

Defensive Strategies & Counternarratives: Middle Class Black Boys' Critical Social Analysis of  
Their School Experiences

by

Chauncey D. Smith

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Robert J. Jagers, Chair  
Professor Phillip J. Bowman  
Professor Robin R. Means Coleman  
Associate Professor Matthew Diemer

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## Dedication

*To my sister and brother, Adrienne and Joshua.*

**Let this be a testament that**—with prayer, hard work, persistence, guidance and mentorship, family and friends, occasional good luck, blood, sweat, tears, knowledge and love of self, love of God, and love of others—**dreams do come true.**

Do your best between the dashes.

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Wishing each of you (named and unnamed) love, light, peace, and joy.

-Chauncey

“Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20, New International Version)

## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
List of Tables .....	xi
List of Figures.....	xii
List of Appendices .....	xiii
Abstract.....	xiv
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	4
In the Face of Discrimination: Black Boys Perspectives on Themselves in the School Context .....	4
A Conceptual Framework of SPD .....	7
Critical Social Analysis of School Experiences Among Black Youth .....	16
Organizational Settings for Critical Social Analysis among Black Boys: The Contributions of Youth Development Programs, Youth Participatory Action Research, & Photovoice .....	26
The Current Study.....	33
Chapter 3: Method .....	36
Research Design.....	36
The <i>Voice Project</i> .....	40
Photovoice Curriculum .....	43
Interviews.....	47

Data Analysis .....	47
Participants.....	51
Chapter 4: Findings.....	62
Epoché.....	62
A Narrative Introduction to Cherry Hill & Lakeside High.....	66
Lakeside Through a Black Boy Lens.....	74
Experiences of Racial Discrimination .....	77
Critiquing Peers, Calling Out Lakeside, and Living the Counternarrative: A Complicated Critical Social Analysis.....	107
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	134
In what ways do middle class Black boys make meaning of their school experiences? .....	134
What strategies do middle class Black boys employ to cope with negative school experiences and succeed in their school community? .....	138
What solutions do middle class Black boys suggest in response to challenges they face in their school community? .....	142
Contributions & Future Directions for Research .....	145
Implications for Practice & Society .....	150
Appendices.....	153
Appendix A.....	154
Appendix B.....	159
References.....	163

**List of Tables**

*Table 1.* Research questions and corresponding data sources ..... 37

*Table 2.* *Voice Project* Sessions..... 44

## List of Figures

<i>Figure 1. A Theory of Sociopolitical Development (Watts &amp; Guessous, 2006)</i> .....	9
<i>Figure 2. An Adapted Conceptual Framework of Sociopolitical Development (Watts &amp; Guessous, 2006)</i> .....	10
<i>Figure 3. Dissertation focus on CSA and the organizational settings that support CSA.</i> .....	15
<i>Figure 4. Annotated dissertation focus.</i> .....	35
<i>Figure 5. Logic Model for the Voice Project</i> .....	42
<i>Figure 6. Clustering and thematizing process with examples.</i> .....	50
<i>Figure 7. Where's the action? (André)</i> .....	116
<i>Figure 8. The Finish Line (Derrick)</i> .....	118
<i>Figure 9. Minutes of Relaxation (Stacy)</i> .....	119
<i>Figure 10. What is your purpose for school? (Terrance)</i> .....	125
<i>Figure 11. All Alone in Honors (Tim)</i> .....	127
<i>Figure 12. Backed Up Against the Wall (Tim)</i> .....	129
<i>Figure 13. Lunch at the U.N. (James)</i> .....	130

## **List of Appendices**

Appendix A: Parent Consent Form.....	154
Appendix B: <i>Voice Project</i> Interview Guide .....	159

## **Abstract**

Whether persistent or apathetic, academically struggling or high achieving, living in urban or sparsely populated contexts, Black boys are still disproportionately affected by academic, social, and political challenges in their school experiences. Among the many challenges they may face, Black boys are at a high risk of experiencing racial discrimination from adults and peers at school. In light of this risk—after decades of scholarship on Black boys in school—scholars encourage the increased inclusion of Black boys’ meaning making of their school experiences in the literature and they emphasize the potential importance of Black boys’ critical social analysis (the awareness and rejection of oppression) in the school context. In this dissertation, I employ a sociopolitical development framework to explore seven Black adolescent boys’ meaning making and critical social analysis of their experiences at Lakeside, a high school in an affluent suburban community. I co-facilitated a youth participatory action research program aimed at promoting critical social analysis through group discussion and photovoice; the participants completed photovoice projects aimed at highlighting problems they saw at Lakeside. Finally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant; these interviews were aimed at capturing their meaning making and critical social analysis of their experiences at Lakeside. Generally, the boys viewed school as a normal and/or boring space; they recognized the privilege of attending Lakeside—a well-resourced public school with a strong reputation in their region. Regarding their meaning making of being Black boys at Lakeside, the boys reported a trend where mostly boys of color received disciplinary action; additionally, each of the boys

reported experiencing overt and public racial discrimination from teachers or peers. In response to their negative experiences in school, the boys reported coping by: (1) de-emphasizing the role of race and racism in their problems at school, (2) emphasizing the importance of their personal responsibility in improving their situations as Black boys at Lakeside, and (3) withdrawing emotionally from school. For their photovoice projects, the participants chose to highlight problems of segregation in school spaces and lack of engagement at Lakeside. They initially employed a deficit-based narrative in the description of these problems—asserting that the problems primarily affected and were the fault of Black students. After group discussion and completion of photovoice projects, the boys countered their own deficit-based narratives about Black student achievement and presented suggestions for improved engagement in Lakeside classrooms. The boys in this study engaged in a complicated critical social analysis of their experiences at Lakeside; they recognized the existence of systemic oppression in the world, but denied its manifestation in their experiences of racial discrimination at school. Instead, they often opted to hold only themselves accountable for their negative experiences at Lakeside. Taken together, through discussion and photography, this study expands our understanding of Black boys' school experiences and the development of their critical social analysis in school and program contexts.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the meaning making and sociopolitical development (SPD) of a group of seven Black adolescent boys' (André, Derrick, Greg, James, Stacy, Terrance, and Tim) experiences at Lakeside, an affluent suburban high school, during their participation in an after-school youth participatory action research (YPAR) program. SPD refers to the process by which marginalized youth are supported around critiquing systems of oppression (and their place in those systems), developing a commitment to effect social change, and mobilizing to make changes in their community. In the first year of the study, the researcher led in the development and facilitation of an 11-week photovoice curriculum. Photovoice is a participatory method aimed at promoting SPD; in this study, photovoice was employed as one method to facilitate critical social analysis around school experiences within a group setting (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997). To complement the photovoice method, in depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the boys in the study; these interviews were viewed as an opportunity to explore critical social analysis in boys' individual narratives around their school experiences.

Aligned with broader narratives of formal schooling as a means of “making it” in America, the promise of education for Black boys has been the subject of doubt. Scholars have discussed the gaps between the academic achievement of Black boys and students of other demographics in multiple ways (Barbarin, Chinn, & Wright, 2014; Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley, &

Cortina, 2010; Noguera, 2003; L. L. Rowley & Bowman, 2009; S. J. Rowley et al., 2014); this study diverges from a deficit framing of Black boys in school (outlined, but not endorsed, in the studies and reviews cited) that emphasizes a longstanding trend of challenges with academic achievement (e.g., lower high school graduation rates, lower performance on standardized tests, and lower college admission rates in comparison to peers of other genders and races). This study focuses on the social challenges they may face in the school environment. Regarding the social challenges Black boys face in school, there is evidence to suggest that Black boys face unique forms of racial discrimination in school. For instance, Black boys are suspended and expelled at higher rates than all of their peers (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). They are also overrepresented in remedial special education classes and underrepresented in advanced placement (AP) classes. Their teachers (who are primarily White and female) view them as incapable, physically threatening, or disengaged. With awareness of the challenges that Black boys face in school, parents express anxiety about their sons' well-being in the school environment (S. J. Rowley et al., 2014).

Although these challenges paint a distressing image for Black boys in school, our understanding of the ways in which Black boys make meaning of their experiences in school. The program described in this study (the *Voice Project*) was aimed at building a community for Black boys within their school; this community was designed to center their individual and collective voices in discussions about being Black at Lakeside. The researcher-facilitators of the program did their best to promote skills for the analysis of school experiences *rather than* promoting their values and opinions as an ideal for the community.

SPD was employed as the conceptual framework for this study. This dissertation explores two components of SPD: (1) critical social analysis (CSA)—one's analysis and rejection of

oppression, (2) organizational settings that contribute to CSA. The research questions guiding this study were: (1) “In what ways do middle class Black boys make meaning of their school experiences?” (2) “What strategies do middle class Black boys employ to cope with negative school experiences and succeed in their school community?” (3) “What solutions do middle class Black boys suggest for their school community in response to challenges they face in their school community?” In terms of methodology, psychological phenomenology was employed to understand the *essence* of Black boys’ meaning making of their school experiences (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Lastly, the conceptualization of the study in addition to the collection and interpretation of the data were informed by the CSA component of SPD; the analytical lens privileged the understanding and rejection of systemic oppression (Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999).

It is expected that this dissertation will contribute to the understanding of Black boys’ perspectives on school. Although there are national conversations focused on the challenges Black boys face in school, rarely are the voices of Black boys included in those conversations (S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). Specifically, the aim of this dissertation is to explore the ways in which Black boys recognize and make meaning of oppressive circumstances for Black boys (and youth) in their school. The hope is that this study will: 1) contribute to the understanding of CSA among Black boys, 2) describe some helpful practices for facilitating SPD in programs, and 3) highlight the diversity *and* describe shared patterns in narratives about middle class Black boys’ school experiences.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### **In the Face of Discrimination: Black Boys Perspectives on Themselves in the School**

##### **Context**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the discussion of Black boys and their well-being in the school context is laden with concern—regarding their academic and social development (see S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). Germane to this study, scholars suggest that Black boys are at a greater risk than their peers of other races and genders for experiencing racial discrimination in school (Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2003). Given this concern, there is a growing literature base on Black boys' perspectives of themselves in school in the face of racial discrimination. There are two emerging threads of Black boys' narratives in this literature; these two threads are often present within single studies. In the first thread, Black boys assert their status as individual achievers in school. In the second thread, Black boys comment on how they see academic and social challenges manifested in their Black peers at school.

Overall, Black boys recognize that school is a potentially adverse context for them *because* they are Black boys. They are aware of the negative academic stereotypes associated with Black males, they report higher levels of racial discrimination experiences, they are aware of the pressures they may face from their peers to underperform and the potentially low expectations their teachers may have of them (Harper & Williams, 2014; Howard, 2013; Rogers & Way, 2016; S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). Regarding the first thread, Black boys make clear their

understanding of these challenges, yet they describe themselves individually as high achievers—an exception to negative stereotypes or as intentionally resisting stereotypes. High achievement is not only characterized by achieving good grades (B-average or higher), but it also involves ambitious career goals (Q. Allen, 2014). In this thread, boys describe their motivation, persistence, and achievement as being driven by career aspirations (Q. Allen, 2014) and escaping poverty (Harper & Williams, 2014). Additionally, boys report that their academic motivation is driven by parental socialization, specifically expectations to succeed in school (Q. Allen, 2014; Cogburn, Chavous, & Griffin, 2011; Harper & Williams, 2014). Finally, in this thread, boys emphasize the importance of their individual efforts to fight negative stereotypes about Black males (e.g., not successful in nor concerned with school, stoic, aggressive; see Allen, 2013a; 2013b; Rogers et al., 2016). The fight against stereotypes takes the form of earning good grades, intentionality around compliance with school behavior codes and outspoken participation in class. In many ways, scholars characterize the fight against stereotypes as an act of resistance (Q. Allen, 2013a; 2014) and a step toward liberation (Rogers & Way, 2016; Ward, 2000).

In the second thread, Black boys discuss the challenges that their Black peers faced in school. Again, they recognize the challenges they and their peers face daily in school including low expectations and the high potential of experiencing racial discrimination. As the boys discuss these challenges, though, a common strategy involves creating a distance between them and their lower performing peers (Q. Allen, 2014; Gordon, 2012; Harper & Williams, 2014; Rogers & Way, 2016). For instance, Rogers and colleagues (2016) found that Black boys responded to racial and gender stereotypes about Black males through three pathways: accommodating racial and gender stereotypes, resisting racial and genders stereotypes, and viewing themselves as exceptions to racial stereotypes while accommodating gender stereotypes.

The latter pathway comprised most of her sample and was characterized by boys' belief that they were exceptions to negative stereotypes about Black people; these boys presented themselves as "proper", "acting right", and intelligent in contrast to other Black boys who may not exhibit these characteristics. In Harper and Williams' (Harper & Williams, 2014) study, Black and Latino boys reported that their lower performing Black male peers were had ambitious career and academic aspirations; however, these aspirations were sometimes unrealistic. The boys in this study reported being driven by visions of their future selves and a workable plan (via formal education in college); they asserted that most of their less successful peers were driven by achieving wealth quickly. In Allen's work (2013b; 2013a; 2014), Black boys reported that their parents held them to a higher academic standard than their lower performing peers at school.

Taken together, in the current literature that focuses primarily on middle class Black boys (Q. Allen, 2013a; 2013b) and/or Black male high achievers (Q. Allen, 2014; Harper & Williams, 2014; Rogers & Way, 2016), Black boys are aware of the negative stereotypes they face in the school context and choose to respond to them through academic achievement. Their achievement is defined by clear academic and career goals, high parental expectations, and a desire to fight negative stereotypes about Black boys. The fight against negative stereotypes involves hard work and persistence; however, it is often reported in contrast to lower performing peers (e.g., "I'm not like them," "My parents hold me to a higher standard than theirs"). In this literature, the distance created between stronger Black male achievers and lower performing Black students is characterized as an act of resistance against negative stereotypes. It seems, though, that some students are critiquing their peers, exemplifying a form of victim blaming—the attribution of blame for a crime or oppression on those that are harmed (Ryan, 2010). In this phenomenon, Black boys can recognize a broad system of inequity (negative stereotypes and racial

discrimination), respond to that system (resisting through achievement; Rogers & Way, 2016), yet still blame their peers who are not succeeding in the system of inequity for their struggle. This demonstrates a tension between Black boys' perceptions of themselves as individual Black boys and their perceptions of other Black boys.

An SPD framework was employed in this dissertation as it accounts for the potentially challenging experiences Black youth face in the school context at individual and collective levels of analysis (Hope, Skoog, & Jagers, 2014; Lozada, Jagers, Smith, Banales, & Hope, 2016; Watts & Guessous, 2006). Within the SPD framework, racial discrimination is viewed as a prime threat to Black boys' well being in school and the broader community—a manifestation of their political oppression in the United States (Watts et al., 1999; 2002; Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998). With a focus on youth development and a lens that recognizes and promotes resistance to oppression, the SPD framework was best suitable for exploring the formation, discussion, and revision of Black boys' narratives about their experiences in school. Additionally, Finally, through the framework, there is room for discussion of the tension between individual and collective narratives of Black boys' challenges in school in addition to a discussion of potential solutions to those challenges (for the school to consider on behalf of students). The SPD framework is defined and described in the following section.

