LET US BREATHE: WHITE SUPREMACIST EDUCATION AND THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALES IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by
Candice Athena Crenshaw-Mayo
B.A. California State University East Bay, 2009
M.A. California State University East Bay, 2014

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Abstract

In spite of various programs implemented in colleges to help Black males transition into higher education, research shows that this population of students is still the most disproportionately impacted in terms of academic progress and success. Solutions often support a cultural deficit model that blames the student. These circumstances translate into disadvantages in the housing market and employment field for Black men and contribute to the school to prison pipeline. To disrupt these patterns, more research is needed on how to cultivate an academic identity that promotes self-efficacy. Some emerging studies do show that mentoring programs for Black males may offer promise for doing so. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study, which draws conceptually on Critical Pedagogy and the Community Cultural Wealth Model, is twofold: to investigate the perceptions of Black males in the "Brothers of Excellence Program" (BOEP) at Los Medanos College (LMC) regarding their academic identity and self-efficacy, as well as identify the factors that may contribute to the development of these constructs. The question guiding this study is: How do Black male community college students perceive their academic identity and self-efficacy? Two sub-questions emerging from this overarching query include: a) What factors contribute to those perceptions? and b) In what ways does LMC's "Brothers of Excellence Program" (BOEP) affect the development of self-efficacy and strong academic identity amongst Black male students at LMC?

My findings revealed that Black male students experience so much trauma in white-normed classrooms that it severely impacts their academic identity and causes issues with mental health. Implementing programs like BOEP that value Black male students' cultural wealth while also providing mentorship and life skills cultivates a sense of community and belonging that promotes academic achievement. My findings also highlight the urgency to unlearn and dismantle oppressive systems built on whiteness that murders the spirit of Black males. To transform the education system, educators must begin confronting the history of racism and white supremacy and work to abolish the oppressive learning environments that traumatize Black and brown students.

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This dissertation was presented
by

Candice Athena Crenshaw-Mayo

It was defended on
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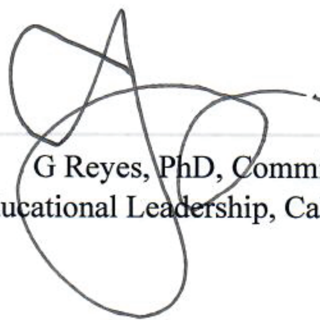
and approved by:

Kathryn Strom, PhD, Chair
Department of Educational Leadership, California State University East Bay



G Reyes, PhD, Committee Member
Department of Educational Leadership, California State University East Bay

Alison M. Richardson

Alison Richardson, EdD, Committee Member
Committee Member

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my mom, Ruby Joe.

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing, supportive, beautiful family and friends.

To my one and only brilliant daughter, Mari, thank you for staying on me to write that book. Well this is not my best-selling book yet, but it's a start. Thank you for all the IT help, the MacBook and iPad you gifted to me when I first decided to return to school for my Masters. Thank you for serving our country. Thank you for giving the world the gift of Sweet-Sweet. Thank you for building on our educational legacy by earning your Bachelor's degree at SFSU. You are just getting started.

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In solidarity,

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRELUDE: THE STATE OF BLACK MEN IN AMERICA, 2020 1

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 3

Problem of Practice Statement 6

Background of the Problem of Practice 7

Research Purpose Statement 11

Research Questions 12

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 13

Critical Pedagogy 13

Community Cultural Wealth Model 17

Literature Review 18

The Impact of Socialization and Influence 19

Outside Influences. 19

Mentorship 20

The Need for Nurturing, Welcoming Spaces, and Community 23

Belonging 25

Nurturing. 27

The Importance of Self-efficacy and Identity in Black Male Achievement 29

Developing Cultural/Critical Consciousness and Awareness 34

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN 38

Methodology 39

Context/Setting 41

Participants 43

Data Sources and Collection Procedures . . . 44
Survey . . . 44
Observations . . . 45
Focus groups and interviews. . . . 45
Focus Groups . . . *46*
One-on-one Interviews . . . *46*
Strengths and Limitations/Trustworthiness . . . 47
Positionality . . . 49
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS . . . 51
Current Conditions of Society & Schooling . . . 51
Social Inequities . . . 52
Deficit Perspectives and Low Expectations . . . 54
White Cultural Norms. . . . 57
White Language . . . *57*
Hidden Curriculum . . . *60*
White Curriculum . . . *61*
Impacts of Inequities & Cultural Hegemony on Black Students . . . 65
Identity . . . 66
George Floyd . . . *66*
Rayshard Moore . . . *69*
Trayvon Martin . . . *70*
Philando Castille . . . *71*
Student Athletes. . . . *71*
Botham Jean . . . *72*
Trauma and Mental Health . . . 77
Spaces of Possibility and Belonging. . . . 80

Summary 84
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS 86
Critical Perspectives on Education 87
Socioeconomic Conditions 88
White Gaze 89
Curriculum *89*
Deficit Perspectives and Low Expectations *91*
Cool Pose *93*
Microaggressions *94*
White Language of Schooling *96*
Spirit-murdering 97
Community Cultural Wealth 99
Recommendations 104
Asset-Based Pedagogies that Dismantle White Supremacy 104
Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies *104*
Critical pedagogy *106*
Abolitionist Teaching 108
Dear White People 109
Administrators and Equity Directors 112
Legacy Learning 113
Recommendations for Future Research 114
Conclusion 115
REFERENCES 118
APPENDIX: 5 POINT LIKERT SURVEY QUESTIONS: 128

TABLE OF TABLES

Table 1: Demographics 42

PRELUDE

THE STATE OF BLACK MEN IN AMERICA, 2020

Black people are constantly told they need to prove they belong in America. They are regularly stopped and harassed by White people who question their motives in public spaces, showing that not much has changed since the years after the emancipation proclamation, when freed Black people were required to produce their freedom papers on demand any time a White person questioned them being in a public space. We have witnessed recent examples of this demand being made by BBQ Becky, Permit Patty, Cornerstore Caroline, Pool Patrol Paula, and Central Park Amy: all White women who called 911 for emergency assistance because they questioned Black people's right to be in public spaces. It's not just that Black people are seen as not belonging, but they are seen as an active threat to the prestige of white spaces, and to white women in particular.

Whether Black people are in the park, corner store, or public pool, they are stopped and interrogated by White people who tell them they have no right to be there--or, even worse, are murdered for being in the "wrong" place. Picture the murdered, mutilated body of 14-year-old Emmett Till, who was lynched when a White woman falsely accused him of offending her back in the summer of 1955. Fast forward to February 23, 2020, when Ahmaud Arbery was hunted down and shot to death while jogging. While the Black community was still in the midst of grappling with this modern day lynching of Arbery by a former cop and his son, the unthinkable was broadcast nationwide: on May 25, 2020, the world witnessed the heinous murder of George Floyd by white police officer Derek Chauvin, as he casually choked the life out of him by placing his knee on his neck

for an entire EIGHT MINUTES and FORTY-SIX SECONDS. This is what it means to be a Black male in America.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"What good is an education if you must shed who you are?"

~Dr. Bettina Love

For the past six years, I have taught Critical Thinking to incoming freshmen at Los Medanos College. Semester after semester, I encounter the same dilemma: many of my Black male students sit silently in the back of the classroom just being *cool*, rather than interacting with their classmates and being a part of classroom discussions. "Cool pose" (Majors & Billson, 1993) is a ritualized expression of masculinity that is exhibited through the way one walks, speaks, and postures. These attributes are a way for Black males to exert superiority in spaces where they feel like outsiders (Kirkland, 2009; Majors & Billson, 1993). Unfortunately, "cool pose" is misconstrued by many of their teachers as menacing, threatening, and disrespectful (Butler, 2014; Kirkland, 2009; Ransaw, 2016). This leads many teachers—who are primarily white females—to view this population of students as disengaged and uncaring about their education (Sealey-Ruiz, 2015). As a result, White teachers are more likely to discipline students engaging in "cool pose" and have lower expectations for them to achieve academic success (Kirkland, 2009). Though I initially thought cool pose would be the focus of my research, the interviews and findings exposed the true issue behind the cool pose which is White supremacy that refuses to see the Black body as fully human.

In schools, Black males continue to experience social oppression that stems from cultural hegemony, which is defined by Gramsci (1926) as dominance over the subordinate class through use of the dominant's class beliefs, media, and educational systems. In addition to being misunderstood for striking a "cool pose," Black males living in poverty tend to receive harsher discipline for minor behavioral offenses, and many of them are often placed in special education, furthering their detachment to school (Skiba, 1999). Studies have shown that special ed students are suspended at double the rates of non-special ed students, which means this marginalized population spends more time away from the classroom, interrupting the learning process and many times contributing to students' decision to drop out of school (Losen & Gillepsi, 2012; Skiba et al., 2014; Whisman & Hammer, 2014). The aforementioned practices reinforce the school to prison pipeline by implementing "unfair and exclusionary discipline practices…that affect Black males' educational achievement and social adjustment" (Darensbourg, 2010, p. 2).

To exacerbate the problem, because Black males are taught in classrooms where 88-99% of educators are White people who have been educated by White college professors in White institutions (Ladson-Billings, 2005), "students of color [become] alienated from the schooling process because schooling often asks children to be something or someone other than who they really are...It asks them to dismiss their community and cultural knowledge" (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. xiv). As a result of their upbringing and professional preparation, these educators also perpetuate classroom practices normed on the White middle class (Alim, 2017), which continues to widen the gap between teachers and Black male students. Because Black male students often do not evidence the behavior, speech patterns, or responses to pedagogy expected by White educators, many teachers adopt a deficit mindset of their Black male students and invest less effort to help them achieve academic success (Ransaw, 2016). Consequently, teachers' low expectations of Black male students either causes emotional responses that

directly harm performance or cause students to disidentify with educational environments (Steele, 1997), which perpetuates inequitable outcomes in the classroom. Moreover, when Black male students are met by teachers with lowered expectations for their academic success, they tend to adopt a "cool pose," as mentioned above, that is perceived by their teachers as not caring about their education which conforms to teachers' negative biases. This cool pose demeanor is a way students protect themselves in these unsupportive, unwelcoming environments (Harper & Davis, 2012).

Although it is true that everyone "speaks from where they are," the majority of teachers view their Black male students through a White gaze, which is harmful for multiple reasons. For instance, the language Black males bring from their environments is viewed as a deficit, while Standard American English (SAE) is valued and, indeed, is the very key to power (Alim, 2017). Put another way, viewing students through a White gaze contributes to the perpetuation of the oppression of Black male students within culturally hegemonic institutions where White patriarchal society is the norm by which everything is evaluated. Accordingly, Alim et al. (2014) poses the question, "What would liberating ourselves from this [White] gaze and the educational expectations it forwards mean for our abilities to envision new forms of teaching and learning?" (p. 86).

In an effort to dismantle these harmful historical practices that have contributed to low academic success among the Black male student population, Los Medanos College (LMC) has developed and allocated resources for the Brothers of Excellence Program (BOEP), which aims to improve academic and life outcomes for men of color who attend LMC by creating nurturing, welcoming academic environments and community partnerships that guide, inspire, and motivate these men to reach their full potential. Unfortunately, despite this program's focus, Black students at LMC are still struggling to succeed and develop self-efficacy and strong academic identities. For example, LMC's equity data revealed that Black students' successful course completion rate in 2014 was

at 57% (21,211 enrolled; only 12,024 completed) while their White counterparts were at 75% (36,690 enrolled; 27,607 completed). Therefore, it is essential that research be conducted to explore how the program is functioning to better help students meet their expected academic goals. Identifying features that are successful, as well as those which may be improved, can provide lessons for other programs that seek to disrupt the negative educational outcomes faced by many Black males. In the next section, I will discuss in more depth how Black males respond to the problem by exhibiting cool pose.

Problem of Practice Statement

Black males exhibit “cool pose” as a coping mechanism in unwelcoming spaces such as the classroom (Kirkland, 2009). Because “cool pose” is often misinterpreted by educators as threatening or disrespectful behavior (Majors & Billson, 1992), Black males are suspended at disproportionate rates to their non-Black peers (Neal, 2003). In fact, Black males are suspended more than any other ethnic group and are more likely to be labeled as learning disabled or placed in special education classes (Noguera, 2003). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students.

The misinterpretation of behavior, high suspension and expulsion rates, and disproportionate placement in special education is a manifestation of social oppression, which stems from cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1926) and is a method of maintaining White supremacy. For instance, Salazar (2013) references the work of Warikoo and Carter (2009), who suggest that “students of color resist teachers who do not understand students’ bicultural and multicultural worlds and reinforce cultural lines of demarcation that are systematically imposed in schools” (p. 123). Not only do teachers not understand their students’ cultural differences, but their interactions create awkward relationships

between teacher and student and lead Black male students to flex their masculinity in what Majors & Billson (1993) refer to as "cool pose." Furthermore, Woods & Woods (2012) tell us that "cool pose can be manifested in positive (pride, self-respect) and negative (dropping out, drugs, street gangs) ways" (p. 992). Put simply, cool pose acts as a mask and shield for many situations. I argue that Black lives have never mattered in America, which shows up in the classroom as deficit perspectives from teachers and curriculum and pedagogy that communicates to Black males that they do not belong. As a result of this, the adoption of cool pose as a way to protect themselves serves as a barrier to Black males' development of positive academic identity and self-efficacy, two elements that could potentially disrupt patterns of lower achievement, as well as contribute to patterns of disproportionate discipline and special education placement.

Background of the Problem of Practice

Much of the literature related to Black male students describes them from a deficit perspective, referencing their low achievement scores and lack of discipline. Indeed, in his groundbreaking work, *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) begins his chapter "Of our Spiritual Strivings" with a provocative question, one that continues to be important for Black males attending U.S. schools today: "How does it feel to be a problem?" Du Bois frames this question within the context of how Blacks, striving for social, economic, and political inclusion at the turn of the 20th century, were persistently seen as a "problem" for the country (Howard, 2014). Labels such as *at risk, endangered, inferior, uneducable*, and *left behind* have plagued the Black male for multiple generations and have led to an academic identity crisis, as noted by Osborne (1999):
if environmental feedback is perceived to be valid, then the individual will identify with that domain. Essentially, if educators constantly label Black males as uneducable, they will internalize that idea, which will become absorbed into their academic DNA,

inform their academic identity, and continue to perpetuate the idea of the deficit mindset concerning Black males and education. As Alim and Paris (2014) note,

> Deficit approaches to teaching and learning have echoed across decades of education in the United States. Such approaches view the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of many students and communities of color as deficiencies to be overcome if they are to learn the dominant language, literacy, and cultural ways of being demanded in schools. (p. 87)

Not only do students of color learn that they—and their cultural norms—are problematic, they also learn that, for educational success, they need to “act White” (Kunjufu, 1988). Once students of color believe that intelligence equates to Whiteness, they experience what Valenzuela (1999) calls “subtractive schooling,” or a separation from their own cultural and ethnic identities to assimilate to the more acceptable white cultural norms. In a similar fashion, del Carmen Salazar (2013) argues that “students of color have been compelled for generations to divest themselves of their linguistic, cultural, and familial resources to succeed in U.S. schools” (p. 121), leading them to accuse one another of “acting gringo” when they adhere to English-only rules in the classroom. “Ultimately, students of color experience subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) through the denial of their heritage and assimilation into White America” (Salazar, 2013, p. 123).

To illustrate this phenomenon, Ladson-Billings (2001) shares the scenario of a black male student whom she knew “could be the intellectual leader of the class” (p. 77), but instead chose to show up without his homework and unprepared for class. He was very popular with the girls and most importantly, he was seen as cool. When the teacher acknowledged his intelligence and asked why he was acting as if he did not want to succeed, he replied, “I can’t be actin’ like no ‘school boy.’ If my boys think I’m a punk,

I won't hold no more check in this school" (p. 78). In Ladson-Billings' example, we see how cool pose is also used to protect one's *masculinity*. Peer pressure is also a factor. As Kunjufu (1988) writes, "peer pressure and its impact on academic achievement has reached catastrophic proportions. To do well academically in school is to act White and risk being called a nerd or braniac" (p.vii). Kunjufu (1988) cites the example of a student who says he could be in honors classes, but he did not want his partners to tease him or call him names, so he would sit in the back of the class and "clown" or sometimes did not go to class at all.

As noted earlier, students also begin to believe negative narratives about themselves with regard to schooling (Steele & Aronson, 1995), which can lead to mental health issues. Steele & Aronson (1995) argue that "after a lifetime of exposure to society's negative images of their ability, these students are likely to internalize an "inferiority anxiety"—a state that can be aroused by a variety of race-related cues in the environment" (p. 798). Once placed in oppressive educational environments, students tend to take on a self-fulfilling prophecy that perpetuates the stereotype of the irresponsible, shiftless, unconcerned Black male (Majors, 1993).

According to Majors & Billson (1993), Black males exhibit "cool pose" in their speech, style, and physicality to evoke strength and control in awkward spaces where their culture, language and style of dress are not respected. Some theorists (Bush, 2013; Ogbu, 1987) have argued that Black males' cool pose is a reactionary response to help them deal with stress caused by social oppression in a White male dominated society, a society which often misinterprets their behaviors. For example, Ogbu (1995) shares his observance of Oakland school children playing the dozens (trading insults) on the school yard. While the Black students saw it as fun and games, "the teachers thought the children were misbehaving and were in need of intervention programs to teach them appropriate *mainstream* behaviors" (p. 277). In other words, because this form of

interaction was unfamiliar to White teachers, it was viewed as negative behavior that did not meet the accepted norms of society, and students were seen as problems to be "fixed".

These differing interpretations often result in confrontation between teacher and student, as Black males' behavior is often misinterpreted by their teachers as threatening, which echoes historical depictions of Black men as menacing and dangerous animals who rebelled against White men, attacking them and raping their women (Ransaw, 2016). In fact, since the early 17th and 18th centuries, Black men have typically been viewed as sub-humans who were physically strong, mentally inept, hyper-sexed animals (Howard, 2013). This historical construction of the Black man as dangerous, animalistic, and subhuman continues today as we witness the almost daily slaughter of Black bodies at the hands of White police officers who have been tasked to serve and protect the community. This may help explain why many of the White teachers whom Black males encounter misinterpret cool pose as aggressive and intimidating behavior (Kirkland and Jackson, 2009; Wiley, 1990), which many times leads Black males to being suspended, expelled, and placed in remedial classes (Gregory, 2010; Lee, 2011; Losen, 2010; Nguyen, 2019).

To disrupt these patterns, and particularly those that view Black males' culture negatively vis a vis the dominant class, it is critical that they are socialized into culturally diverse, welcoming, safe environments (Berry, 2013; Brooms, 2019; Dancy, 2014). Being inclusive of diverse cultures promotes a sense of self-efficacy that cultivates a level of confidence that motivates the individual to believe they have the ability to achieve specific goals that lead to personal success. Self-efficacy helps to combat systems of oppression among marginalized students. A critical piece of the process is ensuring that Black males feel valued in society, and a sense of belonging in the classroom, where their language, style of dress, and tone can be viewed as menacing or disruptive by the teachers. One avenue for helping Black male students feel they belong in academic

settings and helping them develop self-efficacy is through mentorship-based programs like the "Brothers of Excellence Program" (BOEP) at Los Medanos College (LMC).

Research Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the factors that contribute to the development of self-efficacy and academic identity for Black male students in the "Brothers of Excellence Program" (BOEP) at Los Medanos College (LMC). In doing so, this study will help identify ways to promote positive self-efficacy and a strong academic identity among Black male students at LMC. Reform implementation literature (e.g., Gershenson, 2015; Goldenberg, 2014; Yosso, 2005) provides some insights into the barriers that Black male students encounter, but they fail to account for the historical construction of Black males as dangerous, threatening beings and the ways that this may influence students' experiences. Further, while much research exists regarding Black male students' low graduation, retention, and dropout rates in high school and universities, few qualitative studies have been conducted at the community college level from an assets-based perspective focused on student experiences. By adopting this focus, my goal is to provide Black males with a platform to demonstrate their power and strength by sharing their personal stories of challenges and obstacles they've faced, as well as triumphs experienced trying to navigate in oppressive schooling systems influenced by white cultural hegemony. My research will provide a platform for the students' voices to be heard. Moreover, this study will provide an opportunity to document the features of BOEP that are achieving positive outcomes, and use those to offer ideas to develop system reform driven by student recommendations to improve overall academic achievement. The overall goal is to contribute to developing solutions that all involved

parties believe can work to support self-efficacy and academic identity to empower Black males to direct the narrative within their oppressive environments.

