski's story enabled me to make sense of many of the white mentors in

STARSS who used silence as a coping mechanism and as a mask to hide behind the

culture of whiteness for fear of an authentic personal transformation. Additionally, his

story also helped me to understand why many of the same mentors failed to develop a

relationship with their mentee.

Realizing, their lack of relationship was potentially due to them not confronting

and acknowledging an identity that is not invisible. Through his narrative, Gorski

confronted his fears and began to make sense of being white, which essentially

strengthened his scholarship and understanding of his existence in a white world. Gorski

asserts, "I owned my experience and took responsibility for it. I was not constrained by a

set of predetermined response categories on a survey and did not simply attempt to fit my

experience into someone else's modality of *white* identity development" (para. 32). Based

on my experience, many white people who I have encountered in a similar role as Gorski

fail to see the importance of confronting a debilitating culture. They fail to make

themselves vulnerable, vulnerable to learning from personal events and experiences that

have compromised their relationships with other people of color, especially educators

who attempt to influence the lives of African American young men in our schools and classroom spaces.

The idea of confronting the culture of whiteness and people who identify as being white, is even more challenging and complex for people of color, especially for African American young men. Confronting this culture often means coming face-to-face with an oppressive and horrific past that for many, it has crept into their present human condition. Throughout the United States, this culture has managed to permeate many social systems such as our judicial, political, financial, and educational systems, which leaves many African American young men deprived of social and cultural capital. Ahmed (2006) states,

> It is not just that there is a desire for whiteness that leads to white bodies getting in; rather whiteness is what the institution is orientated "around," so that even bodies that might not appear white still have to inhabit whiteness if they are to get in. (pp. 137–138)

In other worlds, whiteness appears to be inescapable therefore rather than divesting from the culture perhaps confronting the culture will begin to dismantle many of the "isms" we face in our world. Additionally, people who position themselves as being white perhaps will shift their thinking and realize that by aligning their heritage and traditions with this culture only separates them further from the collective.

I realize this concept, for many people, will be challenging to embrace depending on their position of comfortability. In many ways, the culture of whiteness serves as an orientation mechanism that keeps things and people in their place—making them comfortable. Ahmed describes comfort as an encounter between more than one body,

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which causes people to experience a sinking feeling, specifically white bodies when this topic is righteously confronted. As a result, they become comfortable, which makes it difficult for them to distinguish an end in relation to where the world begins. They *fit* and in the process of fitting they become invisible—making white bodies comfortable as they embody spaces that extend who they are (p. 138). Hence, the reason why I ask and charge educators to intentionally confront and disrupt the culture of whiteness and white comfortability if we wish to build sustaining relationships with our students however this will take time and adequate school funding to educate and to hold all educators accountable in the matter of confronting race and culture.

School Funding and School Accountability Measures

In regard to education in the United States, the conversation centered around school funding and school accountability measures is not a new phenomenon. From pre-kindergarten, to elementary, middle, and secondary education, the topic of school funding and accountability measures remains prevalent and an authentic and often a heated debate among people who represent and advocate for schools on the local and district levels of government. The idea of school funding and accountability is concerning for various reasons however the most popular and pressing reason is the unequal distribution of funds and inequitable practices that accompany schools that are situated in rural, urban, and impoverished areas within our cities and towns. Per the literature, we can attribute much of the imbalance and unjust practices to matters of race and socioeconomic disparities. Rebell (2012) states, "This means that children who live in districts with low wealth and low property values—as most low income and most minority students do—

will have substantially less money available to meet their educational needs" (p. 1868). In other words, to level the "playing field" for children who are identified as low income and, in the minority, will require people, particularly advocates for education to go beyond simply asking for school funding that gives them access to a quality and equitable education. It will also require them to advocate for their parents to receive adequate employment, quality healthcare, and access to wealth and to an affordable housing market that gives their children an opportunity to obtain academic achievement and success.

Arguably, since the era of desegregation practices in the United States, the federal government and local and state governments have been in a "tug of war" with matters regarding school funding, accountability measures, and where the responsibility truly lies. Shelly (2011) mentions, during the first half of the 21st Century, 60% of local revenue sources made up the total of public school funding (p. 3). Additionally, Shelly mentions that within the last decade, local government contributions decreased while the federal government increased their financial contributions and spending on education, which has greatly influenced educational policy, regulations, and laws (p. 9). As of today, I am not exactly sure where these numbers lie however, school funding constraints are felt throughout many of our educational systems, particularly in those systems where the majority consists of students who are poor and of color.