### **A Conceptual Framework of SPD**

SPD was the most appropriate conceptual framework for this study for several reasons. First, the framework centers identity development in social and political contexts in addition to the socialization of adolescents from marginalized backgrounds (Lozada et al., 2016; Watts & Guessous, 2006). Second, SPD focuses on adolescent meaning making of systemic oppression in multiple contexts (Watts et al., 1999). Finally, the SPD framework was initially designed in

concert with the study of Black boys' CSA in a program setting similar to the one described in this dissertation (Watts et al., 2002; Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998). SPD refers to the processes by which youth become engaged in the pursuit of social justice (Watts & Guessous, 2006; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). These processes focus on the development of critical thinking, organizing and mobilizing resources, and socialization by community stakeholders (e.g., families, educators, community organizers).

As a conceptual framework, SPD is generally applied to marginalized populations. It is born out of Paulo Freire's pedagogical framework with the Brazilian underclass aimed at (1) critically "reading" systems of power (political, social, economic, and historical) and (2) equipping the underclass with the tools to fight the oppressive conditions that those systems created and maintained (Freire, 1970; 1973). In his work, Freire commented on the flaws of formal education in what he terms the "banking concept of education." In this approach to education, a teacher "deposits" information into their students, the students collect this information, and they repeat it to teachers upon request (Freire, 1973). The core assumption behind this pedagogy is that the teacher, a representative of a larger oppressive agenda, possesses all knowledge and students must retain and reproduce that knowledge – sustaining conditions of prosperity for a small upper class and despair for the larger underclass. Freire proposes a counter to this flawed pedagogy, *a pedagogy of the oppressed*, which occurs in two stages (Freire, 1973). The first stage involves the emergent awareness of and commitment to fight oppressive social, political, and economic conditions. The second stage involves the movement toward *liberation* – the empowerment of marginalized people and the sustained eradication of oppression in their environment. The principles from this work are at the root of recent empirical and theoretical development of SPD theory (Watts & Guessous, 2006). In the last two decades, scholars have



adapted Freire’s framework to address the social and political issues that youth from marginalized backgrounds face (Diemer, Hsieh, & Pan, 2008; Watts & Guessous, 2006).

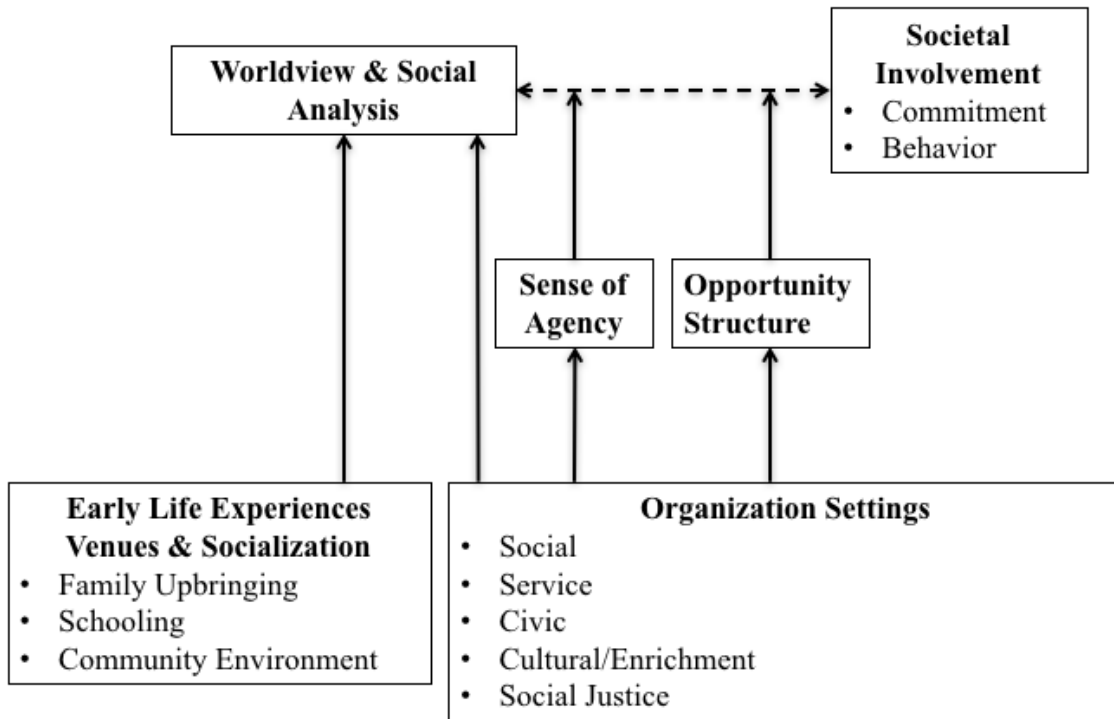


Figure 1. A Theory of Sociopolitical Development (Watts & Guessous, 2006).

Informing the framework of SPD used in this study (see *Figure 1*) is the work of Roderick Watts. Watts developed a framework of SPD and applied it to the promotion of awareness around race and racism among young Black men in urban high schools (e.g., Watts et al., 2003; Watts & Guessous, 2006). Pictured in *Figure 2* is an adapted version of Watts and Guessous’ (2006) conceptual framework of SPD. The framework was adapted in order to reflect recent updates in terminology (i.e. worldview and social analysis CSA; commitment and societal behavior critical action; see Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

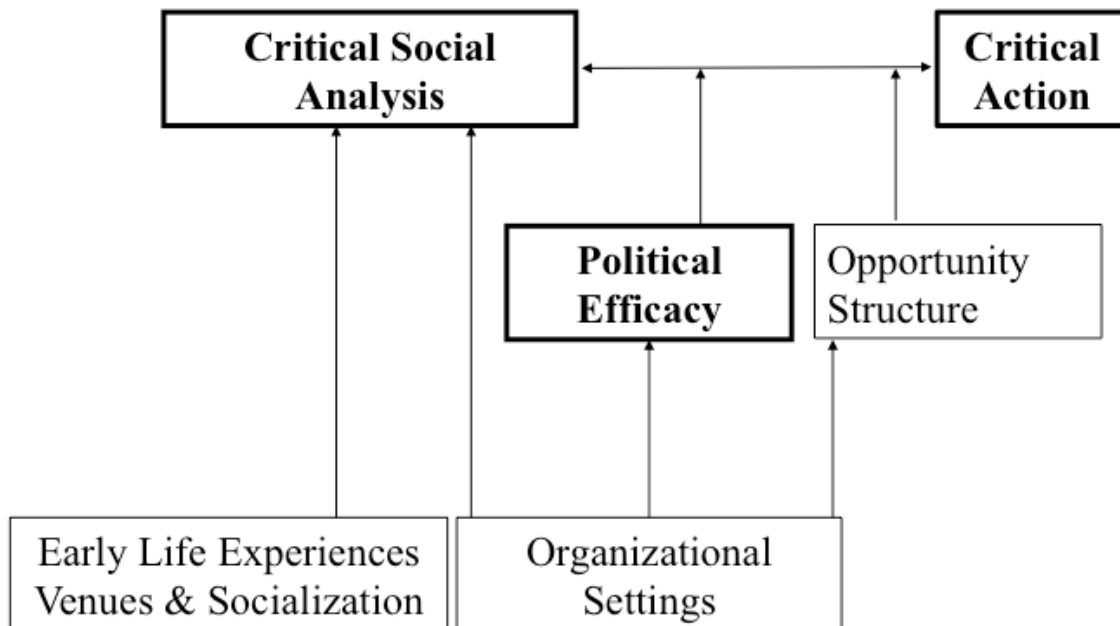


Figure 2. An Adapted Conceptual Framework of Sociopolitical Development (Watts & Guessous, 2006).

Again, this dissertation is focused on Black boys' CSA—one's reflection of the social, historic, political, and economic forces shaping conditions in their environment—which is reviewed in the following section. As the component of focus, CSA is discussed in more detail in the following section. In an effort to provide a broad overview of the SPD framework and its relevance to the study of Black boys, political efficacy and critical action are briefly discussed below. *Political efficacy* refers to one's sense of agency around mobilizing resources to effect sociopolitical change in their environment. Finally, *critical action* refers to one's behavioral efforts aimed at effecting sociopolitical change. Theoretical and empirical work suggests that CSA and critical action are associated, such that one works to address problems in their

environment as they reflect on problems in their environment and *vice versa* (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011).

Political efficacy is rooted in self-efficacy, a core concept within social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). Social cognitive theory posits that human behavior is the result of personal, behavioral, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1997). The theory asserts that environments have the capacity to shape behavior, yet humans contain and often exercise their ability to form and alter their environments in order to meet their needs. The theory speaks to this capacity at individual and collective levels. Efficacy, the concept germane to SPD, refers to the beliefs about the ability to perform behaviors that will bring about desired change.

Political efficacy is defined by two types of beliefs: (1) the belief in the ability to effect social and political change and (2) the belief that one's efforts will lead to change. In agreement with social cognitive theory, an underlying assumption of the study of political efficacy among youth is that one takes action when one believes their efforts will be useful and effective (Beaumont, 2010; Watts & Guessous, 2006). As a result, political efficacy has been described as an intermediary component between CSA and critical action (see Lozada et al., 2016).

In their conceptual framework, Watts and Guessous (2006) argued that people must be able to envision their impact before taking action. This idea fueled their operationalization of political efficacy. It involved one's beliefs in their abilities generally and one's confidence in successfully completing a specific task. In their youth development program work, Watts and Guessous (2006) observed that political efficacy in previous civic projects (community or political) impacted the relationship between CSA and a commitment to address inequity among Black adolescent boys. This has also been supported by recent empirical literature. For instance, Hope and Jagers (2014) operationalized political efficacy as the personal ability to solve

problems and handle unexpected events within the context of politics and social change. They found that political efficacy was linked to critical action among Black youth.

Political efficacy has also been operationalized as the extent to which one believes working within sociopolitical systems leads to desired outcomes (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). Within this definition, political efficacy has been linked to vocational identity in youth of color from low SES backgrounds (Diemer & Blustein, 2006); additionally, Zimmerman and colleagues (1999) found that political efficacy mitigated the negative effects of helplessness in the mental health of Black males. In her study of Black high school students' CSA and resilience regarding school and academic achievement in urban school contexts, O'Connor (1997) describes a specific form of efficacy. In the face of personal and familial struggles, the youth in her study demonstrated CSA of racism and sexism. Although this CSA has been linked to poor school outcomes in earlier literature (Fine, 1991; Ogbu, 1989), O'Connor describes their analysis as a fuel for their resilience. The result, O'Connor (1997) adds, is an *African-American agency*, a sense of their individual ability to achieve that was rooted in them being Black.

Critical action refers to individual or collective action aimed at changing aspects of society (Watts et al., 2011). The targeted aspects of society may consist of inequitable policies or practices. Scholars have operationalized this active component of SPD as youth organizing and activism (Ginwright, 2010; Ginwright & James, 2002), civic engagement (voting and campaigning) (Hope & Jagers, 2014), prosocial behaviors (Lozada et al., 2016), and challenging racial injustice (Smith et al., *in prep*).

Critical action remains the most under-studied component of SPD (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Much of the scholarly effort on SPD centers on understanding, complicating,

and training CSA while emphasizing the potential for critical action. In the case of youth, critical action tends to be modified and scaffolded by adults because of age restrictions (on certain forms of civic engagement), varying levels of cognitive and social development, and other structural constraints in their communities. Consequently, youth groups and programs are spaces for youth to explore critical action. Although critical action may be the goal of some of these spaces, the scaffolding of CSA tends to be the focus of these spaces with critical action as an underexplored afterthought. Watts and Hippolito-Delgado (2015) emphasize the importance of foregrounding critical action at every step of SPD group and program activities.

Scholars outline some special considerations in supporting Black youth in their critical action. For instance, in his research examining the roles of community organizations in youth activism, Ginwright (2010) discusses the possibility of critical action as a collective process that yields a space for Black youth to engage in healing around injustices in their community. Akom and colleagues (2008) offer a paradigm for spaces aiming to promote effective critical action; this paradigm emphasizes the importance of youth voice in addition to multiple opportunities for guided CSA and community-level action. In agreement with this paradigm, the contributions of youth development and participatory action research programs that center youth voice are discussed later in this chapter.

As expected, studies in SPD literature tend to focus on one's analysis, efficacy, and action in response to social injustice. For instance, in Watts and Guessous' SPD framework (2006), CSA, political efficacy, and critical action are outlined within the context of family and community supports as early life experiences and socialization. Similarly in this study, undergirding these components (pictured in *Figure 2*) are the various types of support that one receives within their environment. Previous studies highlight the role of families' interaction

with children about current events and race (Diemer & Li, 2011; Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan, & Hsieh, 2006), school settings (Lozada et al., 2016), youth programs (Hope et al., 2014) and community support for social justice efforts (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002) in the promotion of SPD in youth from marginalized backgrounds. Theoretical and empirical work suggests that these supports influence CSA, political efficacy, and critical action.

SPD seemed most appropriate as the conceptual framework for this dissertation, given its philosophical assumptions around the role of community in developing analysis, efficacy, and action in adolescents (Watts et al., 2003; Watts & Guessous, 2006). The narratives featured in this dissertation come from boys who participated in a youth participatory action research program aimed at facilitating SPD. The story of this dissertation is as much about the CSA reflected in their narratives as it is about the Black male-centered community that the program created for them at school. Thus, CSA and the organizational settings that support it are the foci of this study (see *Figure 3*).

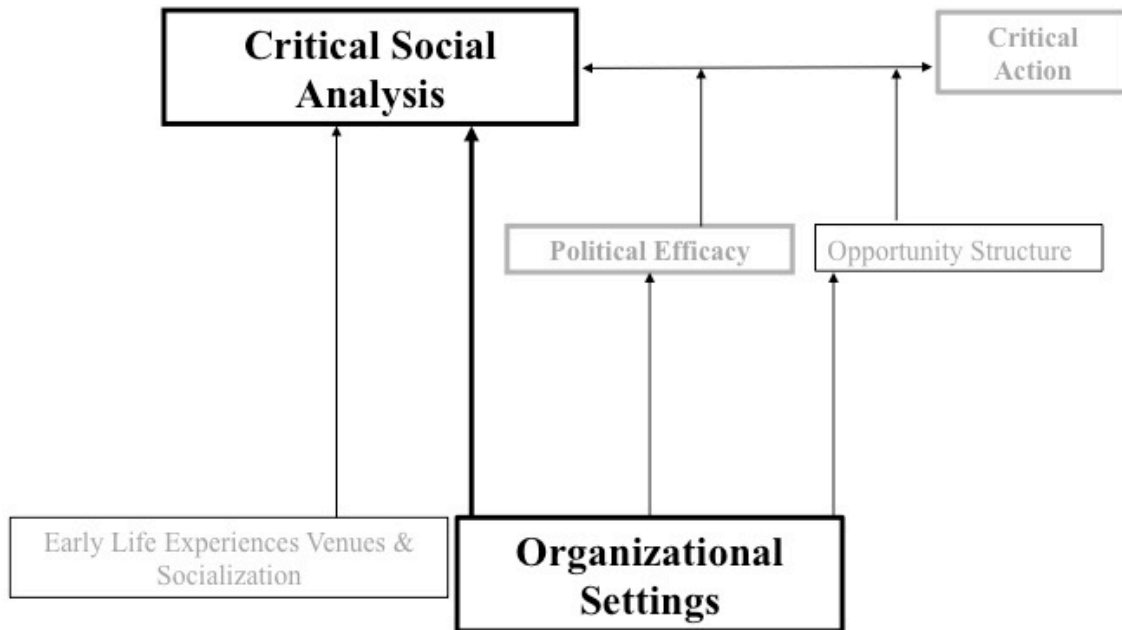


Figure 3. Dissertation focus on CSA and the organizational settings that support CSA.