Research Questions

My research was driven by the following question and sub-questions:

1. How do Black male community college students perceive their academic identity and self-efficacy?
    a. What factors contribute to those perceptions?
    b. In what ways does LMC's "Brothers of Excellence Program" (BOEP) affect their perceptions of self-efficacy and strong academic identity?

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To further examine what Black male students need to achieve academic success, I grounded my research in Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy and Yosso's (2005) "Community Cultural Wealth" framework. I utilized these tools as instruments to frame and theorize my data, which ultimately led to an optimal opportunity to identify obstacles that Black males face in K-12 and community college, while also highlighting their voices to better understand how we can address the inequities they face in education.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is conceptualized as a practice of inquiry (Freire, 1970) that examines how "education processes, practices, and modes of engagement play an active role in the production and reproduction of social relations and systems" (Porfilio, 2017, p. xvi). Critical pedagogy's roots are grounded in the philosophy of Karl Marx, which emphasizes the impact socio-economics plays in cultural relations in society, and in particular, for one group to maintain dominance over others. Other research (Noguera, 2003; Rautins et al., 2011; Freire, 1970) has also established the environmental and cultural impact economics has on human behavior and, by extension, academic performance. During the past 30 years, much conceptual work has been generated regarding the role of critical pedagogy in education, including work by key critical pedagogical theorists Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, and Joe Kincheloe.

Critical pedagogy emerges from critical theory, which Giroux (1983) defined as a body of theoretical work developed by certain members of the Frankfurt School, a group of theorists focused on capitalism, societal relations, and reconstructing human emancipation. The Frankfurt School sought to "penetrate the world of objectified appearances and to expose the underlying social relationships they often conceal" (p. 8). To put it another way, these scholars knew that to transform society, they would have to unveil the truth about oppression and domination. The Frankfurt School theorists understood that there had to be an awakening of the human consciousness in order to effect change. Therefore, critical theorists emphasize the importance of self-conscious critique and developing "a discourse of social transformation and emancipation that does not dogmatically cling to its own doctrinal assumptions" (p. 8). In other words, a person must look at themselves to assess their own comprehension and standing in the world they experience, as well as the world that exists for all others.

Freire (1970), who is considered by many to be the founding father of critical pedagogy, drew on these ideas to construct a mode of inquiry that could lead to greater humanization for oppressed groups. One major contribution was his development of the concept of critical consciousness, or conscientization, "the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence" (p. 108). Conscientization allows the individual to awaken from their own world in order to immerse themselves in another space to connect with humankind on an elevated level of consciousness. Once the truth is unveiled, a sense of freedom and liberation can be achieved. This concept is similar to the notion of *wide-awakeness*, which Rautins and Ibrahim (2011) describe as an awareness of other people's experiences and interests outside of your own. Becoming wide-awake means delving into another person's view of the world that differs from yours, based upon dimensions like race, gender, socio-economic status, and community, just to name a few. It is a way to awaken one's consciousness through critical inquiry and interaction.

This "challenges us to recognize, engage, and critique" (p. 25) to eliminate oppressive, culturally hegemonic environments.

Freire's work is dedicated to using education as a means to freedom, as opposed to education used as a form of oppression. For example, it is common for marginalized students to be placed in classrooms to be filled with information poured into them by the teachers. Freire referred to this model of teaching as *banking education.* In the banking concept of education, the teacher (who holds all the knowledge) acts as narrator to the students (who know nothing), and in turn, they simply become receptacles. In other words, the teacher fills the students with their ideas of how and what to think and the students sit passively as empty depositories receiving the disseminated, homogenized information. The dismal effect of this type of system is that students do not learn to develop any critical thinking skills that would allow them to become awakened and conscious with an opportunity to transform the world, instead receiving already-formed knowledge reflecting the dominant group's worldview and agenda.

McLaren (2009) discusses knowledge as a "social construction deeply rooted in a nexus of power relations and influenced by culture, custom, and history" (p. 63). In other words, education that is pre-packaged is pre-conceived to communicate the standards and values of the dominant class. This is why critical pedagogy is so important. It forces us to interrogate our knowledge and whose agenda it pushes forward. McLaren (2009) also recognizes that there are certain groups whose knowledge and experiences are more legitimized and hold more weight than others; therefore, certain types of knowledge are also more valued. For instance, he cites the example of the subjects of Math and Science, which are more favored and respected than Liberal Arts subjects. On university campuses, Humanities/Liberal Arts instructors are often viewed as lower status than the Math/Science instructors. At my college, it is actually the norm for students to address their English instructors by first name, while the Math/Science instructors are

almost always addressed as Professor. It is by design that one discipline is addressed formally and respected within the field of education because for centuries, White males predominantly taught Math/Science while the nurturing females taught English. In exploring the reasons for this dynamic, McLaren (2009) relates it to economics and big business, pointing out that math, science, and technology are fields where all the big money is made. This again emphasizes how White men stay in power while marginalizing others.

To further expand on this idea of knowledge and whose culture has capital, McLaren introduces the concept of *bricolage,* which "involves the process of rigorously rethinking and reconceptualizing multidisciplinary research" (p. 4). Bricolage helps us look beyond the culturally homogenized blinders that have historically told the same story of those in power and the narratives they want to be heard. Bricoleurs use this method to expose the many ways powerful groups use their knowledge to shape and interpret history. As McLaren (2009) notes, "At every space, the critical bricoleur discerns new ways that a hegemonic epistemology in league with a dominant power-soaked politics of knowledge operates to privilege the privileged and further marginalize the marginalized" (p. 5). This is one way the cycle of oppression is perpetuated through schooling: students are fed the same information, which keeps them from looking deeper at situations where they could develop their own interpretation. Meanwhile, those in power continue their same practices to keep society under their control.

To combat oppressive, perpetual cycles of white privilege, we must do what Freire (1970) suggests, which is to liberate people, not alienate them. Doing so requires *praxis,* or putting theory into action to change the world. Freire notes, "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 60). In addition, we cannot liberate people who we do not even see as human, so like Freire suggests, there must be *authentic liberation* that is not another deposit into the

education bank, but a reciprocal caring and sharing moment of dialogue to advance the conversation of who gets to have a voice in the conversation and who does not. Until we reach the level of consciousness proposed by Giroux, Freire, McLaren, and Kincheloe, we will continue to spiral downward in an educational system that does not come close to addressing and meeting the needs of all students in an equitable fashion.

Community Cultural Wealth Model

As a second lens, I utilized Yosso's (2005) "Cultural Wealth Model" to better understand how Black male students access and experience college from a strengths-based perspective. Yosso's (2005) theory is an extension of Bordieu's theory of cultural capital (1977), which has been used to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor. Bordieu (1977), who argued that social capital can lead to economic resources as one becomes part of a larger network, acknowledges that certain identities (White) provide dominance for specific cultures. This "cultural capital" promotes social mobility leading to wealth, power, knowledge, skills, education, credibility, and access. Yosso's interpretation of Bourdieu is also a critique, however, as she argues that he "exposes White, middle class culture as the standard, and therefore all other forms and expressions of 'culture' are judged in comparison to this 'norm'" (p. 76).

According to Yosso (2005), there are multiple types of capital possessed by communities of color. *Social capital* can be understood as networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions. *Aspirational capital* refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. *Linguistic capital* includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style.

Familial capital refers to cultural knowledge nurtured among family (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition. *Navigational capital* refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind. For example, strategies to navigate through racially-hostile university campuses draw on the concept of academic invulnerability, or students' ability to "sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly at school and, ultimately, dropping out of school" (pp. 79-80). *Resistant capital* refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. I use these forms of cultural capital as an analytic lens for the experiences of students in this study as well as offer ways to better support them in K-12 schools and community colleges.

Literature Review

Drawing on a variety of literature based on empirical studies, in the sections that follow, I identified major contributors to the problem, including the ways Black males are socialized into deficit ideologies where they feel less than or incapable of achieving academic success. I then reviewed literature regarding the need for nurturing, welcoming spaces and community. Third, I discussed studies demonstrating the impact of self-efficacy and positive academic identity, which can empower Black males to shape their narrative within oppressive environments. The final section provides a discussion of literature regarding developing cultural consciousness and awareness. Critical consciousness is important for both teachers and students to develop, as it leads to a better understanding and respect for diverse cultures and experiences. Many teachers have no understanding of "equity" from a critical perspective, instead regarding "equity"

as surface-level modifications—such as adding a unit on Hip Hop that explores whether Tupac was a gangster or a poet, or a full semester length curriculum arguing whether Beyonce is a feminist or a sex object. Teachers need development that helps them gain a perspective of Whiteness/White supremacy as a systemic phenomenon that has consistently prevented many Black males from achieving academic success (Hammond, 2015). In the same fashion, students also need to know how these oppressive systems have historically been non-inclusive and disregarded their cultural assets as being major contributors to society.

The Impact of Socialization and Influence

There are both negative and positive aspects to Black male socialization and influences on their development, especially when it comes to academic success. In particular, there are outside influences, such as media and environmental factors that may contribute to Black males' adoption of cool pose and ultimately, to their negative educational outcomes. However, mentorship from both family and school-affiliated programs may offer positive benefits. Below, I highlight key ideas from literature examining the impact of socialization and influence on Black male achievement.

Outside Influences

Black males are heavily influenced by media and environmental factors. Studies suggest that these factors have a negative impact on Black male academic achievement (Wood & Wood, 2012; Johnson, 2015). For instance, Wood & Wood (2012), in their qualitative study of 29 Black males, illustrated how negative social influences create roadblocks to academic success. They note the impact media has on this generation and that often, Black males are influenced by seeing rappers such as "Jeezy, or T.I. or Gucci Mane rapping about fancy cars, girls, and money, which sometimes shifts their focus from achieving academic success to attaining this type of notoriety where it is

more important to be identified as cool over smart" (p. 989). For example, several students reported that, "the time in study labs or class was spent searching the internet for goods (e.g., clothing, cars, games) as opposed to concentrating on academic matters" (p. 988). Furthermore, Wood & Wood (2012) contend that acquiring material items such as designer clothing, jewelry, and cars to bolster status is ultimately detrimental to meeting academic goals as it alters the student's judgment by placing a "cool image" over basic needs such as rent, books, and utilities. For example, one student stated that seeing his 'homeys' in the neighborhood not going to school, yet making fast money, influenced him to eventually drop out of school. Johnson (2015) offers further explanation in his research, arguing that "perceived masculinity informs adolescents' peer group memberships, non-conformance with school expectations and higher rates of discipline" (p. 6). The aforementioned examples reinforce specific masculine norms that are not consistent with academic success (Ferguson, 2001; Willis, 1997), which is why mentorship is extremely important to introduce alternative ways of being.

Mentorship

Many scholars detail the powerful impact of mentorship on Black male academic achievement (Brooms, 2017, 2018; Hurd et al., 2012; Wilkins, 2014; Wood & Palmer, 2013). According to Hurd et al. (2012), there are two types of mentoring relationships: formal and natural. Formal mentoring includes teachers and coaches, while natural mentoring includes parents, aunts, uncles, or other people in the community deemed to have a close relationship with the student. In other words, adults in both home and school communities can have significant influence on Black males. Moreover, the relationships built between Black males and their coaches and teachers are just as influential as the relationships they build at home with parents, uncles, and others in their communities. Students need diverse groups to interact with and to build long lasting, enduring

relationships to develop and "relational closeness" that leads to effective mentorship and promotes positive student outcomes (DuBois et al. 2002; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Klaw et al., 2003).

For instance, in a study of 220 Black middle schoolers, Hurd et al. (2012) found that positive outcomes and higher academic achievement come from natural mentorship, which included parental involvement. On average, the participants stated that their mentors were important people in their lives over a significant length of time, usually at least 3-4 years. These participants also reported that they saw their mentors at least once a week, and their mentors helped them with homework and life skills. Discussing the factors that promoted academic achievement, Hurd et al. (2012) found that positive parental mentoring resulted in giving these participants a sense of purpose, autonomy, and self-efficacy. Through parental and other "natural" support, Black males developed the belief that they could succeed in school.

Formal mentoring, such as that offered by school-based programs, can also foster positive identity, self-efficacy, and achievement, in both K-12 and higher education. As an example, Gordon et al. (2009) studied 61 Black eighth grade male students who were enrolled in the Benjamin E. Mays Institute (BEMI) mentoring program, aiming to identify how the BEMI program impacted the participants' intellectual, spiritual, physical, and social needs through role modeling and mentoring. The principles of the BEMI program—the Afrocentric paradigm of *Sankofa* (go back and forth), spirituality, *Kujichagulia* (self-determination), *Ujamaa* (cooperative economics), *Uhuru* (freedom and social justice), and *Maat* (truth)" (p. 282)—had a significant impact on Black male students' academic identity as well as achievement. In particular, the BEMI students had higher test scores than their peers in math and reading. In addition to academic success, the mentoring program contributed to positive views about the importance of an internalized racial identity, which will be discussed further in upcoming sections.

In a similar fashion to the example noted above, the Black Male Initiative (BMI) program featured in Broom's (2018) study emphasized the impact positive formal mentorship can have on Black male achievement. BMIs, which are found throughout the country, provide college students with mentors who have shared similar experiences and, sometimes, the same cultural background. The programs provide a space for Black male students to "address, understand, and cope with stressors through connectedness, validation, and empowerment" (p. 61). To better understand Black male student experiences in a BMI program, Broom (2008) interviewed 23 Black college men at an urban university in the south. The participants followed a semi-structured, open-ended format that allowed them to make meaning from their experiences as students. Brooms (2018) found that "being able to confirm shared experiences as Black men fulfilled a need for affirmation and acceptance as students negotiated campus academic and social spaces" (p. 396). For example, one student stated, "It's different than it was in high school. I might be one of the only few Black male students in my class" (p. 397). Having mentors and peers with similar experiences provides positive relationships that are necessary for Black male students to navigate college campuses where they sometimes feel alone and isolated. Similarly, Brooms et al. (2015) study of 16 Black males at a southern University revealed that Black males benefitted from interacting with role models who shared their experiences, wisdom, and insight. For instance, one sophomore shared, "Events like this [the retreat] are important to attend because it lets you know that you're not the only one that is trying to do something; someone may have already been there and they could serve as a mentor for you in the long run" (p. 113).

Not only do these interactions and mentorship provide a sense of belonging, but they are also empowering for Black male students. For example, one student in this study learned that "he was the one guiding the plane of his future" (Brooms et al., 2015, p.114). Being a part of this BMI program allowed the student to accept responsibility and

accountability for his academic future. Through mentorship, the student's confidence and determination grew and he began to believe that he could succeed in school. Similarly, other participants noted the self-discovery that took place through mentorship led them to believe in themselves. One student stated, "What I learned about myself is that I'm not alone; there are people out here that feel that same loneliness when they walk into the classroom. I also learned that I share some of the same values as the speakers that we've had throughout the year" (p. 114). This sense of kinship promotes a sense of belonging which so many of the participants acknowledged had been missing. Not feeling like they belonged on campus was a great hindrance in their academic success and in some instances led to them dropping out of school altogether. These student experiences reinforce the importance of providing nurturing spaces that give a sense of belonging and community for Black male students to thrive in school, as discussed next.

The Need for Nurturing, Welcoming Spaces, and Community

Black male students need to feel a sense of belonging in the learning community to achieve academic success. To develop this sense of belonging, they must feel that teachers and faculty care about them not only as students, but as human beings as well (Clark & Brooms, 2018). Freire (2007) contends that, "it is our intrinsic responsibility as educators to respect, captivate, and inspire all students within a democratic and caring classroom community" (p. 26). One cannot expect students to learn in spaces where they do not feel represented or welcomed. One strategy that scholars have found to be productive in creating a positive environment is through implementing culturally relevant pedagogy that provides representation for Black people beyond slavery. Doing so positively impacts the development of the students' racial identity and reinforces their feelings of belonging within the community (Gordon, 2010). The research regarding

culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014; Darder et al., 2009) demonstrates the positive impact this type of teaching has on one's identity. Culturally relevant pedagogy, a term coined by Ladson-Billings (1995), allows students to engage in topics that represent their culture while promoting equity, inclusivity, and community. In her 2014 update of culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings identified three major tenets that reflected certain teachers' success in providing welcoming spaces for marginalized students: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. She explained,

> *Academic success* is the intellectual growth that students experience as a result of classroom instruction and learning experiences; *Cultural competence* refers to the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture; and *Sociopolitical consciousness is* the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems. (p. 75)

These ideals provide the foundation for providing nurturing, welcoming environments that promote academic success.

However, cultivating this type of empowering, inclusive environment is not the norm on K-12 or college campuses. In fact, Comeaux (2013) argues that the campus racial climate is a major obstacle to Black male academic achievement and contributes to abysmal college retention rates for Black male students. For instance, in his study of 411 teaching and research faculty, Comeaux found that many of the White faculty claimed colorblindness, while not realizing that their statements came from a position of White privilege and did not serve to expand opportunities for students of color. In other words, not seeing race is a contributor to the problem, as it detracts from the

importance of acknowledging an individual's life experiences and hinders instructors from understanding how their students' culture is relevant and contributes to the learning environment (Goldenberg, 2014).

This situation is particularly acute at institutions where Black males are underrepresented, where micro- and macro-aggressions can shape students' daily experiences. Harwood et al. (2012) argues that the Black experience at primarily White institutions (PWIs) is unwelcoming, unsupportive and is associated with poor academic performance (Smith et al., 2007; Worthington et al, 2008). Harwood and colleagues (2012) conducted 11 focus groups with a total of 81 students of color to identify issues students of color experience in residence halls. Participants reported experiencing microaggressions on a regular basis, such as racially insensitive jokes, racist comments and slurs, as well as White supervisors stereotyping them based on the color of their skin and attire. In the classroom, students of color reported that their White classmates refused to partner up with them for group assignments, made snarky remarks (such as speculating that they were only at the university due to affirmative action), or viewed them as threatening. To combat this hostile treatment of African American students, Harwood et al. (2012) suggest providing safe spaces, such as the retreat they held for Black men in their Black Men Achieve (BMA) program. At the retreat, Black males were mentored by men of color who shared similar life experiences. These students reported that they felt free to express themselves without concern of the stereotypes they typically deal with in society. Among their peers, the BMA participants felt part of a community that embraced and celebrated their culture, hence providing them a sense of belonging.

Belonging

Many researchers identify the importance of Black men feeling a sense of belonging and the positive or negative effect it has on their academic success and self-

efficacy (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Clark & Brooms, 2018; Comeaux, 2013; Cuyjet, 2006; Davis, 1999; Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). Black male students often share feelings of isolation and silence on college campuses (Brooms et al., 2014, 2015; Clark et al., 2018; Harper & Davis, 2012; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; McNairy, 1996; Reid, 2013; Strayhorn, 2013). As illustrated by Brooms et al.'s (2015) study, Black male students report facing hostile campus climates where they barely see themselves represented on campus as students and faculty, which makes it hard for them to fit in and succeed. Comeaux's (2013) work also shows that Black male college students must learn to navigate the university in hostile, unsupportive campus environments where deep-seated racial stereotypes reside. As in Harwood and colleague's (2012) study, Comeaux (2013, citing Comeaux, 2010 and Solorzano et al., 2000) found that "students may be referred to as 'dumb jock' or 'affirmative action beneficiary,' both of which suggest that they are innately intellectually inferior and not deserving of college admission" (p. 454). They feel "unwelcomed, isolated, unsupported, alienated, and racially hostile" (p. 454) which leads to this student population feeling marginalized and undervalued. This environment can also lead to lower educational achievement, as demonstrated by Rowley & Wright (2011), who "used the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 to examine the relationship between race and composite reading and math scores among 8,315 Black and White 10th grade students" (p. 93). Findings show that White students on average scored in the 55th percentile, while Black students' scores were in the 28th percentile. The authors noted, "schools with higher quality environments (less bullying and harassment) tend to have students with higher composite test scores" (p. 102). Their study highlights the negative outcomes of students who are forced into environments affected by discrimination based on class and race. The research described above reveals both the experiences faced by Black male students on campus and the impact these negative experiences have on their ability to achieve academic success.

Furthering the conversation on the importance of belonging, Clark and Brooms (2018) argue that a sense of belonging and establishing meaningful relationships are two major factors that contribute to Black males' persistence in their efforts to successfully navigate college life. For instance, in a study of 23 university students who participated in semi-structured, open-ended interviews, Clark and Brooms (2018) found that students who participated in the Black Male Scholars (BMS) program (which was designed to improve retention and graduation rates for Black men) felt nurtured and a sense of belonging which allowed them to "confirm shared experiences as Black men, which fulfilled a need for affirmation and acceptance as students negotiated campus academic and social spaces" (p. 396). Specifically, Clark and Brooms (2018) argue that men in BMS feel affirmed and accepted, which allows them to develop a sense of self-authorship that contributes to the student's belief system that they can achieve academic success (i.e., self-efficacy).