In many ways, these constraints compromise their academic achievement and success due to ill equipped learning spaces, teachers who are not prepared or enthused to educate them, and the way educators choose to hold each other accountable. The idea of

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holding people accountable is simply to insist they embody a sense of responsibility and take ownership of their actions. Regarding education, this sense of accountability should be shared among the collective but, it is not. Unfortunately, based on my experience and knowledge, in many school districts across the United States, educators who work in failing schools are solely held accountable for their failures, which frees our financial, housing, judicial, etc. systems from taking some form ownership and responsibility in the matter. Additionally, in education school accountability measures are often seen as an inequitable practice that is confined to student performance. Currently, students who attend schools in districts that are inadequately funded and with limited to no resources are held to the same academic standards as students who attend schools in districts that are affluent and adequately funded. Rebell (2012) states,

> Policymakers tend to impose mandatory cost reductions—often, across-the-board percentage reductions—without taking any steps to analyze the actual impact of these cuts on children in the classroom or assess whether their broad-based cuts will disparately impact low-income or minority students. (p. 1863)

Meaning, educators who work in economically deprived schools work with less—less money, less resources, less student support, and from experience less time, but they are expected to produce more, specifically in terms of meeting local and state expectations, academic standards, and growth. This accountability model rarely takes into account the human condition, the idea of implicit biases, and institutionalized racism that in many ways contributes to unfavorable assessment and achievement results.

Therefore, as I examine the recommendation regarding school funding and school accountability measures, educators, including myself, have to lobby for equal and

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equitable policies and practices that ensures access to a quality education for all students, particularly for students who have historically been marginalized based on social class and race. The idea of a quality education does not always translate to more money however, it does help. In the Southern Education Foundation's (2009) report, *No Time to Lose: Why America Needs an Education Amendment to the US Constitution to Improve Education*, the SEF explains,

> Children are not "widgets." Students need time to grow and sometimes to heal and to regain a sense of capability, encouragement, and nurture. Only when quality public schools are made available to low income students from their earliest public school years through high school graduation can social scientists accurately measure indicators of success or failure due to educational resources. (p. 22)

In other words, the students that we teach and educate are more than dollars and cents. They are students who are deserving of our care, love, and time. However, the idea of time appears to be the most complex—it is obvious educators, particularly teachers need more time to address our students' academic, social, and emotional needs but academic pacing guides and common core standards take precedence over the latter. Therefore, as educators, we will need to become creative under these immense time constraints, expectations, and policies, if we wish to engage and give our students access to a quality education. Lastly, as an educator, regarding the idea of school accountability, we will need to commit ourselves to becoming lifelong learners, myself included, which translates into educating other people while maintaining our ability and desire to learn as well. It was this sense of accountability that enabled me to engage in the STARSS

program and work towards protecting African American males within our spaces of learning.

Protecting African American Male Bodies

The STARSS mentoring program for African American young men was instituted during a time of civil unrest not only within the EHS and neighboring community but in our nation. Not to mention, the perception and attitude from some stakeholders towards the young men caused a sense of fear within our school and classroom spaces. Unfortunately, this sense of fear still exists, and it is strong, so strong that African American mothers and fathers are losing their boys and young men at alarming rates to our criminal justice system, educational system, and to violent and egregious crimes at the hands of the culture of whiteness and white supremacy, which is a product of racism. Therefore, as an educator, I find it necessary to protect their bodies and I ask for other educators to do the same. To protect their bodies means more than keeping them away and shielding them from harm, danger, or injury and it goes beyond teaching them the art of cultural and social survival and teaching them to play the game. Protecting African American young men means to validate their experiences, confront a culture of whiteness, embody and establish high expectations for them, and to honor, value, and accept their differences.

Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) writes eloquently on protecting and preserving their bodies in his novel *Between the World and Me*. Using a personal narrative to frame and explain the idea of race, injustices, the direction of black bodies, and love, Coates speaks directly to his son as an attempt to protect and prepare him for the perils of life,

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specifically the perils of life as a young black man. He takes his readers on a journey that gives them a glimpse into the complexities of being male and black. He catches my attention with one simple question, Coates (2015) simply asks, "What does it mean to lose your body" (p. 5)? At first, I was stumped by the question, initially thinking I have not lost my body, or have I? The question prompted me to question many aspects of my life, particularly my education. I began to reflect on my parents, my tutor in the first and second grade, and Mrs. AH. Realizing, the seeds that they planted in me and their presence throughout my life have protected and shielded me from the act of losing my body. However, this is not to say that certain people I have encountered throughout my educational journey have not attempted to take my body, in terms of devaluing my intelligence and marginalizing my presence, they just were not successful.