In the remaining portions of this chapter, CSA is further defined and discussed in the context of Black youth in school. Then, there is a review of organizational settings that serve as social support for CSA among Black youth. This review focuses on the contributions of youth development programs broadly, youth participatory action research (YPAR) programs specifically, and focuses on the YPAR method employed in this study—photovoice. Finally, there is a discussion of some gaps in the literature to be explored in this study.

## **Critical Social Analysis of School Experiences Among Black Youth**

In a study examining the promotion of CSA in young Black men through a youth program, Watts and colleagues (2002) make an argument for the distinction between critical thinking and CSA:

Even in education there are some natural bridges between traditional ideas on critical thinking and the more culturally and politically aware notions of critical consciousness as developed by Freire...For people with a history of oppression, such as young urban African American men, the ability to think independently and critically is a necessary prerequisite for the liberation process. After all, education is socialization, and it prepares people for social roles—be they high or low. (p. 42)

They describe the shift from critical thinking to CSA as involving the consideration of person-centered problems (e.g., delinquency and violence) within historical, political, and cultural contexts. While also recognizing the contribution of personal agency to these problems, Watts and colleagues (2002) emphasize the importance of understanding social forces at play. This shift in thinking characterizes CSA.

CSA involves one's awareness, recognition, and rejection of oppression (Hope & Jagers, 2014; Watts et al., 2011; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). It is a process aimed at understanding the reciprocal roles of systems on societies and individuals. In one's CSA, it is theorized that: (1) one becomes generally aware of inequities (economic, racial, social, etc.), (2) one understands how those inequities are manifested in one's daily lived experiences, and (3) one rejects those inequities (Watts et al., 2011). In the past several years, there has been considerable innovation in the conceptualization and measurement of CSA (Diemer, McWhirter, Ozer, & Rapa, 2015). Germane to this study is the scholarship on CSA that involves the



examination of identity dimensions in context (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). In the case of the school context, scholars have highlighted racial disparities in high school completion, disciplinary action, and academic performance (J. E. Davis, 2003; Howard, 2013; S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). Additionally, differences across gender and class in school have been well-documented (Legewie & DiPrete, 2012; Sirin, 2005). Although there is evidence that these various identity dimensions inform (and sometimes shape) multiple life experiences, there is a relatively small amount of literature that engages the narratives of Black youth around their experiences with these identity dimensions. Furthermore, because of the oppressive threats related to these identity dimensions (i.e., racial discrimination, sexism, and classism), Black youths' narratives and CSA of the school context seem potentially valuable. Given this study's focus on the school experiences and SPD of middle class Black boys in school, what follows is a discussion of Black youth's—particularly boys'—CSA of multiple identity dimensions: race, gender, and class in the school context.

In this review, I attempt to highlight the different ways in which Black boys analyze their Blackness, their masculinity, and their social class; however, the identity dimensions, in concert with existing literature, are considered to be intersecting. This falls in line with intersectionality theory, which asserts that one's experience is defined by the interactions of multiple dimensions of their identity—especially in the case of oppressed identity dimensions (Crenshaw, 1989). The theory is considered to be a cornerstone of Black Feminist thought; Crenshaw (1989) argued that the experiences of being Black and a woman could not be understood separately, rather the experiences must be discussed in terms of the ways race and gender interact. In the case of stereotypes around Black boys in school, as mentioned earlier, the fear and differential treatment of Black boys may be rooted in others' beliefs of Black inferiority and Black male aggression

(Howard, 2013; S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). As a result, it is expected that Black boys' (and Black youths') CSA would reflect injustice centered on these identity dimensions (Watts et al., 2002; 2003).

Due to the importance of racial group membership in understanding various life outcomes, CSA around race has become central in discussions of SPD (Diemer et al., 2006; Hope & Jagers, 2014; Watts & Guessous, 2006). Particularly, over the last three decades, scholars have discussed CSA among Black youth by examining racial identity—one's attitudes about being Black and their beliefs about Black people as a racial group—in the school context (Fine, 1991; O'Connor, 1997; Ogbu, 1989). For instance, some scholars reported negative associations between the awareness/emphasis of racial inequity and engagement in school. Meanwhile, other scholars found evidence stating the contrary—CSA of race was associated with resilience and prosocial behaviors among Black youth (Lozada et al., 2016).

Early work that examined adolescents' CSA of race includes ethnographic and qualitative studies aimed at understanding academic underperformance and dropping out among Black high school students. In these studies, scholars provided evidence that CSA of race led to apathy and disidentification with school and academic achievement. One prominent example of this work is the cultural ecological model (Ogbu, 1989; 1991; 1994). The model examines minority groups' beliefs about status, upward mobility, trust of dominant groups, identity, and cultural frame of reference in relation to academic achievement. The model takes a binary approach to classifying minority groups in the United States—voluntary minorities (immigrants) vs. involuntary minorities (members of marginalized racial groups; i.e., Black/African-Americans) (Ogbu, 1989). The model asserts that, as involuntary minorities, Black youth regularly observe unjust barriers to achievement and status within their community—forming their Black cultural frame

of reference. This cultural frame of reference is characterized by the rejection of institutions that discriminate against Black Americans and promote a White American-dominated status quo. Ogbu argues that this frame of reference promotes awareness of a Black American collective struggle, emphasizes a system-level attribution of American problems, and is protective of mental health. Ogbu (1991) also argued that this frame of reference diverts Black American youths' attention from performing academically; thus being maladaptive for the school context.

In an ethnography examining the experiences, reflections, behaviors, and demographics of graduates and dropouts in a New York City public high school, Fine (1991) found that students of color faced challenges in response to their CSA of school. Like Ogbu's work, the conversation around CSA is linked to aspirations, beliefs about economic mobility, and behaviors associated with school. The participants in Fine's study, most of whom were Black American and Latino/a youth and young adults, reported awareness of and personal experience with racial prejudice; however, the responses to prejudice differed almost systematically between graduates and dropouts. With much of participants' commentary couched in opportunity in the labor market and its relation to schooling, Fine noticed a trend where most high school graduates did not challenge injustice; meanwhile, high school dropouts tended to recollect stories of struggle instead:

The dropouts took into their consciousness the lives of persons whom they knew had tried, worked hard, but nevertheless lived in poverty. The graduates, in contrast, were basically unquestioning and unchallenging of current labor market arrangements. They believed deeply in a meritocracy and in the linear relationship of advanced education to advanced economic status. (Fine, 1991, p. 134)

Fine framed this phenomenon within the context of a larger Black/African American tradition of viewing education as a means to succeed in the United States.

In concert with the ethnographic work of John Ogbu and his colleagues, Fine's work illuminates an understanding of a potential challenge associated with CSA among Black American youth and their schooling: as students become aware of racial injustice, they cope through the celebration of collective resistance through Black American struggle, and that resistance extends into their interactions with the school environment. Students then feel a need to resist in the school environment because of the strained relationship between school systems and Black American youth. These scholars' results suggest that CSA impacts Black American youths' schooling from achievement and engagement (Ogbu, 1989) to dropping out of school (Fine, 1991). The implications of this narrative, that Black and other minority youth's CSA could serve as a barrier to their academic and vocational success, have inspired critiques from other scholars—especially in the case of Ogbu's work (Harper, 2007; O'Connor, 1997; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001).

One particular study aimed at challenging some narratives in Ogbu's work examined the struggle and resilience of Black inner city high school students (O'Connor, 1997). In O'Connor's case analysis, participants demonstrated awareness of structural oppression by race, class, and gender in their environment. On the whole, the participants recognized the persistence of racism and its role in their career aspirations. They highlighted the lack of opportunity for Black people in the labor market, failed social policies and government programs in poor Black neighborhoods, and the negative role of person-to-person racial discrimination in daily interactions. In addition to the students' recognition of political trends of marginalizing Black and poor people, their knowledge of struggle was also personal. O'Connor (1997) found that her

participants' families shared and processed stories of struggle with them, which further fueled their aspirations and beliefs that they could overcome future struggles. Along a similar vein, in her ethnographic work examining the experiences of Puerto Ricans in Chicago at the intersection of race, class, and space, Ramos-Zayas (2003) found that youth attending schools that promoted CSA experienced enhanced school engagement and social mobility. Although Ogbu (1989; 1991) and Fine (1991) found evidence to support that this awareness of racism and the subsequent assumption of a pro-Black/anti-establishment stance had a negative impact on school engagement, O'Connor (1997) and Ramos-Zayas (2003) found that students' awareness of racism was a component of their resilience.

As the study of racial identity has evolved to consider multiple dimensions of identity in context (Cross, 1995; Helms, 1994; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998), scholars have considered its role in the CSA of Black youth (Lozada et al., 2016; Watts & Guessous, 2006). Recent studies of SPD have employed the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI; Sellers et al., 1998) in order to operationalize CSA. The MMRI suggests that one's racial identity is composed of four dimensions: centrality, salience, regard (private regard, public regard), and ideology (assimilation, humanism, nationalism, and oppressed minority ideology). In their testing of a model of SPD, Watts and Guessous (2006) included racial centrality (the extent to which one's race is central to their self-definition) and private regard (one's feelings about being Black and Black people in general); they found that these dimensions were significant predictors of Black youths' commitment to societal involvement. Building on Watts and Guessous' model of SPD, Lozada and colleagues (under review) employed private regard, public regard (one's beliefs of other groups' assessment of Black people), and oppressed minority ideology as indicators of CSA. Oppressed minority

ideology emphasizes the connection between the oppression Black American people face with a larger tradition of oppression in the United States. The results of the study suggest that CSA predicts social emotional skills (e.g., cooperation and self-control) and prosocial behaviors (e.g., helping and giving to others). This supports the notion that CSA can be an asset for resilience and critical action.

In terms of gender identity, boys and men generally benefit from male privilege and are usually positioned on the oppressive ends of sexism and misogyny. Although Black boys and men do benefit from male privilege, scholars have emphasized the vulnerability of Black boys and men in multiple systems (e.g., criminal justice and education). From pre-kindergarten through high school, previous studies suggest, Black boys are seen as violent, aggressive, unmotivated, hypersexual, and even criminal by teachers and administrators in their schools (J. E. Davis, 2003; Howard, 2013; S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). Complicating these stereotypes of Black masculinity in school are the ways in which Black boys respond in the school environment. Previous research suggests that Black boys may choose to embrace these stereotypes into their school behaviors—as they are expected to by peers and adults in their school—through acting out or simply not enacting behaviors associated with academic achievement (Ogbu, 1989). Although researchers have observed and discussed this phenomenon over the last few decades, Black boys’ narratives around it (and school in general) are still underrepresented in the literature. It is expected that in these narratives lie Black boys’ CSA around Black masculinity in the school context.

In studies that engage Black boys’ narratives about their school experiences, their CSA around race is often intersected with gender (Q. Allen, 2013a; Gordon, 2012). Although boys recognize racial injustice and broad stereotypes around being Black, they still foreground the

challenges they may face specifically as Black boys. For instance, in his study examining the school experiences of middle class Black boys in a suburban high school, Allen (2013a) found that boys articulated their knowledge around racism broadly *and* specifically for Black boys in school. These sentiments were echoed in the messages their parents shared with them about race; additionally, the boys expressed a need to achieve in the face of racial discrimination within their school environment. On the other hand, the boys emphasized how important it was to be perceived as ‘cool’ (popular among peers) Black males. Their performance of ‘cool’ included hip-hop infused innovations in fashion and dance in addition to talking to girls. The boys’ CSA echoed sentiments expressed in the literature regarding the fear of Black masculinity in schools; they asserted that Black boys are often criminalized and are targeted for disciplinary action more than other peers. Still, their Black masculine identity was grounded in being ‘cool’ trendsetters among their peers. Because of the hip-hop influenced dress, vernacular, and affect associated with the ‘cool’ the boys described, its performance is often associated with the Black masculinity that is feared in schools (Q. Allen, 2013a).

The negotiation of racial consciousness, academic achievement, and admiration from peers is a common theme in the literature on Black boys’ experiences in school. For instance, Gordon (2012) engaged four Black boys in discussion around their experiences in school. She employed a life-history approach to examine how these boys, who had lived and attended school in the same suburban district for most of their lives, had come to understand their racialized school experiences over time. She focused specifically on their experiences with racism, identity development, and the racial nature of social interactions in school. Participants reported early experiences of racism in their school; this subtle *and* forthright racism came from different sources (i.e., peers, administration, and teachers). They also reported feeling pressures to achieve

academically while managing their social lives with Black peers, where academic success was not seen as a priority. Additionally, some of the boys felt it was important to maintain friendships with non-Black friends from middle school; however, these friendships seemed to dissipate by the start of high school (Gordon, 2012). Ultimately, there was a sense of comfort associated with having Black peers.

In a retrospective qualitative study of Black masculinity, Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boles (2013) engaged Black men around their narratives of masculinity as adolescents. The men in the study demonstrated a CSA of masculinity, where they highlighted the pervasiveness of hypermasculinity as a popular model of Black manhood. All participants reported adopting some stereotypical forms of masculinity in their adolescence; middle and upper class participants reported adopting hypermasculinity and “gangbanging” behavior, while most of the participants who grew up lower class did not adopt these behaviors. Expressions of masculinity were largely influenced by social interactions with their peers or role models in their schools, families, and communities. In terms of adopting negative masculine stereotypes, Roberts-Douglas and Curtis-Boles (2013) suggest that middle and upper class participants felt pressure from their middle and upper class Black peers, while lower class participants were influenced by family members who identified as “gangbangers.” Ultimately, the men in this study reported being more influenced by their fathers and other role models in terms of their masculinity development. The men in the study reported viewing academic success as an expression of masculinity in concert with general markers of adulthood (i.e., financial independence and employment). Corprew and Cunningham (2012) reported similar findings where Black boys incorporated academic success into their definitions of ‘cool’; a value that was affirmed by their peers and school environment.



As mentioned earlier, Black boys face many challenges in school that can be attributed to their experiences of discrimination in the school context. An assumption in this study is that CSA may be an effective addition to Black boys' 'toolkit' in the event they face aforementioned challenges. In terms of their CSA, it seems that Black boys are conscious about the unfortunate, potential threat of their bodies and behaviors in the school space. They see, expect, and experience racism as Black youth. In their observation of their peers, they see a Black male script that tells them to be 'the life of the party'; because of this, some boys may feel pressure to entertain their peers (and sometimes teachers and administrators) through various media (sports, music, fashion, etc.). Meanwhile, like all of their peers, they are expected to be compliant and perform academically. In response to their CSA, scholars suggest that some boys may choose to resist through minimal academic performance (Gordon, 2012), challenging behavior in the classroom (Q. Allen, 2013a), withdrawing emotionally from the school context (Fine, 1991; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), or even dropping out (Roderick, 2003). There is evidence to suggest that middle class Black boys may choose to be intentional about the ways they navigate their school experiences, given their CSA. Some boys may find ways to explore a hypermasculine and violent approach to manhood (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boles, 2013) or choose to resist authority at school through being late to classes, talking with peers during class time, and challenging teachers (Q. Allen, 2013a; Gordon, 2012). Even in their resistance, though, middle class Black boys still seem to have high academic aspirations and experience pressure to achieve from their families.

The study of Black youths' CSA has become increasingly complicated over the past few decades. Earlier work that suggested that CSA around race was associated with disengagement and withdrawal from school (Fine, 1991; Ogbu, 1989) has been complicated in a few ways. First,

the ways in which Black youth approach their CSA may vary by class and gender (Q. Allen, 2013a; Gordon, 2012; Roderick, 2003). There is also evidence that CSA may actually be associated with resilience and drive academic performance (Gordon, 2012; O'Connor, 1997). Finally, in their meaning making of their school experiences, Black youth recognize structural oppression, evaluate their roles in school problems, and negotiate ways to please various parties (i.e., parents, peers, teachers, administrators, and themselves) (Q. Allen, 2013a; 2013b).