Nurturing

Affirmation and acceptance are critical on college campuses as they remove the stigma of being "othered" and create a nurturing environment where most students can thrive (Kim et al., 2013; Harper & Davis, 2012; Brooms, 2014; McNairy, 1996; Reid, 2013; Harwood et al., 2012; Brooms, 2015; Ellis et al., 2015). In Harper's (2013) study, he shares the history of the first Black man to graduate Harvard, 234 years after its founding, as well as stories of Black men at PWIs who were admitted into elite colleges, but not allowed entry into classrooms, forcing them to learn from the hallways. Black students were also denied access to dorms, dining halls, and interacting socially with their White peers. Given this history of exclusion, it is imperative that Black males are nurtured and embraced when they step onto college campuses so they are a part of spaces that promote equity and inclusivity and develop positive identities and self-efficacy. For

instance, Brooms et al. (2015) investigated how providing inclusionary activities along with peer group support and faculty that was representative of Black male participants could empower students by cultivating a strong sense of self. They found that Black males who participated in the BMA program became empowered and "began to shatter their own perceptions of stereotypes of Black men" (p. 105).

Seeking and relying on others for support stands in complete opposition to the messages hegemonic masculinity transmits to males, which is that, in order to be successful, they must pull themselves up by their bootstraps and navigate situations by themselves (Brooms, 2014; Strayhorn, 2013). However, research shows that in actuality, interactions with diverse peers where they develop supportive relationships along with teachers and faculty who exhibit an interest in not only their grades, but their general well-being, are imperative for their success (Flowers, 2003; Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008, 2013). For instance, in a study of 531 Black and White men who responded to the *College Student Experiences Questionnaire,* Strayhorn (2013) found that cross-racial interactions with peers significantly predicted a sense of belonging for Black men at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Moreover, Clark and Broom (2018) investigated Black male connectedness, which begins when students feel supported and a sense of belonging. Many students in Clark and Broom's study share how they felt alone and isolated on campus and how they struggled during their first year in college. These examples show that students simply cannot flourish in an environment that is not nurturing; they need interventions that promote a strong sense of self and belief that academic success is possible.

The Importance of Self-efficacy and Identity in Black Male Achievement

Without confidence and a positive sense of identity, it is nearly impossible for Black male students to feel empowered enough to have a voice in environments where they are viewed through a deficit lens as either being incapable of learning or merely a classroom distraction (Harper, 2012; Reid, 2013). For instance, Harper (2012) describes how master narratives of White hegemonic accounts generally categorize Black males as uninterested in education, which is accepted as the universal truth about this group of students. Kim & Hargrove (2013) also note that "past literature has often used a deficit-informed framework to answer the question of why Black males underachieve, often portraying black male students as incapable, unintelligent, disadvantaged, and at-risk to fail at best" (p. 300). Considering how these beliefs are embedded into our educational systems, deficit perspectives have clearly contributed to disproportionate disciplinary outcomes and special education or remedial placement (Noguera, 2003; Skiba, 2008). Furthermore, society confines Black males to environments riddled with drugs and crime, and only offers narrow identity categories for them to occupy, such as athletes and low achievers (Harper, 2012). To further complicate matters, much of the research conducted in this area is framed through a deficit lens, which feeds negative stereotypes about Black male students (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

To combat deficit perspectives and pervasive stereotypes, Black males need interventions that promote self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) defines self-efficacy as "the belief in one's ability to influence events that affect one's life and control over the way these events are experienced" (p. 2). Researchers such as Clark and Brooms (2018) have demonstrated the importance of self-efficacy in educational achievement. In their investigation of the ways that 23 Black college men's belief systems influenced their academic success, the researchers discovered that learning and self-awareness gave

students a positive sense of self and enhanced their motivation to persevere in school, while encouraging others to succeed as well. One student shared, “I learned that as I have the BMS (Black Male Scholars) program, I believe that I can graduate and can help my brothers to graduate too. I learned that I am good at pushing others forward to do something and I push myself with that same force” (p. 399). His words reveal how having the support of the mentors in the BMS program inspired a “pay it forward” mentality where the Black male scholars used the tools they learned to motivate their peers in the program.

In another example demonstrating the importance of self-efficacy, Ellis et al. (2015) investigated the academic beliefs of 103 high school students, discovering that Black male students who believed they could attain higher education were able to overcome obstacles and control the outcomes of their success. In other words, students who believed they could succeed took the necessary steps such as meeting with teachers, surrounding themselves with other academically focused peers, and setting attainable goals. This approach connects directly to Bandura’s (1989) work in self-efficacy, which maintains that students with a strong sense of self-efficacy have a better chance of achieving their set goals. In this study, I consider Yosso’s (2005) notion of aspirational capital--the hopes, dreams and beliefs that students must have to believe they can be successful—to be analogous to self-efficacy.

The various ways Black males have been viewed through a deficit lens throughout their educational experiences condition them to not develop aspirational goals of attending and graduating college (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; O’Connor et al., 2007). Because they have sat in classrooms where teachers, either explicitly or implicitly, communicated their belief that their black Male students would not be successful, they internalized that deficit belief. Like the rest of society, some teachers “have unsubstantiated, unquestioned, and inaccurate thoughts and beliefs about Black male students” which can be harmful

and detrimental to their academic success and general well-being (Harper & Davis, 2012, p. 103). To disrupt this pattern, it is imperative that educators cultivate classrooms that promote self-efficacy, which break down stereotypes about Black male academic ability (Ellis et al., 2015; Steele, et al., 2002). Wilkins (2014) study emphasizes how "race and class differences in academic and social integration matter for educational success, social mobility, and personal well-being" (p. 171). The study was conducted between 2006 and 2012 and consisted of 18 Black males and 8 White males who attended primarily white high schools and later transferred to four-year universities.

The purpose of the study was to investigate how these participants navigated their first year of college. They found that White males easily transitioned to college while Black males struggled to find their identity, which resulted in "increasing the emotional costs of college for black men, undermining academic support, and blocking their ability to construct satisfying pathways to adulthood" (p. 171). While White males were motivated to attend college by their college-bound friends in high school and found it easy to make friends in college, this was not the case for Black males. Many of the Black males reported having plenty of White friends in high school, but when they got to college, they found it difficult to find socially comfortable spaces. They found that White students would not even look in their direction and Black students looked upon the non-athletes as just "regular" people. Students also shared stories of how "regular black men" are not seen as Black men because there is such a strong belief that "real" Black men are athletes. This, in effect, diminishes the identity of the Black academic, who becomes invisible in college spaces. One athlete in particular reported that he engaged strategically with the image of black masculinity by capitalizing on his athletic abilities to convey an image of coolness, but he never allowed it to interfere with his upward mobility. Other athletes stated that they never had much interaction with non-Black athletes and rarely built relationships with them. One stated that regular black men are "invisible to us"

(p. 181). These examples show the difficulty Black students have fitting in on campus, which affects their identity development, and in turn impacts self-efficacy, because the development of positive identity is connected to having strong beliefs about one's ability to achieve academic success.

Ellis (2015) argues that academic self-efficacy for Black male students is important to study:

> Schooling is a social phenomenon during which appraisals from teachers and others about a student's academic ability are encouraged and expected, and because Black male adolescents are typically viewed as uninterested or unengaged in academic activities … it is uniquely important that we understand concepts such as academic self-efficacy which leads to academic achievement. (p. 4)

It is past time to shift the narrative so that educators view Black males through an asset-based lens that engages and encourages academic success. The communicated beliefs of teachers about their students shape their self-efficacy. Ransaw et al (2016), investigating the dynamic between teachers and Black male students, demonstrated that negative expectations by teachers lead to Black males' reluctance to seek help, while "positive expectations increase self-efficacy and motivation for both students and teachers" (p. 128). To put it succinctly, Black male students need teachers who believe in their ability to achieve academically so they develop self-efficacy that allows them to believe and see themselves as academic individuals who are not merely sitting in class to pass the time (Johnson 2015; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Ransaw et al., 2016).

One goal for this study was to provide a deeper understanding of how educators can help students develop self-efficacy and a strong academic identity. A central problem that Freire (1970) identifies is the "duality in which *to be* is *to be like,* and *to be like* is *to be like the oppressor*" (p. 48). Assimilation strips away one's own identity and

teaches students that their culture and/or belief system is not valid or worthy, which has a devastating effect on one's identity and belief that they can achieve academic success. Wood & Wood (2012) offer further explanation:

> Note the effect of psychological outcomes on community college student success, particularly as it relates to Black males: self-efficacy, students' belief or confidence in their academic abilities (Bates, 2007; Ihekwaba, 2001; Wilkins, 2005; utility, students' perceptions of worthiness or usefulness of their collegiate endeavors; (Wood, 2010, 2011); and stereotype threat, the effect of direct and indirect racism and resultant disidentification with education that occurs (Bush, 2004; Bush & Bush, 2010; Foster, 2008; Stevens, 2006). (p. 986)

> Quite simply, students will rise or fall to the expectations set by the people in power.

If they are taught in classrooms framed by deficit, they will either assimilate or conform, as Freire (1970) suggests, which strips them of their own identity and culture; or they will succumb to the trap of living up to the low achievement standards set in place by years of institutional oppression. However, creating campus/classroom environments that are nurturing, and disrupting educators' entrenched stereotypical beliefs about Black male students, requires work on the part of teachers/faculty as well as students. In particular, I suggest that the development of positive self-efficacy and academic identity that promotes academic achievement can only come to fruition if educators, faculty, and students develop a sense of cultural consciousness and awareness, which I discuss next.

Developing Cultural/Critical Consciousness and Awareness

Given that Black males often feel "othered" on college campuses, and educators often bring a deficit view to their teaching, teachers and administrators need to be culturally and critically conscious about how they engage with students of color. The norms and practices of education are based on the dominant culture of White males, or mainstream, acceptable social practices and ideas based on the social group in power (Darder, 1991; Freire, 1998; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Goldenberg, 2014; Milner, 2007, 2010). The dominant culture does not address the needs or interests of Black males, nor does it value what these students bring into the classroom and contribute to the campus, which can result in cultural conflict (Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto, 2004). Highlighting this conflict existing between students of color and the primarily White teaching force, Goldenberg (2014) argues that for white teachers to be successful in a non-White classroom, "they must recognize students' nondominant culture and learn to engage pedagogically" (p. 115).

Goldenberg's (2014) research also highlights that some people's culture is valued more than others and how important it is to develop culturally relevant pedagogy that "emphasizes student skills, interests, and knowledge - and from teachers who teach in solidarity with their pupils" (p. 49). Moreover, much of classroom curriculum is addressed to the dominant culture of White students, which excludes students of color, and contributes to the huge opportunity gap that continues to exist (Ladson-Billings, 2006). For this reason, teachers must develop a cultural awareness that allows both student and teacher to benefit from the diverse perspectives that exist in the classroom, based upon the lived experiences of marginalized students. Goldenberg (2014) further adds that to believe the classroom is a culture-less place is to ignore the vast wealth of knowledge and values that students of color bring to the classroom. There must be a

call to action to get teachers to be aware of this gift that exists when their students bring diverse living experiences into the class. There must also be a shift from looking at the Black experience as a deficit to acknowledging and celebrating the Black experience as an asset to be shared.

Promoting cultural awareness may also help address the issue of non-black teachers having significantly lower educational expectations for their Black students. In Gershenson's (2015) study, he investigates the cultural mismatch between students and teachers and found that "relative to teachers of the same race and sex as the student, other-race teachers were 12 percentage points less likely to expect black students to complete a four-year college degree" (p. 22). Furthermore, his study revealed that Black female teachers believed in the ability of Black males to complete high school. In fact, Black female teachers were 20 percentage points higher in their expectations and beliefs that Black males could achieve academic success. Therefore, it is critical that White teachers become cognizant that they hold implicit biases that lead to inequities in the classroom, where Black men are constantly dismissed as unteachable (Harper, 2012).

In addition to teachers developing cultural awareness and critical consciousness, it is vital that students develop these attributes as well to see the historical ways that the system was built to keep them from achieving academic success. For instance, Harper and Davis (2012) conducted research to challenge majoritarian viewpoints "with the ultimate aim of disrupting master narratives concerning Black males' responses to inequitable schooling and their supposed disinvestment in education" (p. 107). These master narratives of the disinterested Black male perpetuate the stereotype that Black males are dismissive of, or uncaring about their education, and contributes to the widening of the achievement gap (Harris et al, 2011). In Harper and Davis' (2012) study, which consisted of 304 Black male undergraduates in colleges and universities across the United States, they captured the moments when these participants became consciously

aware of oppressive schooling in which they share stories of attending schools in urban areas with dilapidated books while also acknowledging that schools in more affluent areas received more funding and better resources. Students commented on educational policies that neglected racial equity and the inequalities of opportunity that have kept them from achieving levels of academic success afforded non-Black students. One student remarked, "In the wake of major educational reforms, underrepresented groups have continuously struggled to improve their social status due to inequalities of opportunity and disparities in academic resources" (p. 112). Other students wrote about being the only Black student in class at their primarily white colleges and never having a Black teacher throughout their education, including their K-12 experiences. This connects directly to Goldenberg (2014) and Gershenson's (2015) work, which illuminates the disparities that exist in the teaching field, where the majority of teachers are white females.

Students must develop critical consciousness to recognize the unjust, systemic forces that operate on college campuses. Freire (1970) posits that critical consciousness is necessary for oppressed people to decode and make sense of social conditions that promote inequity. Black students can excel academically when critical consciousness is cultivated (Cabrera et al., 2014; Cammarota, 2007; Dee & Penner, 2016; El-Amin, 2017). El-Amin (2017) suggests, "critical consciousness of oppressive social forces can replace feelings of isolation and self-blame" (p. 20) that hinder Black male students' engagement and learning in the classroom. As another example, students in Harper's (2012) study conducted their own research on inequities that exist in education, and as a result, became aware of the historical "racial gaps in achievement, representation, and power in America" (p. 112). They also became critically conscious of educational policies that were in direct opposition of racial equity. One student stated, "In the wake of major educational reforms, underrepresented groups have continuously struggled to improve their social status due to inequalities of opportunity and disparities in academic

resources" (p. 112). Being critical of the institutions and developing an awareness of how one has been impacted by these oppressive systems can help students learn to build navigational capital to navigate these systems that clearly have not been supportive of the abilities and contributions they bring into the classroom, while also developing resistance capital to help them be resilient in the face of continuing inequities.

Rautins, et al. (2011) suggest that *wide-awakeness* (awareness of what it means to be in this world) "empowers learners to be mindful of oneself and others, opening up space for conscious deliberation of how the world is constructed in terms of knowledge, power, and inequality" (p. 26). When some Black males develop cultural consciousness and a sense of social awareness, they begin to understand the consequences of their actions. As an illustration, Wood and Wood (2012) reveal that several Black male college students admitted to "spending their financial aid checks on material items such as: clothing, jewelry, shoes, and cars" (p. 988) in order to impress their peers at school. One of these students had a reflective moment where he realized that he had harmed his own educational aspirations. He initially stated, "If I'm going to get this loan money, I'm going to school to fill my pockets up. It's an easy way of getting money to get what I want" (p. 989). However, later in the study he was more conscious of his actions and recognized that he had set himself up for failure. This wide-awakeness led him to make smarter choices for his future which will provide him the opportunity to achieve his academic goals.

I contend that in order for Black male students to achieve academic success in the white culturally hegemonic spaces of classrooms, they "must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (Freire, 1970, p. 49). By doing so, Black males can develop cultural capital which will bolster their academic identity and help them develop self-efficacy.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: to investigate the perceptions of Black males in the "Brothers of Excellence Program" (BOEP) at Los Medanos College (LMC) regarding their self-efficacy and academic identity, as well as the factors that contribute to the development of these constructs. In doing so, this study helped to identify the impact of cool pose on academic achievement, as well as document the attributes that contribute to promoting self-efficacy and a strong academic identity among Black male students at LMC, which I suggest can help disrupt the tendency to adopt cool pose. While much research has been conducted on how Black males perform academically compared to their peers, much of the work is from a deficit perspective and does not include the perspectives of students themselves. With this study, I aim to provide a platform for the students' voices to be heard, to focus on what is actually working in the BOEP, and ultimately, to generate knowledge regarding how to expand on those ideas to develop systemic reform driven by student recommendations to improve overall academic achievement. The following question will guide this study:

1. How do Black male community college students perceive their academic identity and self-efficacy?
    a. What factors contribute to those perceptions?
    b. In what ways does LMC's "Brothers of Excellence Program" (BOEP) affect the development of self-efficacy and strong academic identity amongst Black male students at LMC?

Methodology

For this study, I chose to conduct qualitative research, which allowed me to "collect and analyze data that consisted of textual materials such as interview transcripts, field notes, and video recordings to document human experiences about others in social action and reflexive states" (Saldana, 2018, p. 4). Through an empirical qualitative approach, I investigated the impact of systems that routinely marginalize Black male students while viewing them through a deficit lens. Utilizing qualitative research encouraged a deeper understanding of the phenomena that I explored. Qualitative research aims to generate meaning while allowing the researcher to "robustly investigate and learn about a social phenomenon to unpack the meanings people ascribe to various situations to build depth of understanding about some dimension of social life" (Leavy, 2014, p. 9). Moreover, qualitative research allowed me to examine how students and faculty act, react, and interact with each other in various social settings, i.e. the classroom, programs such as BOEP, and outside the classroom.

As noted above, much of the literature written about Black males is from a deficit lens utilizing quantitative research and depicting graphs and charts of Black males representing the lowest percentile of academic achievement. Instead of focusing on the catastrophic numbers, my study utilized qualitative data that is robust with personal stories and experiences of the students. This is another affordance of qualitative research, which lends itself to "collecting rich data with descriptions and examples" with "the participants' language and concerns at the forefront" (Leavy, 2014, p. 19) which helped me elevate and amplify the voices of those typically unheard in this literature.

Bringing students' voices to the forefront is a step towards breaking away from the cultural hegemony that has plagued the education system. Saldana and Omasta (2018) acknowledge that people do most things out of habit and tradition usually to generate

successful results, but these rituals often lead to destructive actions. In the case of Black males, culturally hegemonic practices in education lead to them consistently slipping through the opportunity/achievement gap and rarely meeting their academic potential. Therefore, designing this project as a qualitative study will allow me to address the social justice aspect of traditional value systems that do not harmonize with the value systems of other social segments (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). As Saldana and Omasta (2018) discuss, "traditions unquestioningly followed can lead to oppressive and even destructive consequences" (p.18)—such as what we see with Black males who are constantly underachieving and often suspended or kicked out of school altogether. These traditional practices in education have served as obstacles to Black male youth navigating college spaces. It is critical to investigate value systems as they set the tone for what is accepted as the norm and what is rejected as being a problem.

Within the larger paradigm of qualitative research, I employed a case study design. According to Yin (2009), "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 18). In other words, this method complimented my goals as I engaged in in-depth conversations with students to reveal firsthand accounts of personal experiences largely missing in the existing literature. The plan was to construct case studies of 4 to 5 students in the BOEP program, however due to Covid-19, I was only able to interview two students one-on one. According to Yin, multiple case studies are more powerful than a single case study, which can be "vulnerable because you will have put 'all your eggs in one basket'" (Yin, p. 61). A benefit of multiple case studies is that "the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust (Yin, 2018, citing Herriott & Firestone, 1983). Further, multiple case studies

provide the opportunity for comparison and triangulation, which creates a more robust and rigorous study.

When conducting my case study, I kept in mind Yin's (2018) important five components (p. 27):

1. A study's questions: the who, what, where, how, and why of the study
2. Its propositions: directs attention to something that should be examined
3. Its unit(s) of analysis: the fundamental problem of defining what the case is
4. The logic linking the data to the propositions: pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis
5. The criteria for interpreting the findings: identify and address rival explanations for findings. Anticipate and enumerate the important rivals, so I will include information about them as part of my data collection.

Context/Setting

The study was conducted at Los Medanos Community College located in Pittsburg, CA. Los Medanos is part of the Contra Costa Community College District (CCCCD) which serves a population of 1,019,640 people throughout Contra Costa County (4cd.edu). According to LMC's *Student Success Scoreboard* (2018), African Americans are at 17.3% in transfer level achievement for Math. Asians (44.2%) and White students (36.2%) achieve at more than double the achievement rate of Black students, while Hispanic students (33.1%), achieve at almost double the rate of Black students as well. Specifically, this study focused on Black males enrolled in BOEP.
I selected BOEP because data analyzed for LMC's Student Equity Plan in 2015-2016 indicated that Black males defined the gender/ethnic group that is/was the most disproportionately impacted in terms of academic progress and success.