Unfortunately, many African American young men in our schools and classroom spaces do not have the support system and the mentoring I received and experienced throughout my life to sustain who they are. Many of them do lose their bodies to teachers who fail to advocate and protect their sense of humanness and ill equipped school systems, which often leaves them bare. Coates states, "The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear" (p. 17). Meaning, currently, the laws are not adequately protecting their bodies for fear of knowing that African American young men are intelligent, creative, peaceful, and loving humans. The idea of fear is complex in its meaning and in its presentation often **have people quick to say** that people fear the unknown however, based on my experience they fear what they know. Therefore, when educators begin to dismiss

and disrupt the dominant narrative regarding African American young men and accept them as the intelligent and brilliant humans that they are then maybe they will begin to protect them in a way they protect white bodies.

Protecting African American male bodies is the responsibility of every stakeholder in our schools and classroom spaces who encounter and engage them in their educational practice. The protection of their bodies is a human right and it should not be taken lightly. When we make a conscious decision to protect them, we also make a conscious decision to dismantle power structures that exploit and control their bodies for monetary gain or profit, to meet meaningless quotas, and to close fictitious gaps. To incorporate this sense of protection into our practice and pedagogy will require us to reimagine *The Dream* we fervently call American and the dreamer. Currently, the dream as we know it to be still holds African American young men in bondage and it shames them for being who they are. Coates mentions, "The Dream is the same habit that endangers the planet, the same habit that sees our bodies stowed away in prisons and ghettos" (p. 151). Therefore, to reimagine the dream, means to validate their existence and experiences and to give them the space to hope, create, feel, love, and to struggle through their differences without the gaze of judgment.

Summary

In this final chapter, I began with a discussion regarding the STARSS mentoring program and its influence on mentoring and mentorship. I illustrate the benefits of school-based mentoring programs specifically, the STARSS mentoring program and its influence on its participants and EHS. Emphasizing the importance of these programs, I

also illustrate through STARSS the potential that school-based mentoring programs have to subvert the status quo within our schools. These programs, in practice, can and will begin to dismantle the disparity gaps and focus on the academic achievement of all students, especially African American males. Additionally, school-based mentoring programs have the potential to subvert the dominant narrative and place educators in a position to accept their cultural and social differences. Unfortunately, many educators fail to align students' cultural and social differences with their educational practice. I speculate this is perhaps due to their fear of what is known verses the unknown. To say the least, the idea of difference and our differences are constantly in play as educators seek to engage and teach school-age children. Lastly, in the discussion, I mention the limitations that were present in the research study however the limitations did not compromise my findings or the research implications.

The research implications suggest school-based mentoring programs are influential and life changing. With a specific focus on STARSS, in practice, the program positively influenced the lives of the participants in the study. In practice, the program also served as a catalyst for other program changes and learning opportunities that helped to evolve the program and the school. I conclude the chapter with recommendations that could potentially serve as best practices in our schools and classroom spaces. The idea of cultural pluralism, confronting the culture of whiteness, the idea of school funding and school accountability measures, and protecting African American males' bodies can serve as best practices as educators seek to educate and learn from all students, especially from African American males. These recommendations, once implemented as best

practices, may also contribute to the academic achievement and success of African American males as well.

Conclusion

As an educator, who happens to be African American and male, this research was more than another project or work towards another degree. This research is my life that continues to warrant my immediate and undivided attention. The work of mentoring and the practice of mentorship is complex, and it is not an easy feat. However, it is necessary and in many educational systems throughout the United States mentoring and school-based mentoring programs are gaining momentum and are being used to engage African American males in their education. These programs are also being used to engage them in identity and community development and giving them space to claim physical agency. Meaning, many school-based mentoring programs in practice are giving them the confidence to speak up and speak out—taking action to dismantle social systems that devalues the human condition. This work has afforded me the opportunity to work with incredible people who share a philosophy of education that places students first. Additionally, this work allowed me to work with people who saw a growing and immediate need to address the academic and social needs regarding African American young men and set a precedent at EHS for social justice learning and education. Our efforts enabled us to work through topical issues and cultural and social differences that makeup who we are as people.