There is still more information needed about the nature of Black boys' CSA. Scholars have already addressed how more of Black boys' narratives should be present in the literature (S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). The studies that do exist address the intersection of race and gender (J. E. Davis, 2003; Howard, 2013), but only a few consider the role of class (Q. Allen, 2012; 2013a; Gordon, 2012). It is also worth noting that the narratives in these studies did not foreground class; participants primarily discussed race and gender while the researchers made inferences about class. This is not necessarily a limitation, but possibly a reflection of the implicit nature of the study of social class among adolescents.

### **Organizational Settings for Critical Social Analysis among Black Boys: The Contributions of Youth Development Programs, Youth Participatory Action Research, & Photovoice**

In their framework of SPD, Watts and Guessous posit that organizational settings—in addition to socialization from family and community—influence CSA. Organizational settings refer to programmatic efforts, usually outside of the home, aimed at: promoting social and civic development, providing cultural enrichment opportunities, orienting youth to social justice work, and/or facilitating community service opportunities. For Black boys, these settings may take form in faith-based settings (Harley, 2015) or non-traditional school contexts (Fashola, 2003; Harvey & Rauch, 1997); however, the form most germane to this dissertation is youth

development programming. Youth development programs potentially serve as fertile ground for facilitating CSA, because they typically focus on social development, extracurricular activities, and/or sports in addition to academic development (Hope et al., 2014; Woodland, Martin, Hill, & Worrell, 2009). Additionally, these programs tend to offer opportunities for youth to develop relationships with adult mentors, coaches, and teachers—an opportunity that is especially important during adolescence (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008).

In his review of the influence of after-school programs for Black boys, Woodland (2008) outlines three promising models of after-school programs: extracurricular activities, mentoring, and cultural rites of passage. The extracurricular activities model involves exposure to various activities in an effort to encourage creativity, teamwork, physical and mental health in addition to academic enrichment in an open group setting. The mentoring model involves placing children in consistent, often one-on-one, contact with supportive non-familial adults (e.g., Big Brothers/Big Sisters). The cultural rites of passage model—usually rooted in an African-centered tradition (e.g., Black American interpretations of ancient Egyptian/Kemetite human and leadership development models)—involves a process aimed at group identity re-definition/affirmation and culminates in a celebratory ceremony. Among Black boys, participation in each of these types of programs has been associated with various positive outcomes at individual and community levels (e.g., positive changes in self-concept, decreased community violence, and decreased disciplinary referrals) (Woodland, 2008). Germane to this study, though, are the ways in which youth development programs serve as a space for Black boys to engage in CSA, explore dimensions of their identity, and be affirmed by a mentor.

The program setting described in this dissertation did not fall neatly into one of the after-school models that Woodland describes; rather, it employed strategies from each of the models

to achieve the goal of providing a safe and productive space regarding the facilitation of CSA for Black boys in school. The program involved a mentoring component, where two facilitators served as mentors to seven boys in a group setting (with opportunities for informal, individual contact). Outside of scheduled program activities, group discussions involved: mentoring around college preparation, navigating the school environment, and (most importantly) the boys' personal updates for the week. Additionally, the program year culminated in a celebration where the boys shared their projects with their families.

The blend of after-school program models is not uncommon in the literature. For example, Woodland and his colleagues (2009) examined the experiences of Black boys and men in a Black male youth development program that took place in a city where Black males are consistently faced with the risks of violence and underperforming schools. The aim of the study was to understand: (1) what attracted the young men to the program, (2) what kept them involved, and (3) what benefits they received from participation in the program. The program consisted of weekly gatherings of various community stakeholders (people invested in the supporting and advocating for young Black males) and participants (Black adolescent boys and emerging adults; ages 15-23). During each session, the program opened with an affirmation and a reading of group norms. After a facilitator led a presentation, the group focused on the presentation topic in an intergenerational discussion. The findings suggested that the most important aspect of the program was the relationships participants established with adults. Additionally, the program's content was culturally relevant; the participants noted the novelty of the program's curriculum, as it spoke directly to their experiences as Black males in that particular community. The participants also commented on the ways in which the program presented them with an opportunity to explore their sense of self as Black males through

activities and group discussions that encouraged reflexivity. Woodland and colleagues (2009) emphasize the notion of “space” in their discussion of the program; they described the program space as being “the most blessed room in the city,” because it was safe for honest dialogue across generations for Black males. They also noted that participants were encouraged to challenge their elders in discussions, which created opportunities for the development of critical thinking.

A similar blended model of after-school programming was represented in Watts and colleagues’ (Watts et al., 1999; 2002; Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998) Young Warriors program, which focused on facilitating and enhancing CSA in high school Black boys. Watts and colleagues (1999; 2002) emphasized the importance of racial identity and socialization in the program with the aim of promoting a healthy sense of self. For instance, the program was guided by a creed, which adapted the Seven Principles of Blackness (Karenga, 1988): survival, freedom, justice, knowledge, security, prosperity, spiritual growth, and self-determination. During program sessions, facilitators guided the boys through a multi-step protocol to promote the analysis of oppression in hip-hop videos. In addition to simply increasing boys’ number of responses, they found that the boys’ analysis of videos increasingly reflected CSA by the end of the program. The activities of the Young Warriors program are examples of the work being done as part of youth participatory action research (YPAR) programs, much like the one discussed in this dissertation.

YPAR refers to the process by which researchers collaborate with a community around an issue (or set of issues) established by a stakeholder in that community (Fine, Torre, Burns, & Payne, 2007; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; McIntyre, 2000). YPAR is a process aimed at facilitating and socializing SPD. It is rooted in the liberation of marginalized youth through collective CSA, narrative sharing, community organizing, and an action project. Community

stakeholders are members and/or leaders in a community with a vested interest in community healing and empowerment (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). Researchers and community stakeholders may have an existing relationship or either party, in response to community issues, initiates the relationship. Research participants are identified or recruited to pursue a participatory research project by the researcher and the stakeholder. Finally, all parties involved become co-investigators of a research project. This co-investigation involves problem identification/definition, goal setting, mobilization of resources, and informed action toward addressing problems (McIntyre, 2000; Wilson et al., 2007). The culmination of a YPAR project usually involves a dissemination of findings in addition to and/or in concert with their informed action toward addressing problems..

YPAR may take place in ongoing community/after-school programs. YPAR programs offer the space and opportunity structure for youth to be guided by community stakeholders in their development of strategy to address problems within their environment (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Kirshner, Pozzoboni, & Jones, 2011). These programs engage youth in the process of social science research with the goal of understanding and addressing specific community problems, promoting critical thinking skills, and promoting healthy identity exploration. Youth are trained in the basic mechanics of different types of social science research (e.g., interviewing, survey methods, literature review) that is rooted in a topic of interest to the group. Finally, research findings are used to discuss individual and collective experiences.

Outside of the work that is produced, by virtue of the space created, there is evidence to suggest that YPAR programs may serve as a setting for Black boys to collectively process the effects of inequity within their school community. Hope and colleagues (Hope et al., 2014) found that a program aimed at engaging Black high school students in CSA around hip-hop

media served as a safe setting for youth to engage in the CSA of their school experiences— both in interviews and the program space. Similarly, the program described in this dissertation served as a safe space to discuss frustrations, anxieties, and conditions around the recent high profile incidents where Black youth and adults were severely injured or killed (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Michael Brown) (Smith et al., in prep).

The YPAR method germane to this study, photovoice, involves addressing community goals or problems through taking, analyzing, discussing, and sharing photographs (Becker, Reiser, Lambert, & Covello, 2014; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Wang, 2006). Photovoice builds on the popular idiom “*a picture is worth a thousand words*” by providing participants in a community with the opportunity to define and share their own narrative regarding their community. Photovoice projects may be initiated in response to some known community problem (Wilson et al., 2007) or used as a creative visual method to explore identity (Q. Allen, 2012). Although the method is flexible in terms of the ways it is used and the goals that can be accomplished with it, the process generally involves the following steps (not necessarily in this order): (1) the identification of a focus/problem, (2) education about the method, (3) distribution of cameras, (4) taking photos, (5) processing of the photo and development of a narrative, (6) sharing photos and narratives with the community. Generally, the product of a photovoice project involves the presentation of a photo along with a written, descriptive narrative. The projects are then shared with policymakers, school superintendents, other government officials, community leaders, or fellow community members.

In one study, Foster-Fishman and colleagues (2010) engaged youth in discussing their dreams, career goals, existing supports, and the potential role of the larger community in helping them reach their dreams. They conducted thematic analyses with their photographs in order to

assist individuals with their career plans and to drive and focus group dialogue around the project. Photovoice is also seen as a useful tool to engage youth in genuine participation in their school community (Warne, Snyder, & Gillander Gadin, 2013) in addition to gaining a robust understanding of youths' experiences in school (Davison, Ghali, & Hawe, 2011). For example, Wilson and colleagues (2007) facilitated a photovoice project with children of ages 10-12, with the goal of addressing serious problems occurring in and around their school. The youth identified school problems, reflected on those problems, collectively took photographs, and organized action. Actions for addressing problems ranged from awareness campaigns about litter in school to a letter about a dilapidated, scary building on school grounds.

Previous research suggests that photovoice is an effective method for soliciting the voice of youth color, particularly Black youth. In a study examining perspectives on multiculturalism in the United States among racially diverse groups of youth (ages 14-18) in three different regions (Northern Colorado, Oakland, CA, and Bronx, NY), youth reported nuanced narratives through their photovoice projects and conversations (Johansen & Le, 2014). Youth in the study discussed the ideal of multiculturalism while critiquing structures of oppression that present the authentic inclusion and value of multiple cultures in the country. In addition to critiquing systems, photovoice projects may serve as a space to identify strengths and coping mechanisms among individuals and communities. Harley (2015) explored Black youths' definitions of and experiences with hope through photovoice and individual interviews; participants in the study reported their hope being rooted in diverse sources (from education and spirituality to the availability of basic hygiene items in their homes).

Although limited in number, photovoice studies that focus on the experiences of Black boys provide an understanding of their meaning making around oppression and difficult



circumstances in addition to resources and strategies they employ to succeed. For example, one study conducted by medical doctors and scholars across multiple disciplines used photovoice among Black boys in a large urban area to identify and prioritize factors associated with the transition to manhood (Bharmal et al., 2011). The participants foregrounded the multiple dimensions of the struggles they face (e.g., racism, poverty, neighborhood disadvantages), their sources of support, the importance of sports in their lifestyles, and the overall excessive culture of their city. Allen (2012) employed photovoice with middle class Black boys in high school. With a focus on their school experiences in a mostly White affluent school, he used photovoice as an extension of structured interviewing with participants. Through this process, participants were able to explore their identity through photography and discuss their exploration with the interviewer. This, paired with narratives provided by interviews and participant observation, afforded a rich and complicated view into the lives of middle class Black boys while facilitating the power of their voices. This study informed the assumptions about middle class Black boys' narratives and the methods employed in the present dissertation study.

### **The Current Study**

In its purest form, SPD marks the audacity to seek liberation in the face of oppression; as a framework, it accounts for factors that cultivate and support this audacity. Scholars have operationalized SPD in a couple of distinct forms. In the case of the two foremost psychological theorists of SPD, Watts and colleagues (2002; 1998) foreground the process of collectively identifying and working against systemic oppression in their definition while Diemer and colleagues (2012; 2006) focus on the psychological processes around CSA and political efficacy. Both Watts and Diemer encourage further development of SPD research in the form of theoretical and empirical work employing multiple methods (Diemer et al., 2015; Watts et al.,

2011). Scholars also call for an examination of SPD at various identity intersections (Hope, 2013; Shin, 2014). Additionally, there is a call for more work on Black boys experiences in school—especially work that engages their voices directly (S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). Finally, scholars emphasize the potential value of CSA for Black boys in the school context—as schools are often (and unfortunately) microcosms of larger, oppressive sociopolitical contexts for people of color (Hope et al., 2014; Lozada et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2002). This study aims to answer these calls by focusing on Black boys’ CSA of their school experiences. Much like Watts’ work, this process-driven study takes place within the context of an after-school YPAR program, the *Voice Project* aimed at promoting SPD. The present study also aims to further inform the understanding of the role of youth programming in providing Black boys with opportunities for CSA around school experiences. The *Voice Project* was designed to be a setting of social support for SPD broadly, specifically CSA (see *Figure 4*).

CSA is a core component of the analytical lens of this study, given it is the central cognitive and most studied component of SPD. Previous research suggests that pathways to CSA can begin with socialization in the home (Diemer et al., 2008) and in community/program settings (Watts et al., 2002); however, the nature of these pathways is not yet clear. For instance, more information is needed about strategies programs can use to scaffold CSA among Black boys specifically. Although there has been recent development of scales to assess various aspects of CSA (Diemer et al., 2015), youth program workers may benefit from additional methods of understanding their participants’ CSA.

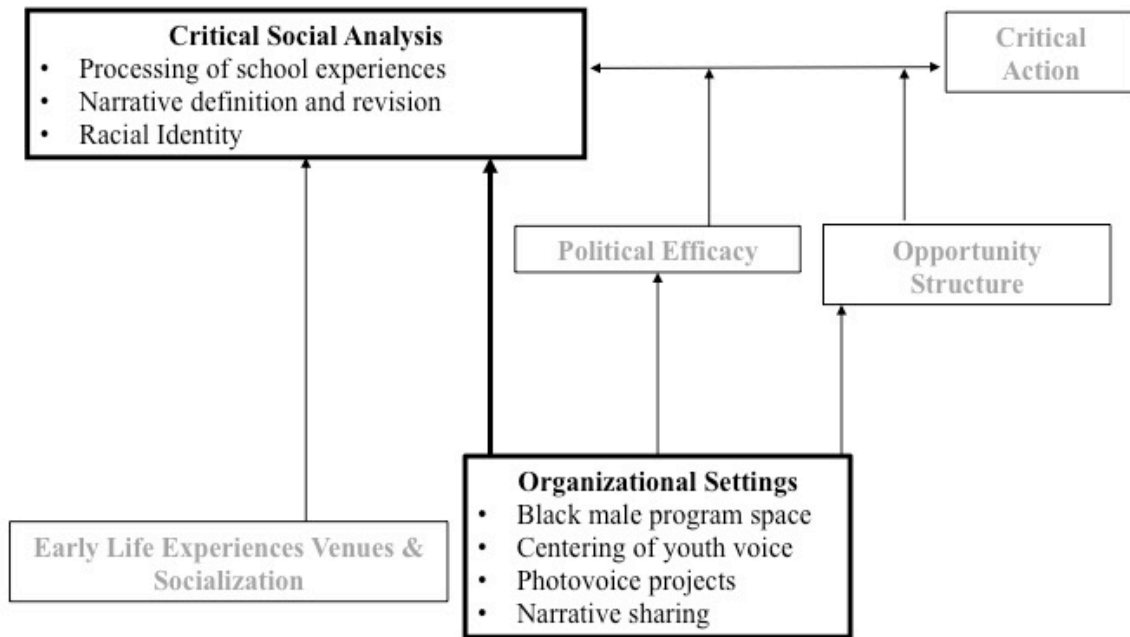


Figure 4. Annotated dissertation focus.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore Black adolescent boys' meaning-making of their experiences in a mostly White high school located in an affluent suburb. Their meaning-making was explored in individual interviews and through their participation in an after-school youth participatory action research (YPAR) program. The overarching research question is "In what ways do middle class Black boys make meaning of their school experiences?" Additionally, this dissertation attends to: "What strategies do middle class Black boys employ to cope with negative school experiences and succeed in their school community?" and "What solutions do middle class Black boys suggest for their school community in response to challenges they face in their school community?"