As of Fall, 2018, BOEP has 73 participants in the following age groups:

Age Group	No. of Participants
19 and under	44
20 to 24	19
25 to 49	10

Table 1: Demographics

BOEP's mission is guided by six success factors:

1. *Direction*: BOEP students, upon entering the program voluntarily, will be encouraged and supported in setting their academic goal, and in creating an education plan to achieve it.
2. *Focus*: BOEP students will meet bi-weekly as a group (weekly if needed) with BOEP coordinators and guest speakers for mentoring and to support them in staying on track to meet their short-term (course completion) and long-term (graduate/transfer) goals, and to support them in overcoming barriers to their goals.
3. *Nurture*: The BOEP will embody LMC's "family" atmosphere, where students feel supported and wanted, with a college dedicated to help them succeed.
4. *Engage*: BOEP students will actively participate in class, and in extra-curricular and community activities.
5. *Connect*: BOEP will support students in feeling that they are a vital part of LMC's community, connected through active participation in academic programs, campus events and meetings.

6. *Value*: Through personal development activities, BOEP students will use their skills, talents, abilities and experiences to contribute on campus and feel their contributions are appreciated.

BOEP meets every Tuesday from 2-3 pm. In a typical meeting, the young men separated into groups of 5-7 students and each group was provided a question by the Program Director for discussion. For example, when I conducted an observation during an earlier pilot study, the question for group discussion was, “How do you plan to improve your grades?”

Although there were currently 73 participants in BOEP, only about 35 students attended consistently, according to the Program Coordinator.

Participants

As the researcher, I met with BOEP students who were all Black males who ranged in age from 19 to 49. All of the students were in the EOPS program, which means they lived in lower socio-economic areas, and many of them were first generation college students. From conversations I had with students during a pilot study conducted in the spring of 2019, I learned that the majority of students had been placed in special education classes in high school and had taken remedial English and Math courses in college, so it was likely that the current students shared these experiences also. The majority of participants worked either full or part-time jobs in addition to going to college. Many of them had the responsibility of helping to raise younger siblings, children, or caring for an elderly relative. A few students suffered tragic deaths and losses in recent years and shared that they sometimes suffer from depression or other mental health issues.

I made the conscious decision to use pseudonyms of Black men who have been murdered by police or White people policing White spaces to emphasize that any one of these participants could have been the latest hashtag in the Black Lives Matters movement. Using the pseudonyms is also a way for me to “say their names” to pay homage to their stolen lives and to ensure they are never forgotten.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

This study consisted of four main data sources: a 5-point Likert Scale Survey, observations (which include field notes and recordings), focus groups, and one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I was only able to observe two BOEP meetings, facilitate one focus group, and conduct two one-on-one interviews. I discuss each data source in-depth, next.

Survey

In the first observation, participants in attendance at the BOEP meeting completed a 5-point Likert Scale Survey that asked them to rate their experiences in the BOEP program The survey was a word document handout with ten statements, with 1 representing “strongly disagree” and 5 representing “strongly agree.” The survey solicited responses around whether BOEP provided them with a sense of belonging, supported their academic identity, and allowed them to feel a part of the community. Each of the statements related to my research question of how BOEP provided safe spaces and promoted self-efficacy. I utilized this survey for foundational data to inform the formalizing of questions for the focus group and interview questions.

Observations

In addition to the survey, I visited two of the weekly BOEP meetings and observed the participants in their study hall groups for approximately one hour each. My role was that of an "active participant observer seeking to do what the participants in the research scene were doing to understand the process better" (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 189). In study hall, participants were issued a prompt from the Coordinator which required them to discuss topics, such as their current grades, with the group members at the table. Each student was tasked with coming up with a suggestion for the group to incorporate into their study habits for success. I listened intently to these conversations and took field notes. I also planned to place a recorder at tables where students consent to having their conversations audio-taped, but students were uncomfortable with being recorded in their groups, so this did not happen.

To aid in this process, I engaged with students to develop a rapport that led a few of them to trust me and feel comfortable sharing their experiences in the program and at LMC with me. However, I was prepared for students who were apprehensive about being recorded, because as the authors of *Studying Your Own School* (2007) state, not everyone will want to be interviewed and some may be guarded or concerned with their thoughts or responses being recorded (Anderson & Herr, 2007, p. 172); therefore, I respected their decision and let the conversation come to me in a way that was much more conducive to the students' comfort. I compiled my field notes and transcribed the recordings verbatim. I also used these data sources to guide the development of the focus group and interview questions.

Focus groups and interviews

After listening and transcribing these two conversations, I planned to seek out ten students to volunteer/participate in two focus groups (5 in each group), but due to

Covid-19, this was not possible. Instead, I met with a focus group of three and discussed how they viewed themselves academically and how they practiced self-efficacy. From the focus group, I asked students to volunteer for one on one interviews with me to further discuss their BOEP experiences and how the program impacted their academic identity. This data helped me to gain a clearer understanding of how Black males navigate college spaces and how it impacts their academic identity. I describe each of these data sources below.

Focus Groups

In addition to gathering data via surveys and observations, this qualitative study also relied on open-ended questions in a focus group setting developed so that BOEP participants could share their personal stories about campus life while also "illustrating how people in conversational interactions exchange and build on each other's ideas" (Saldana & Omasta, 2018, p. 93). Focus groups are a great forum to allow multiple voices and perspectives to be shared. I was interested to see how students responded to questions when sitting amongst their peers which provided a different dynamic than when questioned one on one. I conducted one focus group due to Covid-19. The focus group was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

One-on-one Interviews

Following the focus group, I asked for volunteers to participate in 60-90 minute, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, in which I constructed two case studies. The interviews between me and the participants took place in a classroom on the LMC campus. The interview questions allowed the interviewees to elaborate on their survey statements, discuss any topics they didn't feel comfortable addressing in the focus group setting, and provided answers to questions developed from observations and focus groups. They were invited to share specific stories of how BOEP supported their

academic identity and how the program provided a safe space and sense of community or if the program did not meet these goals. These specific interview questions allowed me to collect data to examine how the program can better facilitate the needs of the students regarding welcoming spaces and self-efficacy. The semi-structured format allowed me to be open, because as Anderson et al. (2007) notes, “Responses to open-ended interview questions often go in directions you hadn’t thought about as a researcher or hadn’t considered. They often contain surprises that enrich the study” (p. 173).

The interviews were recorded separately on my iPad and the audio recordings were transcribed directly after the interviews were conducted. I compared the transcription with the audio recording and my field notes to ensure I captured the authentic sentiments of each student. According to Anderson et al. (2007), “It is important to get the actual voices and thoughts of students in order to truly understand the issues that you are studying and to gain multiple perspectives” (p. 173).

Strengths and Limitations/Trustworthiness

Throughout my data collection process, I ensured that my questions were not leading and the interviews were reliably and validly constructed (Merriam, 2007). I compared the transcriptions with my field notes and video for triangulation. Further, I supplemented analysis from surveys, observations, and focus groups with narrative case studies that provided a more complete or holistic understanding.

I acknowledge that there were a number of limitations that arose during my research.

One included the issue of transparency. Due to BOEP participants not having any prior relationships with me, there was not much time to develop a rapport and trusting relationship, therefore they may have been less inclined to be open and honest with their

feelings and experiences in the program, which may impact my data. Another issue was sample size. Due to time constraints and Covid-19, the scope of the project, and possible apprehension of some of the BOEP participants agreeing to be recorded, I had a limited amount of students take part in my study. This means the results are not to be generalized, although with thick description, I hope that the findings may be transferrable for other programs with similar goals and contexts. Moreover, the in-depth interviews were conducted with only two students, who may or may not be representative of the average BOEP participant. Finally, my positionality may contribute to issues regarding to researcher-participant power relations. I am an English professor at LMC (as discussed in greater detail in the next section) and some of these students may possibly wind up taking my class, so they may have been hesitant to be forthright with their responses for fear of it impacting them in the future.

In an effort to elevate student voices, I relied on internal validity which "deals with the question of how research findings match reality" (Merriam, 2016, p. 201). I gathered data that directly corresponded with students' feelings and experiences. Having multiple data sources allowed me to utilize a strategy of triangulation between survey, observations, focus groups, and interviews, which increased trustworthiness. I also conducted member checks with the interviewees to ensure I interpreted their responses correctly. Finally, I asked colleagues and cohort members to provide critical friend feedback as I continued to interpret my data and began my sense-making of the entire process, which provided yet another set of opportunities to confirm/disconfirm emerging analysis.

Positionality

To mother Black children, especially Black sons, is to live in constant fear of receiving that phone call that your child's black body has been snuffed out before the age of 25. It is open season on Black bodies as we see daily news reports of another Black unarmed man murdered by police. My biggest fear is that one of my sons will become the latest hashtag like #GeorgeFloyd, #RayshardMoore, #AhmadAubrey. The list goes on and on. The root of my passion for working to provide equity and to abolish the dehumanization of Black males is not only for my sons, but also the many Black male students that I've seen over the years at my college who struggle to find their academic identity in an education system that was not designed for them, in a world where their Black lives do not matter. While most cultures have the privilege to decide to have *The Talk* about the birds and the bees, I, as a Black mother, had to sit my sons down as early as 8 years old to have *The Talk* about how to respond **when**, not if, they were stopped by the police. These talks are vital because it is a way of doing our part to prayerfully get our Black sons home safely, but what we've seen in recent news is that Black people are not even safe within the confines of their own homes (Breyonna Taylor shot 8 times while sleeping in her own home and Botham Jean murdered while watching tv in his own apartment).

Over the past fifteen years, LMC has implemented specific programs to close the opportunity/achievement gap between Black male students and other student populations, yet Black males are still achieving below any other demographic. My conversations with these students leave me puzzled because many of them just don't see themselves as academics which is why I engaged them in conversation to find out what is needed for them to have a shift in mindset to see themselves as scholarly and capable of achieving academic success.

Because I have watched this student population struggle, it encourages me to ask the hard questions of Program Directors that facilitate these various programs and to explore why the numbers aren't changing. I feel it is my job to challenge the data because certain programs say GPA scores are rising, but I question if the GPA is increasing in core subjects such as Math and English.

As a mother, I have seen the inequities that impact our Black male students in a system that just passes them along to become someone else's problem. I also know that there will be some backlash to me challenging uncovered issues. This process has led me to wonder if these students have any sense of the inequities they've encountered throughout their schooling, including K-12. I am left wondering how I can disrupt the system while creating and maintaining allies.

In addition to the above-mentioned positions as a mother and professor, I also have the position of working in law enforcement for twenty-three years. I have seen the negative outcomes of uneducated Black males who have wound up in the *injustice* system that have had long term effects on their well-being. Not having a sense of belonging has dire consequences for this population who we know are disciplined and punished at higher rates than any other demographic.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: to investigate the perceptions of Black males in the "Brothers of Excellence Program" (BOEP) at Los Medanos College (LMC) regarding their self-efficacy and academic identity, as well as the factors that contribute to the development of these constructs. The overarching research questions were: 1. a) How do Black male students perceive their academic identity and self-efficacy? b) What role does "cool pose" play in their perceptions?; 2. In what ways does LMC's "Brothers of Excellence Program" (BOEP) affect the development of self-efficacy and strong academic identity among Black male students at LMC? In this chapter, I present the results of my analysis in three overarching areas. The first speaks to the current conditions of society and schooling, in which students described social inequities, deficit perspectives & low expectations from teachers, and white cultural norms. The second details the impact of those conditions on students' identities and health. Finally, the third theme describes the positive impact of the BOEP program on participants.

Current Conditions of Society & Schooling

In the first section, I share experiences of BOEP students trying to balance school and work along with obstacles encountered by many Black males impacted by a variety of social inequities in their daily lives. I then describe interactions between teachers and students, which were characterized by deficit perspectives and low expectations. Finally, I

address the ways that students were alienated by White cultural norms, which showed up heavily in curriculum and language.

Social Inequities

Many BOEP students struggled due to poverty and traumatic life events or living conditions. As a result, they needed to work full-time to contribute to their households. Several discussed the impact of holding 40-hour-a-week-plus jobs while balancing their coursework, including constantly feeling overwhelmed and sometimes having to choose between school and work. For example, in our one-on-one interview, George Floyd described himself as a 33-year-old black man still living at home with his mother. He had no car, no stable work, bad credit, and no degree. George Floyd told me that he believed he was capable of excelling in school, but due to many circumstances out of his control, he found himself struggling to stay in school. He had been forced to drop classes to work full-time to help his mom keep a roof over their heads. One semester he worked three jobs making $12 an hour, which he admitted was not a lot of money, but he stated, "I just kept trying." George Floyd's image of success is a good paying job, stable housing, and food to nourish his body; but all these basic necessities seemed to elude him.

As George Floyd's comment indicates, a common theme for many of the BOEP students included making the choice between pursuing a higher education and trying to pull themselves out of poverty. In the observations, students described engaging in a constant struggle to determine if they should focus on school or obtaining a better paying job, which often resulted in longer hours that interfered with studying. Expanding on this struggle, George Floyd shared a story in our one-on-one interview about working for a bank while attending community college. He stated, "I was making money. I'd pretend to take a Saturday class here and there, or an online class every semester, but I'd drop because I wasn't in the right mindset. From 2009 to 2013, I passed only 2 classes in four

years. It's very difficult to reach my educational goal when I start to value money over everything." George Floyd's sentiment about money was one that was felt by many of the BOEP participants who talked about the pressure of "keeping up with the Joneses" to show people around them that they're doing well, when the reality is they are struggling and suffering just like everyone else. Coupling the pressure of trying to keep up with the Joneses while living in poverty and trying to maintain decent grades created a great deal of trauma and stress among Black male students that oftentimes leads to depression, a theme that I take up in the second section of this chapter.

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Before going into the deficit perspectives and low expectations teachers have of Black male students, I feel moved to address the trauma Black bodies endure in this country. I'm struggling harder than ever to write about social justice and equity in education when every day I am witnessing the murder/lynching of another Black body. How do I stay focused and talk about inclusivity and othering when the Black body is still seen as inhuman? There is no way a White cop could hold his knee on a Black man's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds while casually holding his hand in his pocket if he saw him as anything less than human. Meanwhile, a White man murders multiple people and goes on a six state run but is arrested without incident just like Dylan Roof who shot up a Black church that had welcomed him in and even prayed with him. Roof was such a non-threat to police that they put their guns away as they approached his car, then took him to Burger King because he was hungry. Floyd was accused of trying to spend a $20 counterfeit bill and for that he deserved to be tortured and brutally murdered in broad daylight in front of everyone to see begging and pleading for his life as he called out for his mama. These horrendous incidents are reminiscent of the lynchings where White people showed up with their children to take pictures of this "strange fruit" hanging

from trees then made postcards to send to their loved ones. What do I do with all this anger, pain, and rage? My research is feeling like a powder puff that does not address the powder keg rage I'm feeling at this moment. I am ready to explode, but then what? How does that solve the problem? WTF do we do to stop these modern day lynchings? Covid-19 is not the virus we need to be most worried about' it's the virus of anti-blackness that has infected the multitude and created these inequitable institutions where we expect our young black men to be able to survive and thrive.

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Deficit Perspectives and Low Expectations

In education, deficit perspectives and low expectations for Black male achievement are rampant, especially in K-12. Black males are often boxed into low achieving categories or viewed as disinterested and uncaring, rather than considering how their experiences in white-normed schooling might contribute to their attitudes in the classroom. For example, during my observation, Rayshard Moore shared that his high school teachers didn't care about him, nor did they respect him, which led him to not care or respect the teacher. As a result, he lost interest in school. He also recognized that he was held to a different set of expectations than his White peers. He described sitting in high school classes with non-Black students who talked about going to college after high school as if there were no other choice. He stated, "White people and other races are *expected* to go to college and expected to excel in the world because that is how America has been set up throughout history, while people who look like me are not." Rayshard Moore shared stories of his teacher's astonished expression when he turned in assignments on time as if she or he expected him to not do the work. He described responding to his teachers' questions in the class, and observing their look of shock that he had actually done the reading or could solve the math problem.

Deficit perspectives were not limited to teachers, either. For example, in high school, George Floyd considered applying to Stanford. However, when he spoke with his counselor about it, he suggested George Floyd go another route that would be "more likely to take someone like him." Moreover, George Floyd was denied important information that could have helped him attend a prestigious university. For example, this past semester, he shared that he was still not able to apply to Stanford because, when he investigated the application process, he discovered that he needed to have taken the SAT a year prior to applying. He shared how he made it a priority to meet with his college counselor at the end of every semester, and was never told when he needed to take the SAT. This situation is an example of the hidden curriculum that I will address later. Counselors and teachers, as in Rayshard Moore's case, often assume that *all* students know how to navigate academic spaces to utilize resources that will help them attain their goals, rather than teaching them how to do so.

Like Rayshard Moore, many of the BOEP participants stated they showed up to high school knowing that no one cared whether they succeeded or not. They knew no one held high expectations for them to succeed academically, and felt teachers just passed them along to become someone else's problem. Rayshard Moore stated, "Within the high school district, I feel like they all failed. They all failed me because they just passed me along knowing I had not mastered anything." Other students in the BOEP meeting remarked that in high school, many of their grades were *fake* because they knew they did not do the work for an entire semester, and yet they still passed. Trayvon Martin, for example, recognized that a teacher gave him a passing grade because she no longer wanted him in her class. The teacher did not care enough to create a curriculum that was culturally relevant that would promote equity in her class, nor did she see Trayvon Martin as a student worthy or deserving of her time and knowledge. Culturally relevant teaching helps educators to recognize their understanding of the world and lived experiences may

not be in alignment with those of their students, which is why it is critical to include a culturally relevant curriculum that helps students contextualize the material with their own lives. The high school teacher was fine passing Trayvon Martin along knowing he had not learned anything about himself and the world. Trayvon Martin stated, “I know that teacher just didn’t want to see me again the next year. She didn’t want me to come back to her class, so she said, ‘Cool, I’ll pass him on with a C so he can become someone else’s problem.’” Another student shared a similar sentiment: “I know that [grade] should have been an F, but you know what, she gave me a C, so I’m good.” Reflecting on these incidents, both students realized these teachers were not doing them any favors, but in fact, were actively perpetuating patterns of inequity because the BOEP students graduated high school without the skills to succeed in college.

But instead of Black males receiving positive attention and learning skills to better their learning experiences, they were often met with negative interactions with teachers. Participants in this study rarely received positive affirmations and stated they mostly remember being corrected or chastised for their behavior in K-12, while watching other non-Black students exhibit similar behavior but never receiving the same punishment they did as Black males. Another familiar and negative experience for many Black male students is class group work. Many of them shared how they are always chosen last for group work in K-12 and college. They stated that they know it’s because people think Black people are lazy and lack intelligence. Nearly all 35 participants in the meeting had a story about how they felt when it was time to choose partners in K-12 and college. Some admitted to pretending to go to the bathroom, just so it did not appear they were being chosen from the leftovers. The impact this level of trauma has on one’s identity is unfathomable. Knowing students have to enter these spaces on a daily/weekly basis gives credence to why so many of them decide to check out.

Deficit perspectives don't only rest in the teacher's ideas of Black male students, but also from a peer perspective. In the focus group, Botham Jean stated in high school he was perceived by classmates as not knowing the material because they assumed he had not studied. He stated, "I never tried. I was quiet, then when I did speak up, they (his peers) were like 'damn he can read.' At the mostly White high school, his classmates were like *wow he's smart for a black dude*. They saw that most Black dudes couldn't talk, read, and were kind of nervous. Or at least the perception was that they could not read."

White Cultural Norms

Along with deficit perspectives, many participants have been impacted by the language and curriculum of schooling, which is based on the dominant White culture. The language spoken in the classroom often left Black males out of the conversation feeling like they had not earned the right to be in that particular space. Many students used words such as: alienated, forgotten, inferior, dumb, and stupid to describe how this made them feel. In addition, information was kept from them as part of the hidden curriculum, and the explicit curriculum which rarely covered subjects related to their lived experiences. Students experienced hidden curriculum in K-12 and college. The impact of forced curriculum that was unrelatable to the Black students caused them to lose interest in the class. Moreover, this disinterest was misconstrued by teachers as the students lacking interest in their education opposed to the real problem which was the inequitable curriculum that catered to whiteness.

White Language

The language of school reflects that of the dominant class – in other words, it is the language of White and middle class or affluent people (Alim & Paris, 2014; Valenzuela, 1999; del Carmen Salazar, 2013). This language is not explicitly taught, but rather, is gained through growing up in a White middle class or affluent family.