However, this work is not for the faint at heart. With patience and time and working collectively, people can subvert the status quo thus positively influencing and

changing the human condition of marginalized people. Therefore, as I move forward and work to promote a culture of inclusiveness and acceptance, I ask and charge other educators to engage in the practice of mentoring and mentorship while educating from a culturally relevant, responsive, and culturally sustaining position. Lastly, I also charge educators to unapologetically confront the culture of whiteness and protect African American young males and their bodies within our spaces of learning. As educators, if we are true to ourselves and to our practice, then we have a collective responsibility to educate, honor, value, and validate the experiences of all students regardless of their cultural or social differences.

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APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FORMS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Former Student Demographic Data Form

Directions: Please mark all that apply and where there is an open-ended question answer completely and legibly.

1. What years did you attend EHS? _____

2.   When did you graduate from EHS? _____

3.   Please provide your age:
   - o 18-21
   - o 21-25

4.   What gender do you identify with?
   - o Male
   - o Female
   - o Non-binary

5.   What is your ethnicity and race?
   - o What is your ethnicity and race?
   - o American Indian
   - o Alaska Native
   - o Asian
   - o Bi/Tri-Racial
   - o Black or African American
   - o Hispanic or Latino
   - o Non-Hispanic or Latino
   - o Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   - o White or Caucasian

6.   What is your highest level of education?
   - o High School Graduate
   - o Community College
   - o Junior College
   - o Certification Program
   - o 4-year College University
   - o Workforce

7. What are your goals and aspirations?

_____

_____

_____

8. During your tenure at EHS, did teachers support your goals and aspirations? If yes, in what ways?
    o   Yes

_____

_____

_____

    o   No

9. At EHS, were you involved in extracurricular activities? If yes, what were the activities?
    o   Yes

_____

_____

_____.

    o   No

10. During your tenure at EHS, did you feel honored and valued by teachers and administration? If yes, then how?
    o   Yes

_____

_____

_____.

    o   No

11. During your tenure at EHS, were there barriers that hindered you from interacting and engaging with your teachers? If yes, what were they?
    o   Yes

_____

_____

_____.

    o   No

12.	Using descriptive words, describe your experience in the STARSS mentoring program

_____

_____

_____

_____

Explain:

_____

_____

Teacher/Administrator Demographic Data Form

Directions: Please mark all that apply and where there is an open-ended question please answer completely and legibly.

1. How long have you been in education?
   - o 0-3 years
   - o 3-5 years
   - o 6-10 years
   - o 10-15 years
   - o 15-20 years
   - o 20-25 years
   - o 25+ years

   In which position do you serve?
   - o Teacher
   - o Counselor
   - o Administrator
   - o Other _____

2. If a teacher, what is your content area?
   - o English/Language Arts
   - o Math
   - o Science
   - o Social Studies
   - o World Languages
   - o Other: _____

3. Please provide your age:
   - o 25-34 years
   - o 35-44 years
   - o 45-54 years
   - o 55-65 years

4. What gender do you identify with?
   - o Male
   - o Female
   - o Non-Binary

5. What is your ethnicity and race?
   - o American Indian
   - o Alaska Native
   - o Asian
   - o Bi/Tri-Racial

- o Black or African American
- o Hispanic or Latino
- o Non-Hispanic or Latino
- o Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- o White or Caucasian

6. What is your highest level of education?
- o Bachelors
- o Masters
- o Ed S
- o Ed D
- o Ph.D.

7. Do you have a philosophy of education?
- o Yes
- o No

8. Using descriptive words, how would you describe your philosophy of education?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Explain:_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

9. Do you have any state license or specialty credentials related to the research topic?
- o Yes, please list credentials:

_____

_____

_____

_____

- o No

10. Did you have experience working with specialty programs prior to the STARSS mentoring program? If yes, what were the programs?

      o   Yes

_____
_____
_____
_____

      o   No

11. Recently within the past ten years, have you participated in a workshop, professional development, or taken a course in multiculturalism and/or culturally relevant education, etc.?

      o   Yes. Please explain the event or program

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

      o   No

12. Prior to the STARSS mentoring program, were there opportunities to collaborate with others to enhance the quality of education for African American young men? If yes,

      o   Yes. Please explain the program or event

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

      o   No

13. Are there any barriers preventing you from speaking freely about your experience with the STARSS mentoring program and its participants?

      o   Yes. Please explain:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

      o   No