Research Questions	Data Type	Content	
1. In what ways do middle class Black boys make meaning of their school experiences?	In-depth semi-structured interviews	Demographic Information	
		Identity (Gender, race, academic)	
2. What strategies do middle class Black boys employ to cope with negative school experiences and succeed in their school community?		School description	
		School experiences	
3. What solutions do middle class Black boys suggest for their school community in response to challenges they face in their school community?		Photovoice Projects	Narratives
			Pictures
	Videotaped Program Sessions	Conversations about school	
		Final presentation	
		YPAR activities	

Table 1. Research questions and corresponding data sources

Multiple methods were employed to answer these questions (see Table 1). Regarding the first research question, phenomenological qualitative methods were most suitable to examine CSA of school experiences among Black adolescent boys in this study. CSA involves a specific interpretation or *meaning making* of one's reality and experiences, which emphasizes the analysis of systemic oppression. Thus, qualitative methods that foregrounded the meaning making of participants were ideal for studying CSA (Fine, 1991; O'Connor, 1997). Although it was expected that the boys' meaning making would reflect various ideological standpoints, the standpoints associated with CSA were of particular interest because CSA was the focal skill the after-school program sought to cultivate. In this study, CSA was examined for its content (what the boys saw as unjust in their school experiences) and depth (the extent to which the boys attributed injustice to systems vs. individuals). Even with a lens informed heavily by CSA, data

were coded inductively and larger themes emerged. Regarding the intersection of general meaning making around and CSA of school experiences, “the context, which is the school, is a historical reality that is a political, economic, ideological and structural force that can reproduce marginalized identities and inequitable life trajectories” (Q. Allen, 2010, p. 40). Considering the potential complexity of the school context, especially for Black adolescent boys, and the lack of their voices in the literature on their experiences, it was important to use methods that provided an opportunity to capture an authentic representation of their views and perspectives.

Moustakas’ (1994) psychological phenomenology approach to qualitative inquiry was employed in this study. This approach involves: (1) the identification of a phenomenon (i.e., Black adolescent boys participating in a YPAR program at an affluent high school), (2) the researcher identifying and “bracketing out” their assumptions about the phenomenon, and (3) the collection of data from participants, primarily via in-depth interviews. Phenomenology seemed most appropriate for this study, because the approach is usually applied to the experiences of a small group of participants, it positions their accounts of their experiences as a primary truth, and builds on those accounts in order to describe the “essence” of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

To complement the phenomenological approach to inquiry, photovoice was employed to examine CSA within a participatory action research program context. Photovoice is a participatory research method aimed at facilitating the voice of oppressed groups through organization, discussion, and photography (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice seemed appropriate for this study, because it offers participating boys an opportunity (outside of individual interviews) to own, process, and share their experiences: “...the power of participant photography lies in its ability to situate Black males as knowledge creators by placing the power

photographic representation in their possession” (Q. Allen, 2012). In this process, a community stakeholder (someone directly with and/or invested in a community’s efforts toward improvement) identifies a problem and partners with a researcher or leads this process herself. Participants lead in the definition and communication of the problem, they develop research questions/foci, take pictures that speak to the foci, develop narratives from these pictures, and share their pictures and narratives with the appropriate audience(s). The intended result of photovoice is that participants not only call attention to community problems; they should also pose solutions to people in positions of power. By design, this method promotes tactical authenticity (it *stimulates* action; provides a mechanism through which action can occur) and catalytic authenticity (it *empowers* action; promotes a sense of agency around the action) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A method described by Foster-Fishman and colleagues (2010) was adapted for this study, because its primary aim was to promote CSA and social change among adolescents. This method involves: (1) problem identification, (2) participant photography, (3) thematic analysis of photographs, and (4) dissemination of findings.

There were some ethical considerations in place regarding the photovoice project in this study. First, participants in this study were trained on the appropriate use of cameras and the power of photography (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). During this training, participants were encouraged to think about ways to represent their experiences and any people in photographs responsibly. Additionally, they were given consent forms to share with any participants in their photographs. Permission from school administrators was gained prior to photography in the school.

Another concern regarding photovoice, especially for Black adolescent boys, is the possible reproduction of harmful narratives about Black people and specifically Black males.

Given the aforementioned zeitgeist that pervades negative images, stereotypes, and messages about Black males, especially in school contexts, it is possible that the participants in this study might accommodate negative attitudes about themselves in their photography and narratives (Q. Allen, 2010; 2012). Additionally, although photovoice is a method associated with the liberation of marginalized populations, there is evidence to suggest that the process—which is characterized by identifying oppressive structures in one’s community—may yield discouragement among youth (Pritzker, LaChapelle, & Tatum, 2012). To account for these potential concerns, the photovoice projects were executed over several weeks in order to provide adequate time for debriefing and repetition of the collection/analysis of pictures. Through a program culture of dialogue, debriefing, and critical feedback, the participants in this study were constantly creating and revising their narratives. Additionally, they were supported in moments of frustration and confusion with their findings. These moments were documented in observational field notes and the videotaped program sessions; they were coded and incorporated into the analysis of photovoice projects.

Seeking insight into the CSA of Black adolescent boys, interviews with students and their photovoice projects were supplemented by participant observation. Interviews provided rich insight into the boys’ experiences in school in addition to their critical analysis of their environment and experiences. The photovoice project was designed to facilitate the development of CSA at an individual level and narrative development at a collective level. Finally, participant observation of the boys in the program setting served to provide more context around their SPD.

### ***The Voice Project***

From September 2012 – February 2013, a team of researchers at the University of Michigan developed a YPAR curriculum and program for Black boys, called the *Voice Project*.



The team consisted of myself, another Black male doctoral student, a Black female post-doctoral fellow, and a Black male professor. Both doctoral students also served as program facilitators.

*The Voice Project* was aimed at promoting SPD in Black high school boys through youth organizing, participatory action research, mentoring, and group discussion. The program's structure and curriculum were informed by programs described in the literature aimed at promoting SPD (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Watts et al., 2002) and positive development in Black boys (Fashola, 2003; Woodland et al., 2009).

There were two assumptions undergirding the development of the curriculum. First, the voices, opinions, and narratives of program participants were the program's most valuable assets. Although there are multiple narratives describing the lived experiences of Black boys in school, the presence of Black boys' voices in these narratives is lacking in the scholarly literature (J. E. Davis, 2003; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2003; S. J. Rowley et al., 2014); thus, the primary goal of *The Voice Project* was to understand Black boy's perceptions of their school experiences and to

foreground their narratives in this dissertation.

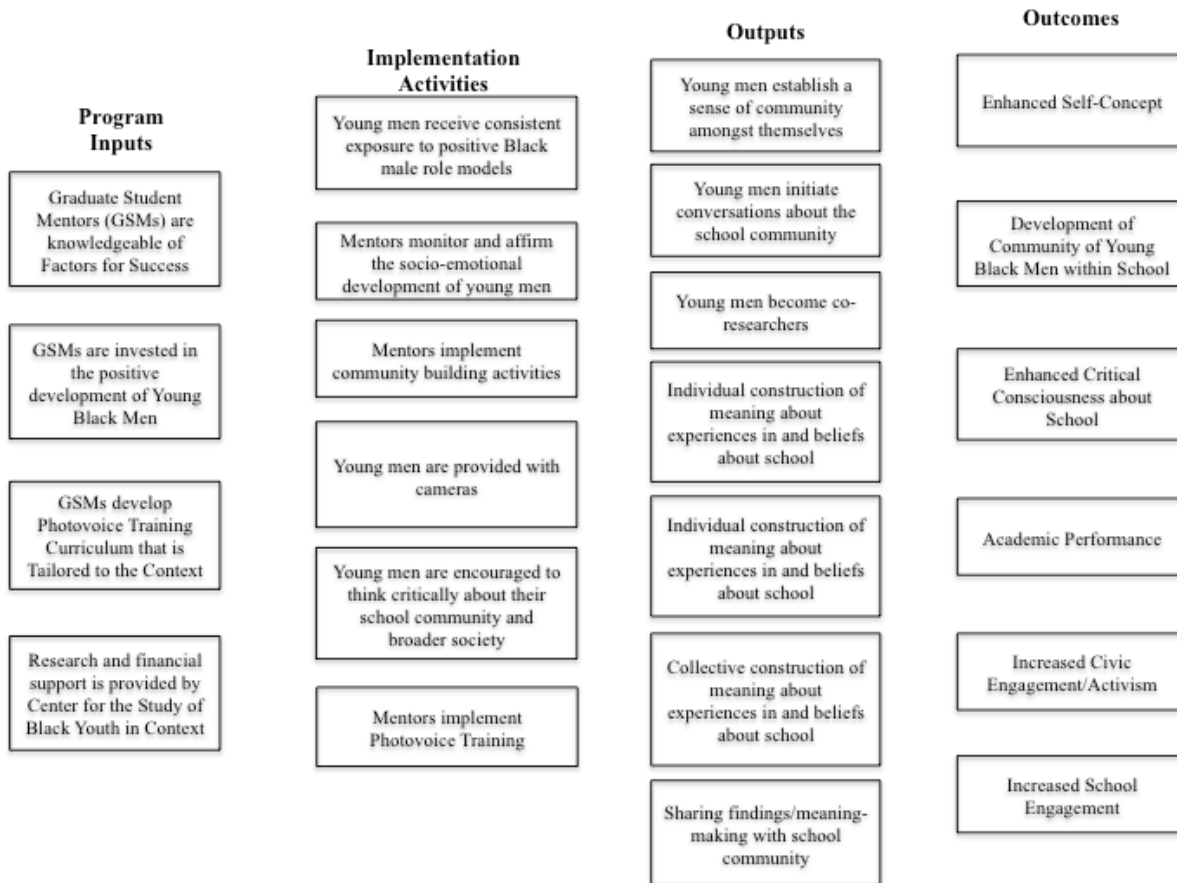


Figure 5. Logic Model for the *Voice Project*

The second assumption of the program was the value of intersectionality. The intersection of race and gender (Black boys) was important for this study because of the lack of psychological literature that foregrounds the voices of Black males in the midst of an abundance of popular media espousing limited narratives of Black males' experiences. Given this, the *Voice Project* was designed as a Black male space for mentorship, identity exploration, narrative sharing, and the discussion of issues that may be sensitive across generations (Woodland et al., 2009). Taken together, these two assumptions guided the program curriculum and program sessions.

## **Photovoice Curriculum**

In order to facilitate SPD in the program space, photovoice was employed as the core activity of the *Voice Project*. The phases of photovoice outlined by Foster-Fishman and colleagues (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann, 2005) seemed appropriate for this study, because they were aimed at fostering CSA through: (1) problem identification, (2) data analysis, and (3) providing feedback. Each program session was dedicated to a step in these phases (see *Table 1*). Weekly program sessions were videotaped in order to capture conversations, activities, group dynamics, and facial expressions. I recorded quick field notes directly after each session using a video camera or voice recorder; these notes were aimed at reflecting on the session broadly and focusing on some emergent issues. Later, additional field notes were recorded using the videotapes of program sessions. The sessions are described below.

<b>Sessions</b>	<b>Focus</b>
Session 1	Building community; Defining the school space
Session 2	Introduction to photography and its power
Session 3	Problem identification
Sessions 4-6	Data collection & group feedback
Sessions 7-9	Data analysis & narrative development
Session 10	Gallery walk

*Table 2. Voice Project Sessions.*

**Session 1: Building Community.** The group participated in a series of “ice-breakers,” common games and activities aimed at making the group more comfortable in the space. The group and facilitators established some norms for the space, which included a common respect for members of the group and no use of cell phones in the space during the session. The facilitators oriented the group to the goals of the program. Then, in order to orient facilitators to the school, the group guided facilitators on a tour of the high school. During the tour, which was videotaped, the boys were encouraged to discuss their experiences in the school as Black adolescent boys in addition to their academic and professional aspirations

**Session 2: The Power of Photography, Research, & Photovoice.** Facilitators shared a brief presentation of the power behind photography, research, and photovoice. There was also a group discussion about some ethical concerns during photovoice. To reinforce the discussion of photography and ethics, the group guided facilitators on videotaped another tour, which was

focused on photographs in the school and the various messages they convey. The group was also encouraged to share more about their experiences at Lakeside.

**Session 3: Problem Identification.** The problem identification activity was adapted from the photo reflection sessions described by Foster-Fishman and colleagues (2010). Upon reflecting on issues the boys identified during the school tours, the boys participated in brief “freewrite” session, where they individually listed and defined problems they saw as prevalent for Black boys at Lakeside. This strategy was used, so that there was an opportunity for each voice to be heard. Then, the boys brainstormed issues of interest through group discussion. After a list of problems was generated, the group ultimately decided on two problems that they would explore for the duration of the program. Next, ground norms and expectations around the ethical use of photography were reinforced. Then, digital cameras were given to the boys and they were encouraged to take their first round of photos with their problems of interest in mind.

**Sessions 4-6: Data Collection & Group Feedback.** There were three rounds of taking and sharing photos. At the end of each round, the boys returned with their digital photos in order to share them with the whole group; a round of photos taken usually resulted in each boy bringing 3-5 photos to share. The photos were uploaded to a facilitator’s computer and displayed on a projector screen. The protocol for sharing photos included three steps. First, the group viewed the photos quietly for a few moments in order to reflect on its potential meanings. Next, the participant who shared the photo described what was happening in the photo, why they took it, and what it means regarding the problems identified in session 3. Then, the group responds with their reflections on the photo and provided feedback. Finally, facilitators offered feedback about the photo’s quality and message. This process was completed with each photo.

**Session 7-9: Data Analysis.** The process of data analysis was adapted from a candy sorting activity described by Foster-Fishman and colleagues (2010). Instead of providing various types of candy for the boys to sort, the facilitators presented the group with a 14 “charged words” (e.g., success, black, woman, happiness, failure) and 3 shapes (i.e., circle, triangle, square). All of these items were scattered on a table and the facilitators instructed the boys to group the words into shapes. The group developed a scheme for sorting words with similar meanings into shapes. After the sorting was completed, facilitators had the group explain their method and reasoning for sorting the way they did. Then, facilitators took away one shape and told the group to repeat the sorting process. In this activity simulating thematic analysis and data reduction, the words represented codes and the shapes represented themes. The facilitators then described this to the group, removed the words from table, scattered their printed photos on the table, and instructed them to repeat the process by sorting their photos into shapes. The group then explained their sorting of photos. Finally, the group was instructed to title the shapes; thus, identifying the themes of their photovoice project. Informed by this, the boys further developed their narratives to be included as a caption of their photo.

**Session 10: Gallery Walk.** The gallery walk took place on a selected evening at Lakeside High School in the media center. Participants’ parents, school administrators, Geoffrey, and Sharon were invited. The purpose of the gallery walk was to present the group’s photovoice project and to facilitate conversation around issues the boys rose during the course of the project. Each participant stood by his photos, explained the meanings, and reflected on their school experiences.