When students do not speak the language of schooling, they often struggle with required literacy tasks like reading, writing, and discussing curriculum. For example, in the weekly meeting, honor student George Floyd acknowledged that he struggled with essay writing in high school and college because he was expected to write in a manner that coincides with White linguistic cultural norms, which differs from the way many Black people speak. George Floyd stated, "One thing that will always bring you down if you're writing an essay is the syntax, the punctuation, the commas, that brings you down a lot of points. It's because that part is hard to understand because we as Black students in urban schools have not been coached to speak in that manner. Writing the essay is not hard; it's just knowing how to write it in a language that '*they*' approve of." George Floyd's statements were representative of other Black male students in this study, who found themselves always striving to meet the approval of the status quo. George Floyd and other students shared their K-12 and college experiences of writing their narratives in a language that was familiar to them, but because it did not meet requirements of white-normed language, they received low grades. Constantly receiving negative feedback on their writing styles created a barrier to their learning. Many of the participants shared the shame they felt when they received papers with several red markings of the grammatical errors because they did not write in Standard American English (SAE), which made them feel inferior. By negating George Floyd's language, they negated his black experience and black culture. Even in college, George Floyd met the requirements of the assignment but because it was not expressed in a manner conducive to white-normed language, it perpetuated this ongoing scenario of the inferior Black student. Incidents such as this devalue the Black experience and culture.

Participants expressed throughout their educational experiences that they felt constantly judged by the way they spoke and their manner of expressing themselves, reflecting that the current educational system has taught this group of Black males that

they are less than and their opinions and thought processes do not matter. The virus of racism that is pervasive in America continues to create spaces of exclusivity that keeps our young brothas yearning for acceptance and worthiness. In the weekly meeting, one student posed the question, "You can speak English, but can you *speak* English? What I mean by that is the whole textbook is different from what I say or how I talk. It's a totally different language. I'll read the book. I don't understand it; however, could you explain it to me? And explain it in a language I know and understand. Hands down. That's just the difference between them and us. I don't understand it." The mismatch of culture/expectations is between a school culture that devalues Black culture and penalizes Black male students who don't conform to White cultural norms celebrated and rewarded in the current education system. Examples of mismatch were prevalent in just about all the shared student experiences where they expressed their resentment of the classroom structure that devalued them on a regular basis while reinforcing the narrative of insufficient Black males. In the weekly meeting, Trayvon Martin attempted to highlight the issue by stating, "Our eyes can be opened like more clearer if we understand what we're reading and the purpose for the assignment. If you can find something similar to it you could read and there could be something inside of whatever you're reading that makes you understand something else, from somewhere else that hits closer to home." Trayvon Martin is pleading with the school system to provide curriculum that he connects to, something that matters to him and connects to the Black male lived experience. He's been seeking that curriculum since K-12 and continues to yearn for culturally relevant curriculum in college. The importance of culturally relevant curriculum cannot be denied. It has been proven to have a positive impact on the Black male learning experience (Darder et al., 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014;).

These are distinct examples of students being traumatized because the language of schooling not only differs from their own, but is much more valued because it mirrors

that of the dominant culture. These traumatizing events occurred in K-12 and college classrooms. Therefore, if a student speaks in a manner that supports White cultural norms, then he is rewarded with higher grades, but should he speak and write in a vernacular familiar in his Black community, then he is penalized due to the fact that the current education systems assesses everything against White cultural norms.

Hidden Curriculum

Teachers and counselors also made assumptions about what students should and should not know, which creates a hidden curriculum. For example, in the meeting, Rayshard Moore stated that the teachers were more interested in teaching them Shakespeare than teaching them about time management or how to work with their counselor or set meetings with teachers. Rayshard Moore articulated an implicit expectation that, since he was in high school, he should already know these things. However, not everyone has access to this information. Certain students gain knowledge through common norms, values, and beliefs of White culture, while other students do not have access to this knowledge, thus constituting a “hidden” curriculum.

Disseminating certain information to some students, while keeping it from others, creates a wider gap in opportunity and achievement. In Rayshard Moore’s case, the hidden curriculum included knowledge about where to go for counseling or tutoring. Rayshard Moore stated, “They won’t teach you anything about talking to your counselor, talking to your teacher, building a relationship. I went to the local high school and I feel like only one of the teachers out of my four years was willing to stay back after school was over to help tutor and help us study for the test. They don’t care about us.” Rayshard Moore’s statement is universal among BOEP participants. Another student attending the meeting, Eric Garner, wishes he would have educated himself on the transfer process, taken the SAT, and applied for college in high school. Unfortunately, because he was

a student/athlete, these resources were never provided to him. He questioned whether school faculty just expected him to know these things or if other parents knew how to access these critical resources to help their children ascend to the next level of education. The hidden curriculum provides students with information and tools to take full advantage of resources available to them, and this was denied to the students in this study throughout their educational experience.

White Curriculum

Another obstacle BOEP participants experience is the lack of relatable curriculum. In the weekly meeting, Trayvon Martin, and other BOEP participants shared the only time many of them studied Black people in K-12 was during Black history month, and they all agreed the only thing they learned about “their” people is that they were slaves and there was only one decent, good Black man throughout all of history, Dr. Martin Luther King. Moreover, the language used in the classroom is based on White culture, which disadvantages students who do not already have access to this language and cultural norms. BOEP students expressed feeling a disconnect between themselves and their teachers because they do not speak the same language. This occurs in both K-12 and college. They struggled to understand their teachers’ explanations, and their teachers did not seem to understand the students’ interpretation of the content, which caused frustration and disengagement. For example, one student in the weekly meeting shared his experience of learning Shakespeare in his freshman year of college. The White students in the class were already familiar with Shakespeare, some having heard about the playwright growing up from their parents, and some who had majored in Shakespearean literature and had performed his plays. In either case, they came in with previous knowledge of Shakespeare, and instantly connected with the teacher about this topic. The student described looking on in astonishment as White students engaged in

conversations with the instructor in a language that only *they* understood as White people who grew up with similar social norms.

In an attempt to connect to Shakespeare's work, the same student compared the sonnets to hip hop lyrics, but he was greeted with stares of confusion. He told the class that he understood Shakespeare when he could see the words acted out in front of him or when he listened to the plays. Because his learning method was not in alignment with those of his White peers, he found himself less interested in sharing and soon retreated into *cool pose,* his protective mode of disengaging when it came to group work and sitting in back of class with his headphones on, even though there was no sound playing in them. In fact, he made a point to say he was thoroughly listening to the teacher, but didn't want to risk being called on or being forced to interact with his peers who made him feel like an outsider.

Unsurprisingly, there were quite a few BOEP participants at the weekly meeting who shared horror stories of trying to learn Shakespeare, such as Ahmad Aubrey, who had an interesting take on the topic. He stated, "I think why Shakespeare is so boring is because it's not supposed to be read. It's supposed to be seen, and that's one of the reasons why I don't really read books like that. Not that I can't read, but because I'm more of a visual learner instead of a reader. Because to me it just seems like you're supposed to be able to see it and not have to visualize it at the same time." Ahmad Aubrey' statement encapsulates the Freirean concept of "reading the word and reading the world." Freire argues,

> Education as the practice of freedom - as opposed to education as the practice of domination - denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people,

> but people in their relations with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it. (p. 81)

In other words, education requires a curriculum that encourages the student to contextualize the word with their world. Currently, in order for students to read the word and understand it, they must be conversant with White normative *academic* language; which is in direct opposition to how one should read the world. One must have experience in it, and use that experience as curriculum. In this example regarding Shakespeare, the student is able to read the world when it's happening in front of him. He can understand what is being performed/displayed in front of him in the context of costumes and body language. He is able to interact with these expressions as they come to life. Though this is a different type of literacy, it is still a complex skill that should be valued.

This example also demonstrates the idea that language and content do not exist apart from life/the world. When Ahmad Aubrey reads Shakespeare, he is disconnected from the words he reads and therefore the text is meaningless to him, but when the play is acted out on stage, he engages in a much more complex way of understanding the world as interconnected and dynamic. Unfortunately, this is not often recognized or valued in the traditional K-12 or college classroom setting. As BOEP students like Ahmad Aubrey shared, however, the curriculum in their high school and college classes were narrowly focused on "reading the word." This disadvantages students who do not learn in the same manner or speak the same language. Ahmad Aubrey advocated for himself making the teacher aware that he did not connect to the curriculum. Ahmad Aubrey needed the teacher to deliver the information in a variety of ways that allowed him access, as opposed to only the students that have grown up in similar White environments as the

teacher. Because this did not happen for Ahmad Aubrey, he wound up repeating the same English course three times. Not until he had a Black male teacher who provided culturally relevant pedagogy did Ahmad Aubrey finally find the readings interesting and relatable enough to engage him and he passed English 100.

On a positive note, some BOEP students found a significant change in the relationships between themselves and teachers as they matriculated from high school into college. Trayvon Martin stated, "In college, some teachers show you the importance of what the assignment is so you get an interest in what you're doing. You actually retain what you're learning because you connect to the material. So, I feel like that's why I didn't like to read in high school because they just gave us whatever information interested them and didn't think about the students. They say you don't judge the book by its cover, and stuff like that, but to find out what the book is saying yourself, instead of listening to what somebody else has to say about the book, which was basically high school." Trayvon Martin's description of his high school experience directly aligns to Freire's *banking education* where he describes a dysfunctional schooling system where the teacher is in the oppressor's role of "depositor, prescriber, domesticator" (Freire, 1970, p.75) while the student is forced to conform to white normed curriculum, further imprisoning them in a system that devalues Black bodies. In contrast, the positive relationship Trayvon Martin encountered in college is in alignment with Freire's *problem-posing* education, which "responds to the essence of consciousness - intentionality-rejects communiques and embodies communication" (p. 79). In other words, problem-posing education values the individual's lived experiences and helps them to contextualize the word and the world around them, which, as Trayvon Martin notes, also results in more powerful learning. As the majority of respondents noted, however, in most of the curriculum they encountered, the Black experience was not considered, which left them disconnected from their learning. Although this disconnect may not seem like a

large issue, it is just one more way the educational system tells students that Black lives do not matter.

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Before moving into the next section, I find it critical to point out another macroaggression that leads to these microaggressions that impact Black males in school. This week not one, but TWO black men were found hanging from trees in southern California. This is 2020 and the strange fruit I referenced earlier is happening again in the supposed post-racial America. It's beyond disturbing to me that as I fight for equity in the education system, we are constantly reminded that Black lives still do not matter and now they are being put on display just like they were during the civil rights movement, without any investigation or suspicion as to how TWO Black men are found hanging from trees within 65 miles of one another. This is exhausting, maddening, and utterly unacceptable!

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Impacts of Inequities & Cultural Hegemony on Black Students

The impact of living in a country that constantly questions whether you belong here – either implicitly or explicitly – weighs heavily on students. Students discussed several ways that the exclusionary, deficit-based culture of schools writes itself on their bodies, including through their identity development and sense of self as well as their mental wellness. I describe these next.

Identity

The inequities and cultural hegemony of schools described above has a major impact on Black male students' identities: it affects their self-esteem/self-worth and self-efficacy, boxes them into negative stereotypes, and forces them to perpetually search for a sense of belonging in a country that does not value Black lives. I first focus on the multi-faceted identity-development experiences of three students: George Floyd, Rayshard Moore, and Trayvon Martin, followed by a discussion of the experiences of Botham Jean and Eric Garner, whose experiences were shaped by their identities as student athletes.

George Floyd

George Floyd found himself caught between identities, including what he called the "stereotypical black man," the "problem child," and "the Black unicorn." One stereotype perpetuated by whiteness is that of the trifling Black man who is lazy, with no job and no money in the bank. George Floyd, at the age of 33, saw himself as fulfilling that narrative, as a Black man still living at home with his mother, without a car, stable work, good credit, or a degree. He shared that these circumstances make him feel like the stereotype of a Black man, and was anguished because, as he expressed, he knew he was capable of academic and life success. However, due to many circumstances out of his control – including being forced to drop classes to work full-time to help his mom keep a roof over their heads, a violent relationship with his father, trauma from earlier educational experiences – George Floyd found himself struggling to stay in community college.

Most notably, the trauma inflicted on George Floyd from his K-12 experiences carried over into his adulthood as a college student. George Floyd had been a 4.0 student in high school, but was inquisitive and at times, questioned teachers about curriculum, and was labeled as a "problem child." He was routinely sent to the principal's office,

and over time, his self-esteem and confidence were diminished. He became suspicious of what was being taught in class and developed behaviors that kept teachers or students from engaging with him which stuck with him in college. He stated, “I was that student in the back of the class in college with my hoodie and earphones on who did not want to be fucked with.” Years of being viewed through a deficit lens and being assessed as a “problem” by white cultural norms impacted George Floyd’s identity and self-image to the point that he developed an inferiority complex and adopted “cool pose” behaviors to protect himself from further educational trauma.

Although George Floyd clearly had the ability to succeed academically, because he was a Black teen with dreadlocks, teachers typically assumed that he was not intelligent and he had to go the extra mile to prove his intelligence. George Floyd’s experiences are reminiscent of the historical freedom paper experience, which follows us everywhere we go in a society that treats us inhumanely and constantly questions where we should be allowed to go. Unfortunately, this created a dilemma for George, who met the academic challenges to be in AP classes, but because his culture was not valued, he found himself being overly disciplined and suspended due to behaviors deemed to be unacceptable or disruptive by his White high school teachers. George Floyd was sent to detention so much that he began to feel more comfortable in the detention space than in his high school classrooms, because he felt there were more people in that space who shared his same experiences, and at least students in detention were dealt the same discipline. He stated, “ I actually liked her (detention teacher) more than I liked most of my other teachers because when you’re in-school suspension for a lot of the time, somebody is like, I know you by first name. I know the rules and it helped to establish me a lot better. But also that person treated everyone the same. There was more equity in detention than what I saw in the classroom.”

George Floyd's remark echoes the situation of men who go back and forth to prison; they are labeled as being "institutionalized" but many times they feel more comfortable in these environments because like George Floyd, they feel everyone is treated the same. George Floyd added, "I think if nothing else when we talk about equity in the classroom or community, I think the principle that everyone is following these rules and everyone's doing these goals and then this is what it is. It made me feel better." Although George Floyd is a brilliant student who was more than capable of excelling in his high school AP classes, because he spent so much time in detention, he fell into the trap of the "problem child" who spent more time outside the learning environment, which put him well behind his peers and set him up for failure. George Floyd stated, "And so then I just became this more and more entrenched person who was just a problem child. My name was not very good at the high school and I was only there for a year. I became what they expected." But throughout all of these negative interactions throughout his schooling, George Floyd kept trying. His perseverance shows a part of his identity that is determined and resilient, even in the face of adversity.

George Floyd also described himself as a "Black unicorn" because he was high-achieving and took advanced courses in high school. He was an avid reader, an AP student, and member of the debate team. However, in educational spaces, teachers and faculty tended to treat high-performing Black students, like George Floyd, as a rarity. George Floyd described constantly coming up against shocked teachers who were in awe that he "got" the material or was able to complete an assignment with very little assistance – as shown in the last section. The teachers typically take a deficit perspective of Black students, expecting them to be incapable or disengaged. George Floyd struggled with the duality of being what the teacher expected – a disinterested, uncaring Black student – or allowing his intelligence to shine.

Now in college, he constantly has teachers and other school staff urging him to become a mentor which places a huge amount of pressure on him. He shares the pressure that he feels of being a “Black unicorn,” a term he defined as an intelligent Black man who excels academically and is applying to Stanford and Harvard. George Floyd feels pulled in so many different directions because people see him as such a rare commodity in certain environments that he is expected to mentor and be the *one* shining example of Black excellence. George Floyd’s experience is an example of black exceptionalism. Decades of data and accompanying educational narratives have consistently characterized Black males as the most underacheiving group of all populations; in combination with historical narratives of inferiority, this contributes to the idea that Black male academic success is so rare that the successful Black man becomes the exception, and as such, becomes the spokesperson or representative of what all Black males *should* be.

Rayshard Moore

Rayshard recounted numerous instances of trauma he had experienced in K-12 and college classroom regarding socialization into white-normed environments and antagonistic interactions with teachers who saw him through a deficit lens. The impact of inequity endured by Rayshard Moore led him to question his own intelligence and where he belonged as he stumbled through life trying to figure out who he was in the world and where he fit in. Like many Black males, Rayshard Moore found himself being assessed by White cultural norms, which caused him to feel anxious in classroom settings. Rayshard Moore began to see himself through the same deficit lens as many of his teachers and developed a hardened exterior. He adopted “cool pose” by wearing dark sunglasses inside the classroom and a hoodie or cap pulled down low to mask his face, which discouraged teachers and other students from interacting with him. For Rayshard Moore, these served as defense mechanisms that protected him from the

ridicule he suspected would follow if he tried to contribute to conversations in his college classrooms, revealing the limited knowledge he attained in high school.

Rayshard was frustrated because he never felt a connection to his peers, teachers, or the curriculum, so he eventually found himself losing interest in the entire process of schooling. He found it difficult to show up to class everyday knowing that his Black life did not matter in the school environment. This led him away from his academic pursuits into finding ways to escape the trauma inflicted upon him in the classroom so he began to smoke to disconnect from his dire circumstances. Rayshard Moore stated, “I used to go home so frustrated from school that I’d just smoke weed and play video games.” Because Rayshard had no positive interactions in the classroom, he became withdrawn and the impact was he lost interest in school. What Rayshard describes here is the sentiment so many Black males expressed as they attempted to navigate in a world that does not see them as human beings. Now that Rayshard has found BOEP, he has positive interactions with peers who share his same experiences. In BOEP, he has learned skills on how to insert himself into the conversation by bringing who he is into the classroom without fear of judgment. He’s discovered that many times when he shares, his peers’ interests are peeked and he is now part of the conversation.

Trayvon Martin

In a society that does not value their culture, and only sees them as a problem to be eradicated or chastised to the point of assimilation, many students find themselves overwhelmed and disgruntled by White normed schooling. For example, in high school, Trayvon Martin stated, “Everything was put on us. They just dropped everything into our laps. All them books you didn’t like but had to read and there was no support or context for the lessons so I just tossed them to the side.” The impact of unfamiliar curriculum thrust upon Trayvon Martin impacted his self-esteem. He found himself sitting in the

back of the classroom hoping not to get called on by the teacher or picked on by other students. He believed that the teacher and his classmates did not expect anything from him since he is a Black male. Thus, the deficit lens through which many teachers see Black males started to become the view in which Trayvon Martin saw himself.

Philando Castille

Students like Philando Castille understand the Black man has always been viewed through a deficit lens in this country and the Black body continues to be hunted and assassinated. He stated in our one on one interview that while he feels there are some places on campus where he feels like he does not belong, but he cannot use the "race card" everywhere he goes. He stated, "You got to prove them wrong. Even if they don't give you an easy opportunity, you still got to prove them wrong." This idea of "proving them wrong" came up throughout the weekly meeting and one on one interviews. Black males feel a constant need to disprove society's lowered expectations of them based on stereotypes that they can't learn and are inferior in comparison to non-Black students. Constantly feeling the need to prove oneself takes a toll on your mental capacity and negatively impacts your identity since you always feel judged and under the spotlight as someone waits for you to fail.

Student Athletes

Botham Jean and Eric Garner both identified as student-athletes. They described a different experience than the three participants discussed above. They shared stories of being placed on the jock track which were special ed classes that all the Black basketball and football players were in. This set this group of students on a remedial track that labeled them throughout education. Special ed classes in high school were filled with Black athletes. When Botham and Eric went to community college, they found themselves in similar situations. They were told by teammates which classes to

take because the teachers would go easy on them because they were athletes. Basically, the teachers had lowered expectations of them and would pass them with Cs just to keep them eligible. In Botham's first college semester, his schedule was Weight Training and Football 101. But what he encountered when he took core courses was that he was academically far behind his peers. When he joined UMOJA and found himself among non-athletes, he felt inferior because many of the UMOJA students were taking AP Science and Math courses. High school counselors had recommended classes that would be easy to pass to keep them eligible for sports which was a huge disservice to these students. These practices limited any opportunities at academic success. This is a case of the education system telling them that they're not good enough, inflicting even more trauma on them.