## **Interviews**

In order to gain an understanding of middle class Black adolescent boys' individual CSA of their experiences in school, interviews were conducted with participants (Moustakas, 1994). Semi-structured and unstructured interviews were utilized because they seemed the most appropriate for examining experiences in informal and formal settings. Each participant was involved in an in-person, individual semi-structured interview. The *Voice Project* took place January 2013 – June 2013, interviews were conducted with participants May 2013. Interviews were conducted in closed, private rooms adjacent to the school's media center during or after the school day. The interview guide included questions about various dimensions of identity (personal, gender, race, academic, and class), their descriptions of their school community, their descriptions of their home and neighborhood, and demographic information. A full interview session generally lasted between 50-80 minutes; some interviews required two sessions due to participant time constraints. All interviews were transcribed shortly after being conducted. After each interview, I taped quick field notes using a voice recorder.

## **Data Analysis**

All formal interviews were transcribed; additionally, the photovoice projects, which include photos and a participant-written narrative, were recreated in digital form for the purposes of data analysis. Interview transcripts, field notes on program sessions, and photovoice projects make up the participant record. Dedoose (Lieber & Weisner, 2010), a qualitative data analysis software, was used in order to conduct data analysis on each participant record. Data analysis was conducted using a modified Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data as outlined by Moustakas (1994):

**Bracketing.** First, as the researcher of the study, I described my personal experiences as a young Black man from a middle class background who only lived in suburban areas and attended suburban schools in his youth. This process of “bracketing” is aimed at realizing the positionality of the researcher and foregrounding the experiences of participants as the focus of the study (Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). The presentation of the bracketing process, called the *epoché*, is presented at the beginning of the following chapter.

Although the process of bracketing is essential to conventional phenomenological studies, I recognize the impossibility of fully “bracketing” myself from the participants’ experiences. I served not only as a researcher, but also as a program facilitator. As a facilitator, I worked to build community with the participants in this study; the aim of that community was to discuss their school experiences and to socialize CSA. Consequently, there is no way to divorce my personal experiences with the phenomenon of study (Black boys’ meaning-making of their experiences at Lakeside). In the *epoché*, though, I described a vignette from my high school experience as a Black boy in a mostly-White classroom. In the vignette, I shared my conflicting emotions and the beginnings of my CSA of that moment (and my high school experience broadly). The goals of “bracketing” in this study were to highlight the biases I have regarding my previous school experiences, to center the boys’ meaning making, and separate the two.

**Horizontalization.** For each participant, a list of quotes, field notes, and photovoice projects relevant to their experiences as a Black boy in school was generated. Quotes and projects that contain moments that are essential to the understanding of the three guiding research questions were included in the next steps of analysis; other quotes and projects were eliminated. Quotes were selected in the form of full statements made by participants (i.e.,



multiple lines and paragraphs) to account for context. Additionally, quotes and projects that contain overlapping, repetitive, and otherwise vague language were eliminated.

**Clustering and Thematizing.** The remaining quotes, field notes, and projects, called *invariant constituents*, were clustered into larger themes. These themes, which were developed within the analysis of each participant, will be representative of the participant's experience with CSA in this study. Some themes were consistent across participants and further clarified the themes to be included in textural and structural analysis. In an effort for validation of the data, the invariant constituents and themes were checked for the extent to which they were expressed explicitly in the complete record of the participant. The thematizing process is exemplified with a sample of invariant constituents in *Figure 1*.

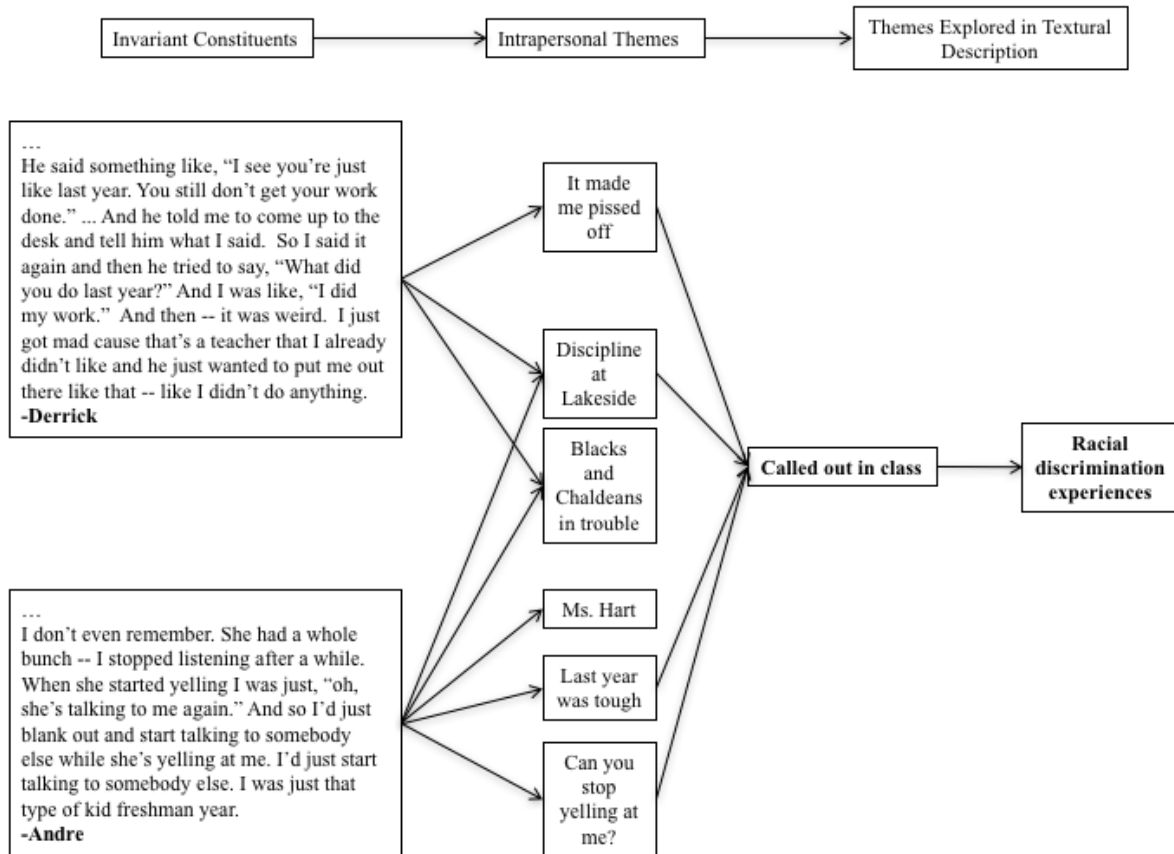


Figure 6. Clustering and thematizing process with examples.

**Textural & Structural Descriptions.** Descriptions of participants' meaning making of school experiences were developed (textural descriptions). Verbatim quotes were included in order to support the description. Then, informed by the textural descriptions and analyzed field notes, descriptions of the boys' meaning making in the program setting were developed (structural description). Finally, a universal description (composite textural-structural description) of the participants' CSA within the program is presented in the following chapter (Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994).

## Participants

**Participant selection.** This dissertation was part of a longitudinal mixed methods study examining the lived school experiences of Black youth in multiple school districts and community contexts. In addition to the methods described in this dissertation, the larger study employed longitudinal survey research, observation, diary, and qualitative methods. Each of the boys in this study was also a participant in the longitudinal survey and attended Lakeside High School, a public high school situated in an affluent suburban community (Cherry Hill), which is described later. In order to recruit participants for the *Voice Project*, a list of all the Black male participants in the survey who attended Lakeside was generated ( $N = 20$ ).

Recruitment began in January 2013. Parents and students were contacted via email and phone to attend a recruitment presentation for an after-school YPAR program for Black boys at Lakeside High School. Of the 20 students invited to the presentation, 6 students and their parents attended the presentation; those 6 students elected to participate in the study. Additionally, there was one case of snowball sampling where one student, James, recruited his friend, Tim, to participate in the study. After recruitment, a total of 7 students elected to participate in the study.

### **André.**

*An athlete -- I like to think of myself...Uh, I'm smart—I don't know what else...Oh, creative -- so like athletic, creative and smart.*

André usually wore a green sweatshirt, sweatpants, and running shoes. Compared to the other boys in the group, he was of a medium height and build. During program sessions, he appeared both calm and irritated yet he was always engaged in our activities. Like only a couple of the guys, André always shared his opinion in activities regarding general thoughts on Lakeside and the overall direction of the *Voice Project*.

In the planning stages of the *Voice Project*, Geoffrey mentioned André's name among a list of students that should *definitely* be included in the program. Geoffrey felt strongly that André should be in the program because of some trouble he had gotten into with a football coach. Apparently, the incident was so bad that it had been the subject of whispers in BPA. At the time of the study, André was a member of Lakeside's varsity football team—an impressive accomplishment for a sophomore. Regarding his passion for football, André said:

Well everything I do is football related things. Even walking around the house is football related stuff, doing this with my arm and like cutting or doing something football related. I'll stiff-arm on the refrigerator every once in a while just to do something.

As a student, André described himself as being lazy; he also recognized that he had a lot of academic potential:

André: I'm just in that lazy mode...I could get straight-As in school like if whenever I get out of that lazy mode, I could easily be a straight-A student.

Chauncey: What kind of student are you right now?

A: Laid-back type like -- I'm not going to say like sit in the back of the room type person. Because a lot of my classes -- I took the initiative in some of my classes to sit in the direct, center front so I could pay attention and so I won't sleep. So some classes and other classes, I sit in the back just -- just go along with it.

C: What kind of grades do you make?

A: Right now, I have 2.5 I think or something like that.

André was born in Hope City and had lived in Cherry Hill with his mother and father since his elementary school years. He described his family as being middle class, because both of his parents had stable decent-paying jobs and college degrees.

**Derrick.**

*Um, a Black male who likes basketball [laughs] ...I guess I'm a happy individual at times—most of the times I'm happy; sometimes, I can get mad.*

Usually in a black jacket, a t-shirt, and jeans, Derrick was tall and slim. He wore his hair in a distinguishable reddish-brown afro. I could always spot Derrick in Lakeside's hallways; he was usually up to something that *gave the impression of* trouble. He was talking loudly, engaging in horseplay with friends, or talking softly to a girl with his arm was around her shoulders.

Derrick was popular at Lakeside, especially among other Black students. Overall, he presented himself as being cool and calm, but also apathetic regarding school.

Within *Voice Project* program sessions, Derrick was very engaged; he was always the first in the room and the first to speak during activities. He and André emerged as the *de facto* leaders of the group; André would keep the group on topic and Derrick would quiet side conversations. Outside of the *Voice Project* and his occasional participation in BSA, Derrick did not have any other extracurricular activities at Lakeside. He could connect any conversation topic to his passion for basketball. Derrick tried out for Lakeside's basketball team during his freshman and sophomore years, but did not make the team either year. He played on travel basketball teams throughout the Hope City metropolitan area, but he described not making the Lakeside team as a source of his disappointment with attending Lakeside.

When I first met Derrick, he expressed emphatically how much he disliked Lakeside. Derrick had been struggling academically since his freshman year and was concerned about his

academic future. I asked him once what he thought his life would be like as a grown man, he responded:

Derrick: I don't know. I think it's going to be average. I just don't want it to be average...

C: Why do you think it's going to be average?

D: Because I'm not like a 3.0 student and I think it is going to be hard for me to get in a good school so I can get a good job.

C: What kind of student are you?

D: An average student...I think maybe like a 2.5 or 2.3.

Derrick was born in Hope City and had lived in Cherry Hill with his mother and father since kindergarten. He is his mother's only child, but he has other older siblings from his father's previous marriage. He describes his family as being middle class, because of his parents' college degrees and stable jobs.

**Greg.**

*A young Black man and I usually -- I like being around my own self sometimes; I just be by myself. Sometimes I like just hanging out with other people too. It doesn't really matter if you're just cool...I would describe myself as a nice person. I'm big. Um, nice, big -- I'm not like a run over type like somebody could just walk over me and I won't say anything. Yeah, I guess.*

With a football player's build, Greg was both big and tall compared to the other boys in the program. He was usually wearing a t-shirt or hooded sweatshirt, jeans or athletic wear, basketball shoes, and a baseball cap. Greg was big in stature, but he always had a gentle disposition. During program sessions, he participated regularly and seemed to enjoy himself.

During a conversation about being Black at Lakeside, he discussed his intentionality around being kind because he knew he might appear intimidating as a big, Black guy:

Greg: I'm a normal person. I'm not going to...[pause]

C: You're a normal person. You're not going to what?

G: Like hurt you or anything.

C: Do you think people think that?

G: Yeah because I'm big...Like they think -- I guess they're. Sometimes, they're surprised when I go up and talk to them and it's not what they think the stereotype is -- like everybody cursing all the time and get mad easily. "Wow. This guy has a nice set of manners." I'm just normal to them [laughs].

Greg was born in Hope City and lived in Cherry Hill with his mother, father, and younger sister at the time of the study. Greg describes his family as being middle class: "I live in a nice neighborhood and stuff. We travel sometimes to different places." Because of his father's job, Greg's family has lived in many cities across the country; thus, Greg has attended many schools. As a result, Greg transferred from another high school in another state to Lakeside in the middle of his freshman year. Greg attributes his freshman year academic struggles to that move:

G: Freshman year was not great for grades and stuff like that.

C: Okay. What was going on? What kind of grades were you getting?

G: I had a 1.1 grade point average. And it was just I guess 'cause I was still trying to like adjust, but I guess it was just me trying to transfer over from learning different curriculums from [previous state] to here.

C: How did you do when you there?

...

G: I got like average grades like B's and C's.

C: When did you move to Cherry Hill?

G: Uh, half way through my freshman year.

...

C: And then over here, what did you get here?

G: I did horrible.

**James.**

*I'm a hard worker and a leader. I'm respectful and I follow directions easily and I work good with others. I'm a hard worker and a leader. I'm respectful and I follow directions easily and I work good with others.*

Quiet, slim, tall, always smiling are the easiest descriptors for James. True to the form of the group, James usually wore a hooded sweatshirt, jeans, and running shoes. Wherever he was, James seemed to fit in with his surroundings. Always appearing pensive, along with Stacy, he was nearly silent during all program sessions. He was consistently even-tempered and engaged in any activity; he joked when others joked and focused when others focused. When he did speak, he spoke clearly but at a low volume.

At the time of the study, James was a member of Lakeside's junior varsity football team. James was a high academic achiever; he maintained a GPA above 4.0/4.0 due to his enrollment in Honors and Advanced Placement courses. He consistently expressed his aspiration to go to a large university and eventually become a mechanical engineer. He shared that he was taking advantage of every engineering class that Lakeside offered in order to achieve this goal.

At his mother's suggestion, James brought Tim to participate in the program. James and Tim had been best friends since middle school; outside of the classes they did not share, James



and Tim were inseparable. Born in another neighboring suburb of Hope City, at the time of the study, James lived at home with his mother and father in Cherry Hill. With visible pride, James shared stories of his older brother who was away at college on a football scholarship. He described his family as being middle class: “Uh, I guess like a big house, everyone in the house has a car, um, a good neighborhood, a good school.”

**Stacy.**

*I'm a young Black male and that's it...It doesn't really mean nothing; it is just who you are.*

Stacy was shorter than other members of the group. He was usually wearing a hooded sweatshirt, jeans or sweat pants, basketball shoes, a backpack, and sometimes a winter skull cap. With braces over his teeth, his speech was often mumbled and quiet; he sat slouched in his chair during program sessions. Everything about Stacy's personality said “cool, calm, and collected”; additionally, he did not speak much unless I asked. When he did speak, he used few words but demonstrated a deep reflection of his surroundings.

Stacy was close friends with André and Greg; they would often be seated close to each other during program sessions. At the time of the study, Stacy played on Lakeside's junior varsity football team. Outside of football (workouts, practices, and games) and the *Voice Project*, Stacy did not participate in any school-based extracurricular activities.