Botham Jean

Botham Jean shared that, in high school, he had transferred from a predominantly Black school, MLK High School High School, to a predominantly White one, Legacy High School. He quickly realized there was a different expectation of him as a Black student in the new, mainly White space. At MLK High School, Botham Jean stated, "However I acted on the football team is how I carried myself in the classroom and there were no repercussions for my behavior." Botham Jean showed up to school without his backpack and homework because he had been teased and called a nerd by his peers. There is a belief amongst some young Black males that if you show up to school with your backpack and homework completed, you are conforming to the whiteness of school; but at Legacy High School, he acted differently in class than on the football team. The Legacy High School coaches had higher expectations of him and viewed him as a leader, so he had to act like one in practice and at games. However, he didn't care what the teachers thought, so he did whatever he wanted in class. "The coaches held me to a

higher standard at Legacy High School when I transferred from MLK High School. They made me conduct myself more maturely, so I had to always act like that. At MLK High School, it was 'do what you want,' and since I wanted to be cool, I acted that way by not participating in class and pretending not to care." Once Botham Jean realized his teachers did not care about him as a human being, he began to either act out or become invisible in the hopes of not being messed with or embarrassed by having the spotlight shined on them in the classroom.

When Botham Jean entered college, he encountered some teachers who just assigned work without getting to know the students, and once again Botham Jean found himself in an uncaring, unnurturing environment and continued his laxed ways of approaching his education. He joined UMOJA (the Kiswahili word for Unity) at LMC for a semester. The Umoja Scholars Program is committed to enriching, fostering, and nurturing the educational experience of all students, especially African American and first-generation college students, ultimately preparing them for academic, personal, and professional success beyond Los Medanos College. Botham Jean admitted to not utilizing the resources though he knew they would be helpful.

He also shared that, while his Legacy High coaches attempted to motivate him academically, his teachers did not bother. Botham Jean stated, "As an athlete, I was perceived as a smart athlete, but my coaches knew I didn't try. They'd try to push me." But, he said, "The teachers don't see you as a student because you are an athlete." Since teachers viewed Botham Jean as nothing more than an athlete, he also began to see himself as an athlete first, and student second. This meant that though Botham Jean knew he could be a leader, his defeated spirit chose to just show up to school without much effort of passing his classes. He admitted that he should have been committed to working harder at being a good student, but he was worried that he would look like a nerd.

This provides an example of the way that lowered teacher expectations can shape Black male identity. Though Botham Jean accepted full responsibility for his lack of academic achievement, had Botham Jean's classroom teachers believed in him as a student as much as his coaches did, he would likely have been more motivated to excel academically. Furthermore, all of Botham Jean's instructors in high school and college were White. If Botham Jean had teachers that looked like him or shared his same lived experiences, he may have been able to equate intelligence with cool, but instead he saw these as mutually exclusive. Botham Jean stated,

> I didn't want to look like a nerd, didn't want to look smart in front of my peers, so I didn't want to have all the answers. It was cooler for people to walk around campus with no backpack. My boys thought it was funny if you had a backpack on, so it was different. It's like we buy into this negative portrayal of the Black male and it's what students gravitate toward. We were all affected by that. I was able to be a leader and really say man I don't want to hear that. I could have done the opposite, but I let the peer pressure get to me. I never tried.

Botham Jean bought into the negative portrayal of Black males because he recognized that teachers had already made up their minds about him as a student/athlete which meant they only expected him to do well enough to be eligible for sports. Teachers did not realize his potential because they allowed their implicit biases to put Botham Jean in the box of just another Black male doing just enough to get by.

Labels follow students for years, and sometimes, these labels come from their own peers, which also can have a negative impact on one's identity. Botham Jean shared how a Black student could get ridiculed for what they were wearing or showing up to campus prepared with a backpack and homework completed. Botham Jean stated,

> Like I walked around campus and one of my boys was like 'dude you got a backpack on' and I was like 'yeah we at school', so then I stopped wearing a backpack. I'm carrying my stuff in my hand now because I get picked on for being prepared. That's how it was at MLK High School, but at Legacy High School, being a square was cool. It was more comfortable for me at Legacy High School because MLK High School is a more ethnically diverse school so the standards were lowered. Legacy High School had higher expectations for all their students.

Botham Jean's statement is an example of a student's response to being forced to learn in white-normed schooling environments where their culture is not valued and everything is assessed by White standards.

He said that he was pressured by his own people at MLK High School. "The Black people don't want you to succeed. They're the ones that's going to talk about you for wearing a backpack, raising your hand and answering a question. These were all my friends. They'd say, man what you raising your hand for and making fun of me. I mean the pressure comes from music/social media to not be smart, but cool. Ignorance and bad things are praised on social media and not doing too well in life. Struggling and talking about it is glorified. Nobody wants to hear the nerd story." What Botham is referring to is the misconception that being articulate and educated is associated with whiteness so by showing up prepared for class, Botham was ridiculed because some of his peers saw him as being a sellout in order to assimilate to meet the white cultural norms of education.

Botham Jean's assigning of blame to his own actions as the root of the problem shows his own conditioning to a decontextualized, "bootstraps" or "grit" perspective. However, Botham Jean is not the problem: it stems from the school system that tells him he's "less than." This deficit perception of Black males communicated to them in implicit

and explicit ways impacts how they see themselves and perceive their own intelligence. When Black students are told throughout their educational experience that they are failing, or are labeled as special ed or remedial, it impacts how they see themselves in the world – not just in the classroom, but how they actually measure up to other people who do not share their lived experiences.

Eric Garner. Eric Garner, another focus group participant, also found that because he was a student athlete, his teachers made assumptions about his intelligence. He identified himself as a confident student-athlete, sharing that teachers in high school and college tended to perceive him as cocky, arrogant, and overconfident, as well as underestimated his academic abilities. However, unlike some of the other participants, Eric Garner actively sought to challenge these perceptions. He stated, "I was always judged and looked like I didn't care because I was an athlete so if we were out and about on the campus, people expected us to be obnoxious and think you run the campus, so you have to go out of your way to behave as a teacher would expect another student to act, but that should be the norm is what I believe. They think you don't care about what's going on but inside you do." Because many of his peers and teachers assumed he was just another "dumb jock," Eric Garner went out of his way to contradict this stereotype by making eye contact with them, answering questions in class, and participating in the Leadership club in high school. He tried UMOJA and Student Council at LMC, but says those programs were geared towards English and Math and didn't hold his interest. Eric found himself disconnected from more scholarly organizations because he had spent much of his time in special ed classes where he had not been challenged academically because he was perceived as just another "dumb jock."

In high school, Eric got lumped in with other athletes. He stated, "They generalized me because I was in classes with other athletes who didn't take academics seriously so I got thrown into that dumb jock track because we all sat together. I see

myself as a student first, juggling workload, school life, work, relationships, and social life. I'm always trying to balance everything, but procrastination and accountability are huge setbacks for me. It's like I know I can do it, but I'm not interested in preparing for the SAT or getting homework assignments started early. Those things were not a priority to me." Eric did not practice successful strategies in school because he had not been encouraged to do so. Instead he fell into the trap of "just getting by" because he was in a learning environment where educators did not see his potential, and therefore he fell through the cracks like so many other Black student/athletes.

In college, Eric initially struggled to oppose the stereotypical behavior expected of him but because he encountered so many obstacles, he eventually fell prey to his overwhelming circumstances by not putting his school work first and eventually dropped out of college. At the time, Botham Jean and Eric Garner did not realize that it was the inequitable systems that had failed them. They believed they were to blame for how teachers viewed them, when the blame actually fell and continues to fall on systems and teachers who do not value Black lives/experiences and the cultural wealth they bring with them to the classroom.

Trauma and Mental Health

The conditions outlined in the first section of this chapter, combined with the narrow, deficit-based identities that Black men in this study were boxed into, resulted in trauma that often manifested itself in the form of mental health. For one, the lack of learning basic skills like time management and studying impacted Black males tremendously. For example, George Floyd stated that he felt very strong at the beginning of the semester, but then crunch time and finals happened and he felt overwhelmed, which took a toll on his mental stability. George Floyd stated, "You keep trying and trying and sometimes your mind just isn't strong enough to handle everything and you

just have a breakdown at times." George Floyd shared that he experienced regular bouts of depression, which was fed by the constant pressure of working two to three times as hard as everyone else to succeed. Social inequities like earning low wages, living in substandard housing, and consistently being made to feel like an outsider in school settings weighed heavily on him.

George Floyd also suffered from mental health issues because of the conflict between his high intelligence and capabilities, on the one hand, and his teachers' misconception that because he was a Black man with dreadlocks, he is not intelligent, on the other. As a result, he always had to go the extra mile to prove his intelligence to his teachers. As noted earlier, despite his work ethic and intellectual talent, he experienced personal hardships that made him feel like the "stereotypical Black man." The overall impact of falling into this negative stereotype while also constantly working harder to compete with others who have historically had better access and opportunities caused George Floyd severe anxiety. He stated, "you just struggle and I think unfortunately it sucks to say that there are times that I've been hungry, sleepy, and full of anxiety, but I still had to force myself to class, even if I was 40 minutes late. I always find myself struggling to get anything accomplished." Though George Floyd acknowledged he suffered from depression and anxiety, he was hesitant to seek help due to the stigma attached to mental health and therapy.

Like George Floyd, Rayshard Moore struggled to find a balance between personal and school life, which impacted his mental health. Rayshard Moore stated he was not taught important skills in K-12 and, as a result, he developed low self-esteem with regard to his academic abilities, which caused him to sink into a deep depression. The impact on Rayshard Moore's mental health and self-esteem were monumental. He suffered from anxiety and depression, which he masked by smoking and distancing himself from his peers. Initially, Rayshard tried to interact with his peers in the classroom, but after

so many years of being made to feel like an outsider, he became anxious in classroom settings which led to depression and eventually he dropped all his classes one semester. He did not begin to feel comfortable in school again until he found BOEP and learned he was not alone and that there were plenty of other Black males who were suffering in similar environments.

Another student, Philando Castille, experienced an immense amount of trauma in one semester, which any person would likely find insurmountable to continue focusing on their studies. First, his parents had just separated, which affected his living situation. Philando Castille stated, “We were always moving, especially since my parents divorced and dad moved out of the house. Now I find myself moving back and forth between my mom and dad’s homes.” The constant moving and instability of his family foundation affected him tremendously, leaving him confused and depressed about his future. In addition, neither parent lived close to the college and Philando Castille often had car trouble and could not make it to class. Although BOEP provided a bus pass, the transit system in his community was not the most reliable, and sometimes buses only came on an hourly basis. As a result, getting to school became a huge obstacle for him, which added to the emotional toll of his family disintegrating before his eyes. In the midst of his parents’ divorce and the upheaval of constantly moving back and forth, Philando Castille suffered an unthinkable tragedy: his brother passed away. Philando Castille’s brother was his mentor and the person he looked up to the most. Philando Castille suffered tremendous grief and anxiety over the loss of his brother, but he never considered using a resource such as Counseling because of the stigma attached to therapy and mental health in the Black community.

His trauma was exacerbated by the deficit perspective of White normed schooling that views Black males as uncaring about their education. Instead of teachers asking him what was going on and why he had fallen off on his assignments and missed so many

classes, they assumed he was just one more Black male student who didn't care about his education. This led to Philando Castille having to take a leave from his studies. He noted, "I felt overwhelmed with working and school and the added pressure of paying bills, so I decided to take the semester off."

The impact of only seeing themselves represented as subhumans or property inflicts a level of trauma that often shows itself as mental health issues, which exponentially add to the struggles Black men experience in schools. To abolish systems that leave Black males broken and disheartened by their educational experiences, we must turn cultural deficits into assets, redefine language, and provide inclusive spaces where Black males feel valued.

Spaces of Possibility and Belonging

Since Black people were brought to America on slave ships over 400 years ago, their bodies have never been valued except as capital for trade in building generational wealth for White people. This is a reality that must be acknowledged as we look at the disparities between White and Black student achievement in our current education system. How can one feel like they belong in the classroom in a country that has historically brutalized and neutralized every opportunity for educational and financial gain? BOEP seeks to address this issue by providing nurturing spaces where students engage with one another, feel supported by their college, and utilize their cultural capital to make a difference through volunteering and making contributions to society.

From my analysis of the 5 point Likert scale survey and student remarks noted during observations, it was clear that BOEP is one space where most of the participants felt like they belonged and were valued. For example, on the survey, when asked if they felt a sense of belonging as BOEP participants, 71% chose *strongly agree*. It was obvious

during the observations that some students engage more with the activities and their peers than others, so it is possible that the 29% who did not strongly agree with feeling a sense of belonging are new to the program and have not yet developed a rapport with faculty and peers.

Students who were the most verbal in the two weekly meetings I observed were those who have spent the most time in BOEP. They were also the ones that, in response to the Program Director suggesting having meetings less often due to low attendance, were fighting to keep their weekly meetings. In one observation, Tamir Rice expressed, "I actually come here, and like being here… it's like a second home." Rayshard Moore added similar sentiments: "I consider BOEP another home and the fact that you want to reduce the time I want to come back to home, I feel like that's stealing my chances of growing as a person because somebody … [only] wants to come once every 3 months." In this quote, Rayshard addresses the Director's proposal to reduce meetings, as well as expresses the importance of having a space like BOEP to connect, decompress, and engage in powerful dialog that pushes them to aspire to reach their academic and personal life goals.

The importance of attending weekly meetings where they see themselves represented as "normal," and saw men who looked like them in positions of power, made a huge impact on the students. Another student in the weekly meeting, Tamir, stated, "You know it feels good to be around Black people and doing things that are not *normal* for us to do. You know, doing things like running a business, talking about school and stuff." Discussing the importance of having Black male teachers, another student, Michael Brown, added, "I'm not going to lie. I had a Black instructor for English this semester and I actually feel like he was helping me with a lot of things. I found it easier to talk to him than I did my [White] high school teachers because he saw me more as a peer than just a student or liability or something like that."

In their weekly meeting, Rayshard Moore expanded on how his interactions and relationship with his Black teacher differed from those with his other instructors:

> I think if you have a teacher that sees you more as an equal helps way more. Because if you have a teacher that sees you as an equal, they understand what you're going through. It's like, 'I've been there. I understand what you're going through. I don't understand, understand, but whatever, I've been in those same types of shoes that you've been in. So, I understand if you don't understand, and I understand if you do need a break, I don't know what's going on in your life, but I understand that you're going through a hard time.' So if you see me as an equal, I have not only more respect for you, but I also feel like I can trust you and I know that you're here to help me. If you're just an authority figure, I feel like you're not going to help me at all, but you're here to tell me what to do, and when to do this, do that. I don't really like that.

In his one-on-one interview, Philando Castille described the sense of belonging he felt on campus as a result of being part of the UMOJA program and BOEP community. He reflected, "My LMC experience has been good because of Umoja and BOEP. It's a really good support system and it's a community. If you ever need help with anything, don't be afraid to ask because they'll find their best way to help you." Philando Castille credited the relationships he developed and support he received from these programs as the reason he was able to persist in college: "I've had a lot of personal situations, but a lot of admins and mentors here, they knew about it and I didn't even have to tell them. They were there to support me. They're the reasons why I'm still here. They motivated me to still go to school and do all that and made sure I was okay mentally and all that. That's why I'm still here today."

Philando Castille elaborated on how welcomed he feels in The Village in the Math Building, an African American group, which has provided him with access to Black teachers who have encouraged him. “They accept anybody. It’s part of UMOJA. It doesn’t matter what color, how light your skin is, how dark. If you’re black, they’ll support you. You can talk to a lot of the Black teachers; they don’t want to see you fail either. Even without saying it, you can just tell they want to see you succeed because they know you. They’ve been in worse situations when they were younger; they had segregation and stuff.” Philando Castille feels so welcome in the village because of his shared experiences and background with mentors and program administrators. He explained, “They know most of the challenges you have to go through. They probably had the same challenges or even worse. They see us eye to eye. They are other black people who have lived similar experiences. In BOEP, you can bring someone off the street and then you bring them here and most of the time, they’ll leave here and they’ll ask when’s the next meeting. It’s real welcoming here.”

Another statement on the 5 point Likert scale survey was *BOEP supports my academic identity*. Like the sense of belonging statement, 71% of students strongly agreed with this statement. There was an even higher percentage (85%) of BOEP students who stated they felt supported as an LMC student. In the weekly meeting, students shared how helpful it was when BOEP brought in faculty from Counseling, Center for Academic Support (CORE) Reading and Writing Consultants, Math tutors, and other resources to assist students. Students and BOEP staff were excited about the “Study Slam” that happens at the end of each semester in collaboration with the CORE, where BOEP provides tutoring for Math, English, and Science to prepare for finals and final assignments. During this time, students could also sign up for one-on-one zoom study meetings. Having access to these resources provided BOEP students with an extra level

of support that is often missing in the classroom setting. These supports are also catered towards the student's individual needs, which helps them to develop an academic identity.

Less than 15% of students said they felt isolated at LMC. Programs like BOEP and UMOJA mentioned above are responsible for providing inclusive environments where students feel valued and nurtured. Interestingly, however, only 35% of students stated they felt like they were part of the larger LMC community, which makes me wonder if BOEP students really only feel a sense of belonging and support when BOEP collaborates with the CORE and other college resources. Further, BOEP has a small fraction of LMC's Black male students in their program, so this means that there are Black males walking around campus with no association to BOEP and/or UMOJA that are likely feeling disconnected, and who are missing out on the benefits that BOEP provides.

A little more than half (57%) of BOEP students stated they are still trying to figure out their academic identity, but when asked if they needed extra support when it comes to their academics, only 28% admitted to needing assistance. This is likely attached to the stigma around seeking help, especially in the Black community, where needing assistance can be perceived as a weakness or sign of inferiority. On the other hand, 91% of students stated they believed they have what it takes to graduate college. This is interesting because it belies the grade point averages of Black males at LMC and raises the question: if students believe they have what it takes, what is preventing them from achieving academic success and transferring to a University after two years?

Summary

In this chapter, I presented emerging themes from my observations and conversations with BOEP students. Participants were able to reflect back to realize the

K-12 classrooms that were supposed to provide nurturing, learning spaces actually devalued them and caused trauma that stayed with them through college. Participants emphasized the importance of Black role models and Black people in positions of power/ authority that inspired them to seek leadership roles based on their lived experiences and cultural wealth. The overall impact of a white-normed education system left many students feeling inferior, but through the fellowship of BOEP, they learned of their commonality as strong, resilient, aspirational young Black men.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine how Black males view themselves in relation to their educational experiences, the impact of cool pose on academic achievement, and the role of “Brothers of Excellence Program” (BOEP) in their development. The question guiding this study was: How do Black male community college students perceive their academic identity and self-efficacy? Two sub-questions emerging from this overarching query include: a) What factors contribute to those perceptions? and b) In what ways does LMC’s “Brothers of Excellence Program” (BOEP) affect the development of self-efficacy and strong academic identity amongst Black male students at LMC? To investigate these, I observed two weekly BOEP meetings, facilitated a focus group, and conducted one-on-one interviews. I reasoned that beginning with a holistic view of the larger group, then whittling down to a smaller group, and eventually individual interviews would provide the most salient and in-depth information on their lived experiences as Black males in community college.

The study results indicated that Black males experience a combination of factors, including social inequities, background trauma, deficit perspectives, low expectations, and white-normed schooling, that, taken together, severely impact their identities and self-efficacy, and in turn, their ability to achieve academic success. But in spite of the trauma endured and struggle within these homogenized environments, these young Black men refused to be victims of their circumstances; they continued to navigate school and

sought out academic spaces where they felt welcomed and validated, like the Brothers of Excellence Program.

I realized through these in-depth conversations with participants that the trauma Black males experience in the classroom and on campuses is a subtle, but powerful, manifestation of a much bigger problem: Black bodies do not matter in America, except perhaps as an exploitable object. They are not perceived as fully human. This inescapable fact has become even more evident in recent events such as the murdering of George Floyd, Ahmad Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, etc. These modern day lynchings move me to highlight the systemic phenomena of the dominant culture's chokehold on Black male students in community college, which perpetuates racial violence of a different kind.

In this chapter, I discuss my findings in light of the theoretical framework and relevant literature. I also draw on the results of the study to make several recommendations that will work toward dismantling current oppressive learning environments while creating equitable spaces of opportunity and educational liberation where Black males not only survive, but thrive (Love, 2019).

Critical Perspectives on Education

This study was informed by a critical theoretical and pedagogical perspective, which focuses on how social relations and systems impact education process and practices. Analyzing findings through this lens allowed me to examine how BOEP students' academic performances were directly impacted by socio-economics and their cultural relations in society (Porfilio, 2017; Rautins et al, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Freire, 1970). In this first section, I interpret my findings in relation to inequities experienced by Black males in community college.

Socioeconomic Conditions

Participants in this study all experienced socioeconomic conditions and related issues that impacted their schooling. For example, the majority of Black male students interviewed had the responsibility of taking care of younger siblings, ailing parents or grandparents, and many needed to work to help a parent pay rent and household bills, such as electricity and food. As a result, BOEP students often had to choose between supporting their families or attending college. As one student shared in chapter 4, he often found himself faced with a decision to buy food or put gas in his car to get to school. When these students had to miss class for reasons related to family support or work, teachers did not understand their need for an extension. Instead, many teachers, primarily White, assumed that the student did not care about their education – an assumption informed by the dominant deficit lens, discussed next. If these teachers had a full understanding of the historical events and factors that have led to the systemic economic oppression of the Black community, such as low employment, lack of access and opportunity to affordable housing, healthcare, and transportation, they'd understand that, historically, poverty and racism go hand in hand – they are interlocked systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). These obstacles are sewn into the fabric of America, not the fault of the individual student, who is impacted by centuries of these socioeconomic conditions.

In addition to these academic understandings, teachers must also get to know students. It is imperative teachers communicate with students and develop relationships with them to learn about their lives. Building rapport and understanding the socioeconomic conditions that impact students will help teachers develop compassion and empathy for their Black male students, as well as recognize the effort they expend to navigate these oppressive environments.

White Gaze

Schooling in the United States is normed on the dominant group – that is, middle class and affluent White people. This phenomenon is "the White Gaze." Upon further analysis of my findings, it became apparent that White gaze is not just the lens through which many teachers view Black male students; it refers to the culture which structures the entire schooling experience, from the teacher attitudes and expectations, to curriculum, to language. White gaze stunts the academic growth of Black males as this deficit approach refuses to acknowledge the cultural wealth Black males bring into the learning environment. White gaze views the language, literacies, and Black culture as deficiencies to overcome in order to learn white-normed language and literacies (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Curriculum

The impact of being educated in educational institutions that are grounded in curriculum that connects to White students, without considering or valuing the cultural capital and wealth brought into the classroom by Black males, leaves this student population at a clear disadvantage when striving for academic success. By excluding curriculum that relates to students of color, teachers devalue their experiences, as if they and their ancestors do not have anything of importance or value to contribute to the world. Many of the students shared that they only learned about Black people during Black history month, and the only things they learned were that Black people had been enslaved for 400 years, and basically, there was only one *good* Black man, Martin Luther King, who fought for Civil Rights for his people.

Instead of learning about W.E.B. DuBois, they were taught white-washed lies about Christopher Columbus "discovering America," as opposed to the truth of his robbing and savagely murdering Native Americans. Instead of learning about White thugs

looting and burning down Black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma, they learned about Black people burning down their communities in the LA riots, without any discussion of why Black people were outraged. While White people have had the privilege of providing history through a lens which always positions them as the pure, righteous saviors of all that is right and good in America, this same history promotes the negative image of Black men as savage, inhumane animals who are shiftless, lazy and a threat to White America (Howard, 2014).

When students have been taught throughout their educational experience that White is good and Black is bad, they come to assess themselves by this false belief system. For example, many of the students started to internalize the deficit beliefs of the oppressors, as evidenced by their lack of self-esteem and self-confidence in their abilities and their identity development. Freire (1970) argues,

> The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. This is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed which their education must take into account. (p. 48)

In other words, students find themselves in a position of having to decide whether to assimilate to meet the standards of white cultural standards – which necessitates that they internalize their own oppression at least to some extent – or to hold onto their culture, which alienates them in White-normed learning environments, and ultimately serves the White agenda to keep them in power (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

Deficit Perspectives and Low Expectations

The experiences students shared provide evidence that their teachers viewed them through a deficit lens that communicated to them, implicitly or explicitly, that they were inferior to non-Black students. Participants shared numerous examples, such as a teacher responding with astonishment that the Black student turned their assignment in by the due date, or expressing surprise when a student performed well on a test. Students mentioned they never saw a teacher show shock or surprise when non-Black students knew an answer, but if one of them raised their hand and added something of value to the conversation, everyone, including teachers and students were surprised by their knowledge. Incidents like these tell Black males that they are inferior to everyone else in the learning environment, which, as demonstrated by my findings, damages their self-esteem, negatively impacts identity development, and triggers defense mechanisms such as "cool pose."

Teacher deficit perspectives also lead to lowered expectations for Black males to achieve academic success (Ransaw, 2016). One student reflected on his high school days and the confidence in which White people discussed going to college. He stated it was the norm that White people would automatically graduate high school and go onto college, but for him it was not the expectation. Because teachers and counselors did not encourage his academic endeavors or believe that college was an option, he began to doubt his chances as well. The impact of deficit thinking severely affects Black males' motivation and self-efficacy (Steele, 1997). Another student shared his aspiration to go to Stanford to major in Psychology, but when he shared this with a college counselor, he was told that he should set his sights lower and apply to a less prestigious university. This particular student held a 4.0 grade point average at the time and knew the only reason the counselor would suggest this was based on his Black skin. By the time the student was ready to apply to Stanford, he discovered it was too late for him to take the SAT.

This information is part of the hidden curriculum that is based on knowledge gained in specific socio-economic settings that value white cultural capital above all others. It is assumed that everyone knows the process of applying to a university. Other students mentioned similar scenarios where they were expected to know where to go for tutoring or other school resources that were available. Hidden curriculum is based upon the norms of Whiteness which creates an inequitable environment that does not value Black cultural wealth. According to Darder (2019), "Institutional conditions of privilege are enacted through attitudes and practices of individuals shaped by embedded asymmetrical relations of power – persistent attitudes and practices of privilege that betray the promises of diversity of another time" (p. 58). In other words, unless you are from the dominant culture, your chances at succeeding are limited because you do not have access to the language of schooling, nor do you have shared lived experiences to the people creating the curriculum. Darder further states, "The outcome of conditions of privilege – reflective of structural inequalities and enacted through institutional relationships by individuals – is that there has been little to no challenge to the oppressive structures of power within the university" (pp. 50-51). Darder's statement is evidenced by the stories BOEP students shared of inequality and inequity in their educational experiences.

Darder (2019) speaks of how the "dehumanizing impact of social and material inequalities perpetuated by hierarchical and undemocratic forms of university leadership impels us to unveil the hidden curriculum, with its anti-dialogical values and practices, in an effort to move toward a decolonizing vision of leadership and a more just social order" (p. 58). The hidden curriculum is doing major harm to students who are left out of the equation. The hidden curriculum is further proof that Black lives do not matter which further traumatizes students of color. Del Carmen Salazar (2013) shares how systematic practices in the U.S. educational system that suppressed vital elements of humanity led

her and other students of color to "divest themselves of their linguistic, cultural, and familial resources to succeed in US public schools" (p. 121). Throughout U.S. history, educators have intentionally and unintentionally bombarded students of color with messages of their inferiority through a hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990). Moreover, educators have compelled and at times coerced these students into whiteness. (Sanchez, 1993; Woodson, 2006).

Both Botham Jean and Eric Garner talk about the stigma of showing up prepared for class or volunteering answers and looking smart that makes you look like a sellout to your Black peers (Kunjufu, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 2001). It's not that they didn't want to achieve academic success, but they didn't want to be perceived as giving up their culture to meet those white standards of success. The hidden curriculum provokes feelings of inferiority (Steeles & Aronson, 1995) while disregarding the cultural capital of Black males, which often reveals itself as *cool pose* when Black male students enter the classroom.

Cool Pose

Black males exhibit cool pose in their speech, style, and physicality to evoke strength and control in awkward spaces where their culture, language and style of dress are not respected (Bush, 2013; Majors & Billson, 1993; Ogbu, 1987). When their cultural capital is ignored, many Black male students don the cool pose in order to navigate these unwelcoming spaces. As a protective mode, they don the cool pose which many teachers perceive as a lack of interest, but is oftentimes a way to say "I'm present, but don't pick on me or ridicule me," which has been many of their experiences. For example, both students who engaged in in-depth interviews talked about adopting cool pose behaviors, such as wearing dark sunglasses or a hoodie pulled up and sitting in the back of the class to discourage interaction. Cool pose is a reactionary response that I

have witnessed firsthand in my classroom and I understand it to help Black males deal with stress caused by social oppression in a White male dominated society because I have personal knowledge of the struggle as a Black person navigating White spaces. Sitting in a classroom for six hours a day with a person of authority that does not respect or understand your culture causes traumatic impact on one's psyche, and cool pose is one way of dealing with it. However, many White teachers misinterpret cool pose as being defiant and disruptive, which often leads Black male students to detention or the Dean's office.

Microaggressions

Many BOEP students shared K-12 experiences where they rarely received positive affirmations from their teachers. Their memories are of being chastised or disciplined for behaviors exhibited by non-Black students but receiving much harsher punishment, such as being sent to the principal's office (Gregory, 2010; Lee, 2011; Losen, 2010; Nguyen, 2019; Ogbu, 1995). The students talked about being picked last for group projects and laughed at any time they raised their hand. What resulted is students checking out by sitting in back of the classroom in a hoodie or baseball cap pulled low over their eyes and AirPods in their ears to avoid further trauma inflicted upon them in the classroom. The trauma contributes to so many facets of Black lives: low self-esteem, low self-worth, lack of self-efficacy, all while constantly feeling like an outsider.

The misinterpretation of behavior, which leads to high suspension, expulsion rates, and disproportionate placement in special education, is a manifestation of social oppression, which stems from cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1926) and is a method of maintaining White supremacy (Losen & Gillepsi, 2012; Skiba et al., 2014; Whisman & Hammer, 2014). For example, one student, George Floyd, shared how he unfairly earned the title of problem child in middle school and it followed him into high school

where teachers were warned to beware of his disruptive behavior. However, the so-called disruptive behavior was him merely using his critical thinking skills to question information being shared with him by his teacher. This student's experiences are an example of a Black male resisting teachers who do not understand their bicultural or multicultural worlds, which are mismatches for the white-normed systems imposed on schools (Salazar, 2018; Warikoo & Carter, 2009).

Moreover, these microaggressions are a reflection of the macroaggressions that empower White officers to shoot unarmed Black men in the back and for White women to call the police on Black people doing ordinary things such as walking their dogs, barbecuing, swimming, or working out. All these examples show the dehumanization of the Black body that does not conform to White expectations or norms. When Black people do not stay in the box designated by White people, they risk encounters with police that frequently leads to death for non-violent infractions or just minding their own business. Because the Black man has been painted throughout history as a savage beast to be feared, White people feel justified in the vilification of Black males. We see this in the high rates of suspension of Black males in comparison with non-Black students (Neal, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Skiba, 1999). The Black body has never been safe in America so it is not a matter of only being able to achieve academic success, but it is a constant struggle to survive as a Black man in America when you can be murdered by a police officer while sitting in your own apartment like Botham Jean. So not only are Black male students working hard just to survive in this world, but they are also developing grit that motivates them to keep trying even though they face adversity at every corner. One such roadblock is the language of schooling.

White Language of Schooling

Many students mentioned the problem of language in school which is based on white cultural norms. Not speaking or writing in a way that is conducive to whiteness leaves Black male students at a severe disadvantage. George Floyd made the statement that he can speak English, but can he *speak* English meaning can he speak it well enough to meet the requirements of white-normed standards. Another student, Trayvon Martin, questioned the reading material that is written in English but does not resonate with his lived experiences so he had a difficult time comprehending what he was reading. Also, since the teacher did not frame the assignment with a purpose and outcome, Trayvon Martin felt confused about what he was supposed to take away from the assignment.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Black culture, languages, and literacies are viewed as deficits Black students need to overcome to conform to the dominant language (Alim & Paris, 2014; del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela (1999) refers to this deficit approach to education as subtractive schooling by denying students of color their heritage and culture and forcing them to assimilate to white standards. Once Trayvon Martin found himself in an equity-based classroom the following semester, he felt supported by teachers who used CRP that he found relatable and that valued his cultural capital.

Educational institutions have relied on a curriculum that connects to White students without consideration or value to the cultural capital and wealth brought into the classroom by Black males. By not including curriculum that relates to students of color, teachers devalue their culture as if their cultural contributions do not matter in America's history. Students must be able to contextualize what they are learning in the classroom if they are to make sense and help them to feel like they belong. Teachers must prioritize ways to speak to the multitude, not just the dominant culture. Friere (1970) talked about education as a practice of freedom opposed to education as practice of domination. Freire

argued against the banking concept of education in which "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p. 73). Unfortunately, the banking concept is what the majority of BOEP students have experienced. They sat in white-normed classrooms being told how to speak, think, and respond to curriculum that did not resonate with them and when they did not meet these standards, they were penalized by lowered grades that did not reflect their true abilities. Teachers who structure their courses around culturally relevant pedagogy provide Black male students the opportunity to flex their cultural capital and to feel a sense of pride and belonging as they navigate White educational spaces. When we homogenize education, we negate everyone else's culture and experiences. We devalue them. We tell them that only White patriarchal norms matter. How can we expect Black male students to navigate these environments and achieve academic success?

Spirit-murdering

The re-emergence of Jim Crow comes at a time when we are seeing the magnitude of the disparities in urban, spirit-murdering schools. Dr. Bettina Love (2019) states, "Racism literally murders your spirit. Racism is traumatic because it is a loss of protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance – all things children need to be educated" (p. 38). Dr. Love is referencing basic human needs that should be provided to all beings, but we know in America this is not the case. Many BOEP students shared their experiences in spirit-murdering schools where they felt left out of the conversation because they did not understand or conform to the White language of schooling. The impact of spirit murdering schools leaves students questioning their own intelligence after years of being assessed by White cultural norms that constantly make them feel like outsiders (Kunjufu, 1988). For example, in chapter 4, one student described how trying to learn in an environment that battered his spirit on a daily basis became overwhelming

and frustrating, which led him to spend his time playing video games and getting high as an escape. This student had been so traumatized by the spirit-murdering education system that he was ready to give up on his education. However, not until the student had the opportunity to take an English class with a Black male instructor did he develop the self-efficacy and will to persevere. Since interacting with a teacher who respects his culture and utilizes culturally relevant pedagogy, the student is once again motivated to achieve academic success.

In the past few years, we have seen the resurgence of White supremacy and what it means to "Make America Great Again." Strategic forces have been put in place to take us back to the ugliest, most horrific days in America. MAGA is not about American pride, it's about White pride i.e. White supremacy. There is no need to tell people *blue* or *all* lives matter, that's a given. It is critical that the movement remains focused on Black Lives Matter because these are the lives that have NEVER mattered in America EXCEPT when they are used as capital: slave trade, ball players, entertainers. In one month, six Black people have been found hanging from trees in California, Oregon, and New York and law enforcement has quickly labeled them as suicides without an in-depth investigation. Black people are being stopped and questioned by White people to prove their right to be in public spaces. We've found ourselves as Black people being required to produce freedom papers as if we were recently emancipated from slavery. The scary fact is invisible Jim Crow laws continue to exist and we are witnessing White people exercise their privilege to enforce these inhumane laws to remind Black people they are still viewed as less than human in America.

According to Alexander (2010), "Our understanding of racism [Jim Crow] is shaped by the most extreme expressions of individual bigotry, not by the way in which it functions naturally, almost invisibly (and sometimes with genuinely benign intent), when it is embedded in the structure of a social system" (p. 184). The experiences described

by the participants in this study, and the impact on their academic identity development and achievement are clear examples of an invisible Jim Crow system that is continuing to harm and kill Black men. White people need to recognize that our Black bodies do endure pain. Our hearts are weakened by the constant trauma endured watching our sons and daughters murdered unmercifully like animals. The casualness of Chauvin's murdering of George Floyd and his pose like a deer hunter makes it quite evident that Floyd did not represent a human to him. Chauvin was unmoved by the man's plea for his life. The system is not broken. It functions exactly as it was designed: to keep White people in power and people of color oppressed. As Black Atlantis noted, "Teaching is to White women what policing is to White men. It's the same damn job, with different forms of violence" (Tweet, June 11, 2020).

Community Cultural Wealth

In Yosso's (2005) work, she argues,

> One of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in US schools is deficit thinking that takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: ...students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills. These racialized assumptions about Communities of Color most often leads schools to default to the banking method of education. (p. 75)

Yosso's statement connects to experiences BOEP students shared in chapter 4. For example, Rayshard talked about not being taught basic learning skills and time management strategies in K-12, but was expected to have this knowledge when he entered college; Trayvon shared his experience with trying to learn Shakespeare without

his teacher helping him to contextualize what he was learning to his lived experiences. Trayvon's experience is an example of Freire's banking method in which students are nothing more than receptacles to be filled with knowledge deemed important by the dominant culture.

But even with these obstacles, BOEP students developed community cultural wealth that begins with *familial capital.* According to Yosso (2005), *familial capital* refers to "those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (p. 79). In BOEP, students were nurtured by two successful, educated Black men who shared stories of their challenges and accomplishments to overcome obstacles to get where they are and give students a sense of history and continuity. One story shared by the Director of BOEP was a time when his grade point average in college was 0.0. He asked the students why they thought he chose to share that personal information with them, and they replied that it was to show them that no matter what the circumstances, there was still an opportunity to turn things around. Stories like the Director's helped students to see they did not have to be victims to the system; they were provided tools in BOEP that helped them change the narrative to aspire to something greater. I argue that this relationship and knowledge served as familial capital. One generation sharing stories with another generation helps to highlight contributions made by Black people so students aren't just carrying the burden of the slave narrative taught in schools. Our stories have purpose. Our stories have power. Our stories matter. Our Black lives matter.

Because students were able to develop familial capital cultivated by BOEP, they also developed *navigational capital* which Yosso (2005) refers to as "skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind" (p. 80). As mentioned in chapter 4, BOEP students frequently found themselves feeling like outsiders

in white spaces where it was required that they be conversant with White normative *academic* language. In BOEP, students learned how to effectively navigate these systems by setting up meetings with their instructors to communicate challenges they may be having in class. BOEP brought in counselors and other speakers from the community to help students hone skills that not only helped them in their academic lives, but personal lives as well such as teaching them to tie a tie, practice interviewing for a job, and how to communicate with people in power to get a point across while achieving their desired outcome. By developing these navigational skills, students were able to focus on their aspirational goals.

According to Yosso (2005),

> *aspirational capital* refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals. (p. 76-77)

Aspirational capital cultivates self-efficacy because it allows students to believe they are capable of achieving their academic and personal goals in spite of obstacles. For example, Tamir Rice shared how important it was for him to be in BOEP talking about school, starting a business, and other things Black people are not *expected* to do. Having these conversations helped Tamir Rice to have dreams and aspirations regardless of the perceived barriers they encountered every day in the classroom and in society.

Yosso (2005) defines *resistant capital* as knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenge inequality. I argue that the cool pose students discussed in this study is a form of resistance capital. Many BOEP students have experienced so much trauma from their years in K-12 schools that they don cool pose

to protect themselves in spaces where they have rarely been made to feel welcome. In response to the micro and macroaggressions they have experienced in these spaces, students put on their hoodies, pull baseball caps low over their eyes, and put their AirPods. This serves as a form of resistance that helps them survive in White hegemonic spaces that still persist in the current education system.

Though Black males bring a wealth of cultural capital to the classroom, it is not acknowledged or rewarded because everything is assessed by white standards which is why it is vital that our classrooms are transformed into spaces of liberation that abolish anti-blackness and focus on instilling pride and celebrating all cultures while acknowledging contributions made by people of color to build this country. We must focus on building community and showing solidarity with Black males who need to know they are valued and celebrated for their resilience, aspirations, and fortitude.

Two strategies for building on community cultural wealth that arose from this study include having Black role models, especially those in positions of power, and creating academic spaces of belonging specifically for Black men. For example, several students in this study talked about not having their first Black teacher until they were in college. Being in BOEP, which is run by two successful, educated Black men, provided a sense of pride for these students who had never seen people that looked like them and shared similar life experiences as them in positions of leadership and authority. Having these role models gave them a sense of belonging and catapulted them into a world of possibilities. The positive interactions Black males had with teachers of color connect directly to McLaren's (2009) work around the concept of bricolage, that helps us look beyond the culturally homogenized blinders that repeat the same narrative of Black inferiority. By utilizing bricolage, we can dismantle systems that keep the status quo of White people at the top standing on the backs of marginalized people that are the foundation of this country. Dismantling white homogenized systems is how we begin

to reshape and interpret the real history that's been purposefully denied in the teaching of America's history. By providing students with accurate details of their robust history, we can work to begin addressing the negative feelings students carry in regards to schooling which often lead to mental health issues and a development of internalized inferiority anxiety induced by the multitude of racist interactions in society (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

A second strategy includes developing spaces where Black men feel like they belong. By belonging to BOEP, students found their "homeplace," a space where they felt a connection to people that looked like them and experienced many of the same challenges and joys of being Black. This helped students shed the cool pose in environments that welcomed their swag without judgment. bell hooks describes "homeplace as a space where Black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world" (1990, p. 384). bell hooks' statement emphasizes the importance of providing healing spaces to sit with the impacts and injuries caused by the legacy of trauma endured by Black males. Several participants described BOEP meetings as home and said they relied on the weekly meetings to network with peers, facilitators, and to discover resources available to them on campus. BOEP meetings invited students to verbalize their experiences not only in the classroom, but in society. They were able to share both micro and macro aggressions experienced in their daily lives in a safe environment where they could always be themselves without fear of being misunderstood or perceived as a threat. A few students returned to BOEP after graduation to give back to the program skills they learned and effective strategies that helped them develop self-efficacy that ultimately lead to them ascending to a four-year university or a job on campus. These examples show the positive impact of students seeing Black men who look like them in positions of

power and leadership and the importance of building strong, enduring relationships that motivate students to aspire to reach their full potential and cultivate self-efficacy, impact that has also been demonstrated by multiple studies (Brooms, 2017, 2018; Hurd et al., 2012; Wilkins, 2014; Wood & Palmer, 2013).