When I asked Stacy what he saw as his biggest personal challenge, he described his achievement in school:

Stacy: School I guess...getting good grades -- yeah that's a challenge.

C: What kind of grades do you make?

S: Like B's, C's and D's kind of --

C: What does your GPA come in at?

S: It would be like a 2.3.

C: Okay so 2.3. Given that that is challenge and something you work on? How do you see yourself working on it, moving forward?

S: I know how to do better. I feel like I'm gonna be trying my hardest to do my homework. I be lazy when it comes to the homework stuff so that's what I really—if I could just turn in all my homework I'd be good.

Stacy was born in Hope City and lived at home with his mother, stepfather, and younger sister in Cherry Hill at the time of the study. Stacy spent most weekends visiting his father who lived in Hope City. In terms of social class, he referred to his family as being middle class because of his nice neighborhood and his mother's college degree.

**Terrance.**

*I am someone who is crazy, loud, sometimes could be a lot to handle...But um, I'm a person...who wants the best for myself and who is trying to get there. I want to see the best for my friends. I have good intentions; that's what I'm saying. I'm crazy at times but you know there is good intention behind those...I'm not really for much words at the beginning...I kind of let my clothes do the talking for me instead of me talking. One thing I do hate is first impressions you know. I hate to judge people 'cause I know. They haven't even talked yet and you already judging them. I don't judge...but overall, I am—I'm me.*

Often wearing jogging or sweat pants and a t-shirt, Terrance stood the shortest of the boys in the group. Instead of a backpack, he always carried a duffle bag filled with books and clothes to school. He often projected his voice loudly and clearly, so that everyone in any room

could hear him. Although Terrance was small in stature and his style of dress was subdued, his personality was as loud as his voice; this is not simply an observation, but a characteristic that Terrance owned with pride (see his description of himself above).

In program sessions, his comments were often presented in opposition to the group. For instance, while group members presented their pictures for photovoice projects, Terrance often critiqued aesthetics of pictures instead of content. Often, this fit well with the group's casual and joking atmosphere; however, there were instances where other members of the group were visibly irritated with his comments. It was no secret to anyone in the group that Terrance was somewhat of an outside in the program space; this includes Terrance: "Let's be real when I walked in the door with this big old duffle bag, did you think I was a typical boy?" As a facilitator, it was always clear to me, Blake, and the other boys that Terrance played a significant role in highlighting the ways in which he was different from the other boys. However, it was not always clear *why* he highlighted the difference. A common favorite teacher among the boys described him as being sensitive and shielding his sensitivity by being loud and difficult. With the exception of Derrick, Terrance was not close to anyone in the group.

One of Terrance's most notable characteristics was his ambition. He made it clear that he was not concerned with what others thought of him because he wouldn't see them in two years: "And I'm fine with it; I won't change myself because what he or she thinks. I mean [laughs] I won't know these people in two more years. I mean I'm not saying I'm standoffish..." Even in the context of the program, he saw the *Voice Project* as a great extracurricular activity to feature on his college applications in the future—it was in some ways a stepping-stone. Additionally, at the time of the study, he was on Lakeside's track and field team. Terrance made it a point to emphasize the importance of academic achievement in his life. This was present in his

photovoice projects, which featured the academic achievements of him and his friends.

Although Terrance attended schools in Lakeside's school district his whole life, he was the only student that did not live in Cherry Hill. Terrance was born in Hope City and lived in a nearby suburb; his parents drove him to Lakeside each day. At home, he lived with his Mother, Father, and two sisters who also attended Lakeside. In terms of social class, he described his family as being "well-off" because of his parents' jobs and their home.

**Tim.**

*Um, I'm half Black, fourth Brazilian, and fourth White kid who goes to Lakeside. I get pretty decent grades. I mean I get—I get above average grades; I get mostly A's and there are a couple B's thrown in there that annoy me a lot. I've got one or two so far; I may get another one this semester if I can't raise that which I hope I do. And then I do some extracurricular things like [the Voice Project]. I'm also a part of Law Club. And then I work as a caddy. I volunteer at my church. And I play rugby outside of school.*

Tim was the final addition to the *Voice Project* group; his best friend, James, brought him to the second program session. I got the sense that James' mom suggested James bring Tim to the program because James was shy or did not have close friends in the group. James was always quiet, but Tim was loud and vocal about his opinions. He stood tall and usually wore a t-shirt and jeans. When he and I first met, he did not appear to be Black/African American; he was brown with a fine grade of hair.

Like a few of the other boys, he was a member of the junior varsity football team at Lakeside in addition to the aforementioned activities. Tim was also a high academic achiever; he made mostly A's and a couple of B's. Given what he describes as a lack of focus, he was surprised at how he continued to make good grades:

I procrastinate a lot. I don't. I'm a very—I lost focus easily. I have a short attention span...I don't focus in school at all—I don't know how I get the grades I do. I don't focus well at school at all. Most of the time, I just end up talking to people, sleeping which is hard because of the snoring but I pull it off sometimes. I'm just like daydreaming in school most of the time. Most of the stuff I just have to memorize it, which I guess is a strength, but studying and all that stuff is not—it is a weakness. I don't have to study. I don't do anything. I do homework but I do it like late at night. It is just—procrastination is a big thing and focusing—I think are my two biggest weaknesses.

Tim was born in a neighboring Hope City suburb and lived at home with his mother, father, and sister (check this) in Cherry Hill. He described his family as being middle class:

I would say we're middle class. There are times where money has been a problem but I'd say they're both relatively set off. My dad has a pretty good job; he makes a \$100,000 or \$90,000 a year; he's an engineer. My mom works in a day care; I think she makes between \$40,000-50,000 a year, but she likes her job. I'd say financially, we're pretty set up. But we don't have enough money that I could afford a really good college without scholarships. One reason we do well in school is so we could go to a good college—so we need scholarships.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

#### Epoché

On a regular day in my 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, I sat during a lesson in one of my classes. I do not remember the class, the teacher, nor the lesson; yet, this particular day has stuck in my memory for one 15-second moment. My teacher usually kept the door to the classroom open during lessons; as a result, we would often hear people talking and moving throughout the hallways. On this particular day, as my teacher was demonstrating something on the board, we heard a student in the hall reciting lyrics to a rap song. The student delivered the lyrics loudly, with conviction and seemingly without regard for how he might be disruptive to others. The teacher paused the lesson and waited for the student to pass. When the student reached our door, I saw a fellow Black boy in baggy clothes continuing to recite lyrics. I looked over to my teacher as she was exhibiting a look of disgust and irritation; my peers in the class laughed audibly.

This scenario rendered me angry and ashamed. On one hand, I was angry at my peers for laughing at this Black boy who was expressing himself. Internally, I asked myself many questions. *Was he acting disruptive and inappropriate for the setting and time?* Yes. *Was he deserving of the look of disgust from my teacher?* In my opinion— “no.” What made my peers laugh—his actions or my teacher’s disgust? I recognize that I am still hypersensitive to this moment for a few reasons. First, I attended a large, racially and socioeconomically diverse suburban high school. Although the school served mostly Black and Mexican American students,

I was a student in an International Baccalaureate (IB; advanced studies) program that consisted mostly of White students. The class described in this scenario was an advanced IB course and I was the only Black person in the class. Overall, my White peers *and* some teachers did not have to interact with students outside of the IB program; thus, sometimes limiting their contact with Black and Brown students. This moment gave me a glimpse into how they might think of other students that looked like me. It made me question how they might think about me.

I felt angry because I *knew* that they did not value that student or his experiences. I saw it in their faces and felt it in their laughs. I *knew* that in another situation, they might have felt threatened by his body, voice, and overall disposition. I *knew*, at best, they simply did not take him seriously. Now, I was confident that my peers took me seriously, valued me, and respected me to some extent; but I had to ask myself, “*do they really?*” For many reasons, I felt connected to this student. He was a Black boy in high school, just like me. He liked and recited hip-hop, just like me. He reminded me of my cousins. Honestly, in private contexts (i.e., my bedroom, my car, the school bus), *I was him*—I even grew up in the same community. My disappointment in this scenario was amplified, because I began to see the way my peers and teacher *really* thought about people that looked like me, people who grew up where I grew up.

On the other hand, I remember feeling shame in this moment. As the only Black boy in my class, I was annoyed by the image this fellow Black boy exuded. To me, his essence in that moment lacked tact and respectability; it was *ghetto*, it was *hood*. I commented to myself, “Come on man! Really? Down the hallway? You *know* these white teachers expect this from *us*...do better!” I felt let down. I felt like all the work I had done to be a *model Black boy scholar* was shattered. It felt like he went out of the way to do that harm. For the rest of that class period, I felt the eyes of my peers judging me; I felt like I was not supposed to be there.

I present this scenario for two reasons: (1) to highlight some of the personal biases I brought into the dissertation (2) to demonstrate the ways in which I am both an insider and outsider to the participants and the research setting in this study. In terms of my biases, the emotions I expressed toward a line between harsh reality and hyperbole; I attribute this to my identity development as a middle class Black adolescent boy in a predominately White classroom. With the lens of an adult graduate student, the anger seemed to be rooted in my sense of Black pride, the connections I felt to fellow Black peers at my school and in my home community, and the distance I felt from my classmates and teacher. The shame seemed to be rooted in the dissonance between my Black pride, the lessons my parents taught me about how to act as a Black boy in public, and how the Black boy in the hall challenged all of that for me.

As a researcher, I did my best to look beyond my biases—to divorce my feelings around my school experiences from the analysis of my participants' meaning making. This divorce meant not imposing my sense of Black pride, my anger, nor my shame associated with scenarios like the one I described. Additionally, this divorce challenged me not to overanalyze the participants' meaning making, but to understand and authentically represent their analysis; simply, my role was to engage participants in conversation and listen. This process is the essence of the epoché:

As I reflect on the nature and meaning of the Epoché, I see it as a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also as an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85)

The concept of the epoché seems idealistic and, at times, unachievable. Moustakas (1994) noted



that it counters the way most people interact with the world—building on and learning from previous experiences. Giorgio (2009) commented on the ways in which phenomenological researchers can think about the role of their previous experiences while engaging phenomena:

It is not a matter of forgetting the past; bracketing means that we should not let our past knowledge be *engaged* while we are determining the mode and content of the present experience. Indeed, quite often one is very aware of the past as one tries not to let it influence an ongoing experience. This task can be difficult at times, but it is not impossible...One may very much be aware of past personal experiences relevant to the ongoing experiential encounter or favorite theories leading to comfortable interpretations about the ongoing experience, but the demand to be followed is that one puts aside all such temptations and systematically notes and explores the ongoing occurrences as they are unfolding. (p. 92)

Keeping these challenges in mind, I continually employed this process of bracketing throughout the study

At the time of the study, I was an educated Black man in my early 20s; in some ways, this positioned me as an insider. My participants, Black boys age 15-16, shared a closeness with me over time. I also grew up in a suburban community and came from a middle class background (two working parents with college degrees and stable sources of income, safe and quiet neighborhood, decent school district). As a hip-hop and pop culture aficionado, I could understand certain references and speak with them in an authentic fashion; they eventually saw me as an older brother/mentor figure.

There were still some factors that rendered me an outsider. First, I was still an adult in their school and was sponsored by the principal; thus, I technically harbored some authority.

Additionally, I was not from their neighborhood. I did not attend Lakeside or any schools nearby. I also did not know many of their peers or teachers. Thus, my status as an outsider was amplified when they discussed specific locations, people, and their respective reputations. When I did interact with my participants' teachers and parents, I was considered an adult peer and an authority figure.

Because of my insider status with students and adults, I was trusted with privileged information. The adults shared their personal experiences with and detailed information about the boys in my study. The boys shared their intimate, and mostly unfiltered thoughts about various aspects of their school experiences. As I negotiated my previous experiences with the different accounts of the phenomenon of study, I worked to be “transparent to [myself], to allow whatever is before [me] in consciousness to disclose itself so that [I] may see with new eyes in a naïve and completely open manner” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86).

### **A Narrative Introduction to Cherry Hill & Lakeside High**

As mentioned earlier, this dissertation work is an extension of a research study aimed at exploring the school experiences of Black youth across three distinct school districts. That research study was housed in a research center that executed multiple research studies that employed a range of quantitative and qualitative methods; these studies explored school experiences through the lenses of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other key school community members. One assumption held in the center was that there is a history of racial discrimination against Black youth that may place them at risk in school contexts; thus, the importance of understanding and eventually intervening in their school experiences.

In an effort to understand experiences in school at a specific intersection of race, class, and gender (middle class Black boys), I elected to conduct a study exploring the school

experiences of Black boys in high school via YPAR and student narratives. With a research and professional research background in youth development programming for Black youth, a colleague (Blake; former teacher and doctoral student in Teacher Education) and I designed an after-school program for Black boys with a subset of the student sample from a participating high school (Lakeside High or Lakeside) in the center's ongoing research. True to the research focus of this dissertation, the program was designed to facilitate in-depth group discussion, a photovoice project, and—most importantly—community among Black boys at their school.

While developing the program, we contacted school community partners in the Cherry Hill School District, the president of its Black Parent Association (BPA), the principal, and a guidance counselor. The BPA president, Geoffrey, was the initial contact with the school district, as he had served as a liaison between researchers and the school district in other projects. Geoffrey was a Black man of middle age who had lived in the Cherry Hill's School District for over two decades. His children attended the elementary, middle, and high schools in the district; at the time of this study, his children had graduated from college. Geoffrey founded BPA to “ensure the academic achievement and general well-being” of Black students in the district.

BPA, consisting of parents and other community members, met monthly in the Lakeside High library. Meeting agendas involved the discussion of helpful academic and extracurricular opportunities, invited speakers, and an open forum for questions and concerns. Often wearing a polo shirt, khakis, a Bluetooth headset for his phone, and carrying a black leather note pad, Geoffrey owned a business and made it known that he had a flexible schedule to work on behalf of Black families in the school district. He also emphasized his working relationship with the high school principal, Ed, in addition to his reputation for holding Ed and the administration accountable to serving Black students in the best way possible. After the research team contacted

Geoffrey, he expressed interest in supporting Black boys at Lakeside and helping us in any way. In order to obtain permission to recruit for and run the program, Geoffrey and I set up a meeting with Ed at Lakeside. This marks my first time going to Cherry Hill.

Cherry Hill is a mostly White (~80% White, ~10% Black), affluent suburban community (Median family income □\$110,000) that neighbors a large city, Hope City, in the Midwest region of the United States. While driving through the community, I noticed some other cues of affluence: luxury car dealerships, multiple high-end retail and restaurant options, a museum, a country club, several private schools, a popular community center, and a library among many other resources. Houses in the school district varied in size and price; for instance, I drove down tree-lined streets with modest single-family homes as well as streets lined with gated mansions. Upon pulling my car into Lakeside High on the day of the meeting with Ed and Geoffrey, I noticed the school had a large, formidable physical structure, much like a small shopping mall. The school's expansive parking lot was filled, almost to capacity, with cars belonging to students. I parked my car, met Geoffrey outside; we finalized some points for the meeting and entered the building.