Recommendations

The following recommendations are focused on abolishing oppressive institutions and building equitable institutions that celebrate community cultural wealth and acknowledge that Black lives matter. Through asset-based pedagogies and abolitionist teaching, everyone from teachers to administrators will play their parts in dismantling the banking of education that continues to traumatize marginalized students.

Asset-Based Pedagogies that Dismantle White Supremacy

Below you will find multiple types of pedagogies including culturally relevant/ sustaining; critical, and abolitionist pedagogies that encourage teachers to develop curriculum to dismantle White supremacy.

Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Pedagogies

Rautins and Ibrahim (2011) acknowledge the importance of getting to know students through their lived experiences. The best way to effect social change is by experiencing someone else's culture that differs from your own. Giroux (1983) challenges us to recognize and engage with other cultures to eliminate oppressive, white-normed education. By doing so, we invite all cultures to the learning process and through culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), we incorporate relatable curriculum that reaffirms to Black students that their lives matter. Culturally relevant pedagogy helps educators recognize that their understanding of the world and lived experiences may not be in

alignment with those of their students, which is why it is critical to include a culturally relevant curriculum that helps students contextualize the material with their own lives (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

According to Paris and Alim (2017), culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP),

> move away from the pervasiveness of pedagogies that are too closely aligned with linguistic, literate, and cultural hegemony and toward developing a pedagogical agenda that does not concern itself with the seemingly panoptic "White gaze" that permeates educational research and practice with and for students of color, their teachers, and their schools. (p. 86)

CSP honors, taps into, and purposefully builds on students' resources as positive attributes to the learning community. In this way, CSP can be viewed as a process that supports the Black living experience which can also be thought of as valuing the cultural wealth that Black males encompass. To better serve our Black male student population, we must incorporate storytelling into our pedagogy to emphasize the importance of Black lived experiences that encourages students to contextualize what they are learning in their daily experiences to their everyday lives. For example, in the English literature course that I teach, we read Ta-Nahesi Coates, "Between the World and Me," a book about the exploitation of the Black body through slavery and segregation and how it impacts Black males in today's society as they are imprisoned and murdered by police at disproportionate rates to other races. Through this reading, students are able to connect with these stories whether it is an encounter they themselves had with racism, or something a friend or relative experienced, or a news story. We do a close reading of each paragraph or passage to flesh out connections between the text to themselves, text to other text we've read in class or stories they've seen broadcast around the world in

relation to the dehumanization of the Black body. This teaching concept works for nearly any reading and it helps students contextualize their position in the world.

Another example of valuing a student's lived experiences to to help students reframe what many see as a negative attribute into a positive one. For example, one semester I had a student who described himself as a hustler. He was hesitant to share this description of himself with his assigned group, but once I connected the hustler's mentality to that of the grit mentality that the majority of teachers encourage students to have, then we were able to see him through a different lens focusing on his perseverance to creative problem solving. As teachers, we can all look at the dynamics of how these qualities are used in class and bring them to the student's attention so they see them as strengths, rather than deficits. Further into the semester, this same student relied on his hustler mentality to help him when he was struggling in class. This quality gave him a relational intelligence and acted as a form of community wealth, so just like he would go to one of the OGs in the streets for wisdom and help, he came to use his knowledge of his classroom community to seek help from his teachers and peers. Mentors also contribute to helping students reframe circumstances by sharing personal stories such as the BOEP Director highlighting how he was able to use his own cultural wealth to navigate institutionally racist systems by aligning himself with individuals who had his well-being and best interest at heart and helped him to identify valuable resources that changed his life from a student with a 0.0 GPA to a college graduate and leader in the community.

Critical Pedagogy

Students need relevant curriculum as well as classroom relations that develop a mutual respect between teacher and student. For example, in chapter 4, Rayshard Moore stated that he does his best work in classes where the teacher sees him as an equal. Freire (1970) states that, "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-

teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers" (p. 80) meaning both parties are listening to and learning from each other. This pedagogy builds a space of equity where the student feels valued and a sense of belonging in the classroom. By exercising these practices in the classroom, both teacher and student are able to build community that contributes to the humanization of all parties involved.

This type of interaction removes the hierarchical power structure that currently exists in the classroom. In this scenario, "education is the practice of freedom as opposed to education as the practice of domination" (Freire, 1970, p. 81). To further advance this argument, students mentioned reading the word versus *reading* the world meaning if they are able to connect to material provided by the teachers, Black males are able to "develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves" (p. 83). Freire refers to this as *problem-posing education* which moves away from the banking education system which treats students as robots who need to be programmed how to think instead of critical thinkers who analyze and come to conclusions based on their own volition.

In our community classroom, we begin each class by journaling about a topic of their choice. It can be something as simple as what they did over the weekend, a homework assignment, or a family gathering. It's completely up to the student. We talk about any lessons, skills, they learned, and discuss new ways to look at the world that might be possible from examining those experiences. They bring the experiences into the class, and then we all learn from those experiences and many times can apply them to situations in our own lives. In this way, students' experiences become the curriculum, and students become the teachers alongside the "instructor of record." Rather than standing at the front of the class behind a podium, I make the conscious decision to sit among my students. We usually start in a big circle so that we are all teachers in that space. We are physically on the same level. I tell them that we are all in this community together, and

I will always sit among them, whether as a whole class or in small groups. In addition, when students share their stories, I tell them what I have learned from them. In this way, I validate that they bring knowledge to the classroom, and this knowledge helps me as a lifetime learner.

Abolitionist Teaching

According to Love (2019),

> Abolitionist teaching is as much about tearing down old structures and ways of thinking as it is about forming new ideas, new forms of social interactions, new ways to be inclusive, new ways to discuss inequality and distribute wealth and resources, new ways to resist, new ways to agitate...new ways to show dark children they are loved in this world, and new ways to establish an educational system that works for everyone, especially those who are put at the edges of the classroom and society. (pp. 88-89)

Abolitionist teaching is a movement begun by Dr. Bettina Love that comes from a place of humanity. Although the idea of abolitionism has a connotation of radicality, as Dr. Love stated in her talk, “Abolitionist Teaching & the Future of Schools,” it is not radical to want to be seen as fully human” (6/23/20).

One tenet of abolitionist teaching is to highlight the joy and pride of people of color; it is important to celebrate the major accomplishments and contributions of Black people to America, and the world as a whole. In this way, we show Black people that they matter by listening and sharing stories that acknowledge their hurt and trauma, as well as their joy and pride.

As teachers, it is vital that we organize around anti-blackness making sure Black people know they are relevant, their experiences are relevant and their Black lives matter. Ways to do this are to read, listen and learn. The work has been done by

teachers, scholars and activists who have made it their life mission to educate all of us on the atrocities endured by Black bodies in order for us all to be a part of the solution to dismantle spirit murdering systems such as the K-12 learning environment that is grounded in whiteness. Understanding how the experiences of white-normed schooling has caused trauma to Black people is a step at beginning the work of an abolitionist that leads to a liberation of the mind. When Black students are in spaces being told that something is wrong with them, then they finally encounter someone who tells them their voice and experience matters and is valid, they experience a liberatory feeling.

Dear White People

The vast majority of K-12 and community college teachers are still White. These teachers need to raise their critical consciousness to understand: 1) how the system perpetuates white supremacy, 2) how they perpetuate White supremacy through their own practices and interactions with students, and 3) how to disrupt the current oppressive system.

I offer a few specific ideas for all teachers to disrupt oppressive systems next.

Teachers need to acknowledge that they are not the givers of knowledge and decenter themselves. Our students have an abundance of knowledge that adds important experiences to the conversation. Teachers need to develop a rapport with students and invite them to share who they are. This takes trust, which means teachers need to listen as well as share their own life stories. Teachers need to model vulnerability first (hooks, 1994). I do this in the classroom by sharing my own struggles and obstacles I've encountered in school, work, and personal life. This is a way teachers can develop a relational approach that engages with students so they feel like they belong in the classroom.

Additionally, teachers must provide spaces for students to show who they are – whether that is through sharing their art, anime, poem, story, rap lyric, music, writing, family photos, etc. Include curriculum that helps students explore their identities to understand that while they may feel positioned in a particular way by the dominant culture, they have many facets to their identities and all of them are valuable and valued. To show students how much I value them as people, not just students, when they walk into my class each day, I ask them questions about their lives: what are they vibing to? What were they listening to in the car? Did they see any movies over the weekend? How's that podcast going that they've been working on or listening to? By doing this, teachers give students the floor. Think back to "show and tell" in Kindergarten and how exciting it was to share with classmates. I see that same excitement from students when I ask them to share a part of their lives with the class. As an example of a strategy to do this, on the first day of class, I ask students to fill out an index card of their favorite songs, movies, tv shows, food, sports teams, activities, and so on. From that list, I compile a playlist of their songs, and I begin each class with these songs as they write in their journals. Students utilize this time to reflect and ground themselves in the space we will share for the next two to three hours. I do this so students understand that our class is not just about learning English, as in grammar and writing essays; but it is also about how they can use their experiences and resources to connect with the world, through English and conversation with their peers. When students know that teachers respect and honor their lives outside of class, interactions between teachers and students change dramatically.

Teachers also must set and communicate high expectations for students, while also letting students know they (the teachers) are confident in their (the students') abilities to succeed. This type of communication, over time, can help students develop positive self-efficacy. As one example, a student told me that because I believed in him and had

demonstrated that over our time together, he began believing in himself. He believed that he was capable of passing all of his classes, and he did just that. On day one, I tell all students that they all start with A's because I know they all can be successful, and I fully expect them to continue that way throughout the class.

Transparency is also key. Teachers need to ensure that students know expected outcomes, not just on the syllabus, but as a daily or weekly reminder for the purpose of all assignments. Students need to know they are not doing busy work, but are engaging in actual work that will impact some aspect of their lives. Inform them of the expectation of the assignment and the class and how this class or assignment will help them meet their goals.

Flexibility is also very important. Zero tolerance policies don't work – they do not account for our students' lived realities. Class policies regarding late assignments should be rethought: if an instructor has a policy that late work is not accepted, that will create a barrier for many students who are juggling work, family responsibilities, and other personal matters. If you have in your syllabus that you don't accept late assignments, then you need to revisit that. While it is desirable for students to be punctual and meet deadlines, there are often valid reasons for tardiness or late assignments. Rather than adopting a blanket policy, communicate regularly with students, ensure they are welcome in class regardless of the time or whether they have been able to complete all the work, and then check in one-on-one to find out what is happening and help problem-solve. For example, in my class, when students walk in late, I thank them and tell them I'm happy they could join us. I later ask them about work schedules and try to brainstorm solutions—for instance, if it's a childcare issue, I let them know they can bring their children to class. The most important piece is to encourage students to keep showing up, even if the paper isn't complete, even if they haven't read the assignment prompt.

We cannot help them grow and achieve academic success if we discourage them from showing up by chastising them when they do come to class.

Administrators and Equity Directors

Leaders of schools and universities also have major roles to play in abolishing oppressive systems. K-12 administrators must prioritize professional development that can help teachers develop the understandings and practices discussed above. Moreover, administrators and district leaders need to work to remove police and security officers from schools, and instead focus on providing counselors, therapists, and healers. Moreover, our students need teachers and leaders who look like them, who share their backgrounds and experiences. Therefore, effort must be put into hiring more diverse teaching and management personnel.

Directors of Diversity and Equity at community colleges and universities also must work through an antiracist, abolitionist, equity lens that humanizes Black bodies. Speaking at the Abolitionist Teaching & Future of Schools Conference, Dr. Bettina Love (2020) argued that often, these Equity positions merely manage inequality rather than cultivating equity. She stated, "Abolition is a push for everybody's humanity. We no longer need reforms to appease White people." Accordingly, those leading departments focused on equity and diversity need to ensure that they understand the needs of their students of color and conditions in classrooms and focus their initiatives there. Often, those in leadership roles are detached from students and classroom settings. They need to ensure they are in contact with faculty and even spend time in classrooms to understand firsthand what is happening. Further, they need to ensure that they are not making assumptions about what Black male students need; they need to hear directly from them, by, for example, holding focus groups to talk to Black males and find out their experiences and understand the types of resources that they bring. Further,

diversity departments in community colleges need to be plugged in to current events and use these as a way to assess their equity agendas and outcomes. For example, right now, as the nationwide consciousness is being raised regarding institutional racism, diversity leadership needs to be asking: how do Black Lives Matter in our university and classrooms?

Legacy Learning

Legacy learning is a term that came to me as I prepared for my final day of work at the Concord Police Department. After a career in law enforcement, I will now be teaching as a full-time faculty member at Los Medanos College. The timing of this transition in my personal life is in complete alignment with what is taking place in our world today. People are finally awakening to the fact that we need to defund police and invest that money into our youth, if we ever expect to dismantle the systemic racism that America is founded upon. I have spent the past 23 years working with officers trying to teach them about Black people through my lens and experience and now I have the privilege, passion, and purpose of helping students discover who they are and how they want to impact this world. As I spent my final day in my office at the police department where I had worked for over two decades, I thought about legacy learning—what I inherited from my elders, and what I will leave behind for the generations to come.

Legacy entails the truth, a person understanding where they came from and who blazed the trail before them—the legacies left by previous generations, constituting the history and spirit of their people. However, legacy learning cannot happen in the current system for black and brown bodies. The current education system teaches that Black people's history is about slavery, about being three-fifths of a person. That is communicated as our legacy. However, if slavery is the legacy, then there is nothing to

leave behind and no place to go. Therefore, it is critical that we as teachers change this narrative and tell the true story of Black excellence.

Legacy learning starts with acknowledging that a major part of American history has been erased from the mainstream collective knowledge base. Our history is not just Black history, it is *American* history. We are the very beings who built this country with our blood, sweat, and tears—and this information is not typically found anywhere in history textbooks. However, the truth is that slavery is not Black people's legacy; it is the legacy of *White people*. Slavery is *their* sin and *their* history, and they have constructed it instead as *our* history, the totality of our prior existence in the United States, as a way to keep Black people subordinated through internalized oppression. Legacy learning, then, begins with addressing whiteness in America. It is learning the true history of White people murdering, raping, and pillaging from people of color. It is revealing the ways that racism is not just overt, like police violence, but the ways it murders spirits through the everyday classroom microaggressions that grind us down over time. It's telling the true story of Black people's resiliency, humanity, and forgiveness. The truth of our rich culture must be shared with the world (and not just in the month of February).

I pose these questions to everyone reading this and to my future students: How will you contribute to changing the narrative of Black people in America? What legacy do you want to leave for your children, family, loved ones, this world? What is your message? What is your purpose? How do you express your voice? Who is your squad, your village? How can we collectively do better, be better? ***What is your legacy*?**

Recommendations for Future Research

Now that I am a full-time instructor, I would like to take a deeper look at the specific strategies from BOEP that helped students with their identity development and self-image. In addition, I would like to explore the strategies students might have

learned on their own or from other support programs or mentors. I would like to follow the students in this study further to find out if they reached their goals, and if not, why? I would be interested in exploring the role teachers played in whether or not they met their goals. This is both for personal growth and to contribute to my colleagues as well as the larger field. I want to explore how can I be an asset to students, as well as an asset to my colleagues.

We also need to look at Equity Directors and Equity programs in higher education. In particular, it would be helpful to investigate the initiatives of these programs and the impact they are having, and the ways they are disrupting (or not) systems of White supremacy on college campuses. A future project might also examine the experiences of diversity directors of color, and how they negotiate with the (mostly all white men) leadership of universities.

Conclusion

This study investigated how Black males in the Brothers of Excellence Program at Los Medanos College developed self-efficacy and academic identity, while navigating the White gaze that assesses everything by White cultural norms. The initial findings highlighted the importance of mentorship, belonging, and developing cultural capital, but more importantly, the students' stories highlighted the trauma inflicted on Black male students in institutions grounded in White supremacy. This trauma, which showed up as mental health issues, also spurred students to protect themselves through "cool pose," which I argue is a kind of resistance capital that helps ensure survival in harmful settings. Yet, as Love (2019) stated in the title of her best-selling book: *we want to do more than survive!* Therefore, it is even more critical to humanize the Black male and to create spaces that value the Black body.

The inequities that impacted Black males in the 1950s are the same inequities impacting them in 2020. Their lives did not matter then, and recent slaughters of Black bodies show us that they still don't matter in White America. The value in my research, in connection with the findings, is that it is focused on dismantling oppressive systems—for example, I am drawing on this project to create a series devoted to Abolitionist pedagogy that will celebrate the cultural wealth Black males bring to the community. I hope my findings will inspire conversations between faculty and administrators to drastically transform our learning spaces based on the needs voiced by the students themselves. Our jobs as educators are to provide equitable learning spaces for all students, and we can only do that if we listen to them and implement changes based on their feedback.

As educational institutions, we are able to provide much more support to our students than we typically do. Covid-19 revealed this when, suddenly, schools were able to loan out tablets and laptops for home use when, prior to the pandemic, students couldn't even remove the technology from school grounds. Covid-19 also exposed everyone to the real pandemic of racism, coupled with and inseparable from capitalism. Black people have lost jobs and homes at higher rates; Black people are dying at a more rapid rate than any other population; Black students are missing out on healthy, hot meals because they're not in school to receive free/reduced lunch; Black students are falling behind academically because they are more likely to lack access to technology and wifi. These issues connect directly to both race and zip codes. The discrepancies in who gets the best access to medical care, jobs, housing, education has never changed.

These inequities laid bare by the pandemic have been thrown into further relief by the attention finally being paid to atrocities experienced by the Black body that is criminalized in every aspect of America. This is a tipping point—but where do we go from here? What will equity look like on the other side of the Black Lives Matter Movement? How do we ensure the work of abolitionists carries on? It took a pandemic

and real-life snuff movie of George Floyd being murdered before our eyes to wake America up to the slaughtering of Black bodies. The fight we are in today in 2020 is the same fight MLK fought in the 50s and 60s. How will we get America to stop dehumanizing the Black body? In this country, the land of freedom and opportunity, the Black man has never been free. With education comes freedom, access, and opportunity. Although it needs to happen alongside multiple other social initiatives, dismantling White supremacy in our classrooms is a way to start addressing these massive injustices. It starts with us!

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APPENDIX

5 POINT LIKERT SURVEY QUESTIONS:

1. I feel a sense of belonging as a participant of BOEP.
2. BOEP supports my academic identity.
3. I feel isolated at LMC.
4. I feel I am part of the LMC community.
5. I feel there are welcoming/safe spaces on the LMC campus.
6. I feel supported as an LMC student.
7. My academics are exactly where I hoped to be.
8. I'm still trying to figure out my academic identity.
9. I need extra support when it comes to my academics.
10. I'm committed to improving my academic identity.

Interview questions:

1. How has BOEP supported you in reaching your goals?
2. How have your experiences been in college? Have you had positive experiences that made you feel that you belonged? Negative interactions that made you feel like an outsider? Please share stories.
3. What do you think about yourself as a student? How would you define your academic identity?
4. Lately there's been a lot of discussion of race in our country, and on our campus there is acknowledgment that campuses are white spaces. Do you think that affects your ability to achieve here at LMC?

5. How do you, as a Black male, feel that you are perceived at LMC? Do you feel like you're perceived differently in different spaces?
6. Are there any welcoming spaces at LMC for Black males? Do you feel a part of the campus community? In what situations do you feel a part of the community? What communities do you feel a part of? What does that look like? Are there any groups or clubs that you belong to? How did you find out about them?
7. What makes you stay in BOEP?
8. What lessons have you learned from BOEP?
9. How has this experience impacted your academic success? Your life as a whole?
10. How does BOEP support your academic identity?
11. What else would you like to see BOEP offer? What else do you need to support your academic goals?
12. How does BOEP provide a safe space? Sense of belonging?
13. What do you think your successes and challenges are in those areas?