Upon walking through the front doors of Cherry Hill into a large colorful lobby, Geoffrey and I were greeted by two non-uniformed security personnel and asked to sign in with our name, the time, and our purpose for visiting the school. Above the security guards are country flags that represent the various national backgrounds of students at Lakeside. The guards quickly recognized Geoffrey, he mentioned that we had a meeting with Ed, and they gestured us to go to Ed's office without signing in. Located in a front office suite that housed two administrative assistants and two principals' offices, we sat in Ed's office. Ed was a tall White man with the large athletic frame of football player; at the time, he was in his early to mid-forties. He greeted

us short of breath but with a smile, as he had been away from his desk and in the halls of the school prior to our arrival. During the meeting, I outlined the scope of my research project and the associated after-school program for Black boys at Lakeside. Geoffrey sat in on the meeting, cosigning the importance of such an effort and offering his support with it. Ed was immediately receptive to the idea of the program and gave us full permission to proceed with the recruitment of boys into the study. Additionally, because all school-sanctioned extracurricular activities require a faculty or staff member to serve as a sponsor, Ed offered to serve as the program's sponsor. Our meeting lasted about 10 minutes, then Ed and Geoffrey offered to give me a tour of Lakeside.

Both Ed and Geoffrey expressed a sense of pride in the school while showing me around. Ed shared information about the history of the school building and Geoffrey explained how spaces within the school are used. Lakeside has two floors; most rooms and activities are held on the main floor, which is organized in a circle that revolves around an open courtyard. The second floor covered a portion of the school's area and only housed classrooms. Large crowds of students could be seen walking around and talking freely in between classes or after school, but the hallways were mostly quiet during classes. During lunch hours, students had the choice of eating in the cafeteria, an adjacent small eating area, the hallway near the cafeteria, or the open courtyard (as weather permitted). Free roaming throughout these spaces was permitted, but an administrator or a security guard monitored each space. Along with Ed's office suite, there was another administrative office suite, a guidance counselors' office suite, and a disciplinary office.

Eventually Ed had to leave to tend to other business in the school; Geoffrey then led me to the guidance counselors' office suite to meet a guidance counselor and friend of his, Sharon.

Sharon is a Black woman in her mid-forties who had been a counselor at Lakeside for almost two decades. Her office was big enough to hold three people comfortably; blank space on tables and walls were filled with pictures of her family and former students, sorority paraphernalia, and inspirational posters. After Geoffrey introduced me, he and Sharon carried on a couple of conversations about their families. Most recently, Sharon's daughter graduated from Lakeside and was in her first year at college. Sharon was generally very warm and expressed interest in doing anything to help with Black boys at the school. Sharon and Geoffrey emphasized how much a program for Black boys was needed at Lakeside. They highlighted low GPAs and test scores, more instances of getting into trouble, and a general presence of apathy as their primary concerns regarding Black boys in the school. They shared names with me of students that "need this program the most." Although I explained to Geoffrey in previous conversations that we would take on no more than 10 boys in the program, he still advocated for more than 20 boys to participate.

In the middle of our conversation, we heard Ed's voice on the school's intercom for end-of-the-school day announcements before the dismissal bell. Before the bell rang, Sharon let us know that she had to leave her office to report to the school bus line where she helps to coordinate bus departures. School dismissal was the first time that I got to see a large portion of the Lakeside population. Like the size of the building, Lakeside's student population was large, serving about 2,000 students. The school had been described as "racially diverse" or "mostly White" (~60% White, ~30% Black); most the students I saw that day were White. After the bell rang, hundreds of students flooded the school's wide hallways. Most students were headed to buses, a carpool line, or to their cars. Other students were running through the halls to prepare for sports practices or to set up for after-school clubs and activities. The front lobby, formerly

occupied by security guards, became a popular space for groups of students to congregate before leaving school. Administrators could be seen with walkie-talkies monitoring students from a distance. Within 15 minutes, the once crowded hallways were nearly empty.

Before leaving the school, Geoffrey and I went to see Sharon. This time, Sharon was in a meeting with students. We walked through the guidance counselor office suite into a small conference room. In the room were Sharon and six Black girls. These are the first students I have officially met at Lakeside. Sharon stops the meeting and has the girls introduce themselves to me — Geoffrey smiled with pride. Each girl was prompted by Geoffrey and Sharon to share their name, year at Lakeside, and the college they were planning to attend the next year. Every girl was a senior and all of them were headed to either a top tier in-state universities or reputable out-of-state schools. Even after introductions, I still did not know what meeting I had just interrupted. Sharon let me know that the six girls made up the executive board for the Black Student Association (BSA). BSA is a student club that was founded in the early 2000s with the purpose of supporting students in their educational development and promoting sociopolitical awareness. It was originally designed as a safe space for Black students at Lakeside to discuss important and sometimes controversial topics. It is a branch of BPA and occasionally the two groups meet concurrently and collaborate on events. Sharon served as the sponsor of BSA in the 2012-2013 academic year; she was supporting the executive board in their planning of BSA's upcoming events. After meeting the students, I parted ways with Geoffrey and left Lakeside for the day.

Prior to that visit, I heard one dominant narrative of Cherry Hill—it was known as the “area where the rich White folks live.” Cherry Hill's affluent suburban reputation was ubiquitous throughout the region; when I casually asked people about the area, they responded with some

form of disgust in response to the amount of wealth in the area. Because I grew up in suburban neighborhoods my whole life, I believed I had an idea of what the community would look like. I was used to decent community centers, access to libraries, some expensive retail outlets, big houses, and nice restaurants. Cherry Hill is unlike any suburban community I have ever seen—whatever I knew to be *decent*, *expensive*, *big*, or *nice* compared to none of the things in this neighborhood. At the time, Lakeside was not just a good school in a nice neighborhood, it was one of the most coveted public schools in the country at the time. As a researcher who once anticipated closeness to the experiences of Black boys at Lakeside, I began to recognize the distance I *may* encounter when interacting with students in terms of social class.

Given its reputation, I was surprised to learn that Lakeside served as many Black students as it did. Black students make up nearly a third of the school population, but only about a tenth of the community. In conversations with Sharon and Geoffrey (and eventually the boys in my study), I learned that some of this could be attributed to a recent and controversial change in state policy that enabled families to enroll their children in a school district other than their own after an application process. Versions of this policy exist across the country and draw similar controversy (Good & Braden, 2014; Ravitch, 2016); the many readings, interpretations, and uses of this policy lie outside of the scope of this dissertation. Sharon and Geoffrey saw the policy as a way for students in neighboring school districts, assumed to be Black and poor, to have access to highly-resourced schools like Lakeside. They described a migration of Black students from a neighboring school district and hinted at its negative effects on Lakeside in terms of test score performance and increased behavior problems. This hint was no surprise; because I lived not too far from the region, I heard whispers about how residing Black families were not enthusiastic nor supportive of Black students from other school districts attending Lakeside.



Another unique feature of Cherry Hill and Lakeside was BPA. At the time of the study, BPA was very active and present in Cherry Hill. The organization's name was visible as a sponsor of some general school events, in protests of racial inequity in the community, and in support of local government elections. They seemed to be respected among decision makers within the community. This regularly assembled, organized, and respected group of Black parents seemed generally uncommon; however, O'Connor and colleagues (1999) described an organization with similar features in their study. What I gathered from learning about BPA and BSA in addition to conversations with Geoffrey and Sharon is that Black families in Cherry Hill were invested in organizing for their children. Their organizational efforts attended not only to matters of education, but also to Black consciousness (via Black history awareness) and community politics.

There was an underlying sense of urgency present in each of my conversations with Geoffrey and Sharon—they were disappointed in how much Black boys were struggling at Lakeside. Geoffrey shared stories of his interventions with Black boys of Cherry Hill when they got into trouble. He mentioned late night visits for mentoring sessions with boys. While on a visit to her office, Sharon pulled out a file she kept with her caseload of students' grade point averages (GPAs). On one paper in the file, she wrote Black students' names and GPAs in red. She spoke with exasperation as she showed me the list and pointed out all the GPAs below a 2.5/4.0 (C+ average). Some of the boys had GPAs below a 2.0 (D+ and below average). On this and other occasions, she asked the question, "they have *everything* they need, why aren't they achieving?" She gave me a look that seemed to be probing for answers. I responded with a head nod and shoulder shrug as if to say, "I also don't know." I did have thoughts at the time though. Yes, it did seem like the students at Lakeside experience more privilege than many other students

in the country generally, but especially in the case of Black students. Given my previous program, research, and personal experience, I knew that there were likely be some holes in this logic. The holes in this logic fueled my interest in running a program that centers on dialogue about school experiences among Black boys.

### **Lakeside Through a Black Boy Lens**

In concert with SPD theory, the story of this dissertation hinges on notions of injustice, collective struggle, resilience, and social justice. With a focus on the school experiences of Black boys, there is also an attentive and critical eye for racial discrimination, emotional distress, and segregation within school spaces. Naturally, *the wrong, the unjust, and the racist* in the boys' experiences at Lakeside emerge as a dominant narrative. However, it is important for me to note my belief that if I asked the boys from this study (now young men) about their experiences in high school, I do not imagine that the words *wrong, unjust, nor racist* would be the first they uttered. I offer that not to discredit my findings, but as an informed assumption that I will unpack in the following chapters.

As a core focus of the dissertation, I asked the question “How do you feel about school?” multiple times and in different contexts. It was rare that the boys in this study offered a direct, negative response; only Derrick consistently said that he disliked attending Lakeside. Overall, their response to the idea of being a Lakeside student ranged from apathy to positivity. All the boys referred to Lakeside as being some degree of boring; they were not excited to go to school, but they all saw it as a necessary bridge for college and success as an adult. Terrance regularly emphasized the function of school as a place of business that requires focus (usually with a cliché; e.g., “You gotta do what you gotta do” or “That’s [getting work done and graduating] what we’re here for”). Tim and James were high achieving students who seemed to adopt a

“Lakeside is what you make it” attitude. André, Derrick, and Greg all referred to being bored at Lakeside. Stacy usually expressed indifference.

The boys’ attribution of boredom to their school environment may be a function of what Lakeside is—a high school nested in an affluent suburb. By many measures, Lakeside embodied an ideal choice of school for many families throughout the United States. Students at Lakeside performed well on standardized tests. It contained many unique, well-funded resources (e.g., programs and centers for engineering, music, theatre, multiple sports, career navigation, and college preparation). A common explanation, from conversations with the boys, regarding their boredom or apathy toward Lakeside was the lack of school spirit. André and Greg especially expressed frustration about students not having school spirit. Their use of the phrase “school spirit” emitted images of students at pep rallies wearing school colors or yelling with painted faces at Friday night football games. The sense of community around school sports, especially football, was certainly a part of their definition. On the other hand, school spirit also referred to the morale and school pride of the student body at Lakeside. Some of the boys were bothered by the fact that some Lakeside students expressed disliking the school by wearing paraphernalia from other public and private schools near Cherry Hill.

Initially, their fixation on the lack of school spirit as a high-priority problem was puzzling, especially given the expressed apathy toward Lakeside. It seems, though, that many other students of various races were not enthusiastic about being at Lakeside. In moments where celebrating one’s school was normative (e.g., pep rallies, sporting events, school spirit days), per the boys’ experiences, a significant portion of Lakeside students did not display any pride in the school. It seemed that the boys were disappointed about attending a school where a noticeable number of their peers disliked the school. There appeared to be a cycle of apathy where the boys

were already not enthusiastic about coming to school; then, they saw other peers who did not like school which lead to their further annoyance with the space.

Another possible explanation for their emphasis on the lack of school spirit was the fact that each of the boys (except for Derrick) were Lakeside athletes. Terrance ran track and even Derrick aspired to play on Lakeside's basketball team. André, Greg, Stacy, James, and Tim all played on the football team. Football was a central aspect of their daily schedules. André, Greg, and Stacy would arrive at school a couple of hours before classes began in order to work out in the weight room. There were daily practices after school for each sport and their summer schedules were already filled with football camps. They expressed disappointment in other Lakeside students because of their low morale and attendance at football games. With the amount of time they sacrificed and the effort they put forth, it may have been disappointing to play for Lakeside when their peers did not rally behind them. Additionally, athletic spaces are often seen as important spaces for Black boys at school and athletic-related disappointments may negatively impact their school experiences (Gordon, 2012).

Even in their boredom, the boys recognized that Lakeside was a well-resourced school. They could identify unique resources within the school and they expressed a general appreciation of their teachers. The boys were aware that Lakeside had one of the strongest academic reputations in the Hope City metropolitan area. Thus, they tended to talk about it as a *good school* (having many resources and a decent reputation) in comparison to other schools in the area. Although they saw Lakeside as a *good school*, no one saw it as the *best school* (having even more resources and one of the strongest reputations in the Hope City metropolitan area). Some of the boys named a neighboring high school as being a better school. The boys, and many of their peers at Lakeside, also had friends at popular elite private schools in and around Cherry Hill.

These schools were regarded as better than any of the public schools in the Hope City area; in Cherry Hill, attendance at these schools was a symbol of status and wealth.

### **Experiences of Racial Discrimination**

#### **Called out & kicked out.**

*James is kicked out.* Direct individual conversations about race with the boys would sometimes be awkward. It became clear that they were either uncomfortable talking about racism, they did not regularly have conversations about race, they were encouraged to de-emphasize race, or they were exhausted by the discussion of race's role in society. Although I center race (specifically being a Black boy/man) in all our interactions, the boys' individual narratives about experiences of racial discrimination in school usually emerged as we discussed some aspect of school outside of the direct auspices of race (e.g., favorite class and teacher). One example where this was not the case occurred during a conversation with James.

In the context of discussing his racial identity and the ways in which his family talked to him about being Black, James talked about a time when he was kicked out of class:

C: Have you ever experienced racism?

James: [Pause] -- No, I don't think so.

C: Discrimination -- have you had a moment where you felt like, "That happened because I'm Black."

J: [Laughter]

C: ...that happened because I'm Black and I'm pissed off.

J: One time, me and [White friend] were talking in class and I'm the one that got in trouble for it so I had to sit in the hall and he didn't get in trouble. She just told him to stop talking.

C: But she sent you in the hallway.

J: Yeah.

- C: How did you feel about that?
- J: I didn't feel good about that. I think that was my first time -- getting sent to the hallway.
- C: And so by sent to the hallway, were you just outside the classroom?
- J: Yeah.
- C: Have you ever had a referral?
- J: No.

James' description of this incident was surprising, because he was usually very quiet (at times too quiet for program activities) and a very strong student—an ideal candidate for a teacher's favorite student. That being said, I was surprised that a teacher would kick him out of class for talking. I was equally surprised that James connected the incident to race, given his usual hesitation to talk about any existence of racism at Lakeside.

*Derrick & the substitute.* Although speaking critically about race was difficult for most of the boys, Derrick did not seem to have a problem directly discussing systemic oppression—including structural and individual racism. Additionally, Derrick always expressed the harshest critiques of Lakeside; I attributed it to his not wanting to be there—likely a result of him not making the basketball team. In a conversation with Derrick, I asked him about the circumstances under which his parents talked to him about being Black. He then shared a story of an exchange he had with a substitute teacher:

- C: Give me an event you remember where you and your parents talked about being Black.
- Derrick: Oh, uh-huh. Just a couple days ago cause one of my teachers -- he's not my teacher but he used to be my teacher. He was like a sub for my class and he tried to call me out in the middle of class. And I just didn't think that was right.

The phrase “I just didn’t think that was right” was not a common one among boys in the program. They seemed to accept certain negative experiences as isolated events and not process them as unjust. Even in this case with Derrick, he was not going to linger on the details of the topic until I prompted him to share more:

C: Yeah. Can you tell me about this? Give me the play-by-play, what happened with the substitute teacher?

D: We were coming back from lunch and it was this girl’s birthday and she was giving out cupcakes. I went to throw out some trash and the birthday girl pushed me. He said something like, “I see you’re just like last year. You still don’t get your work done.” And then I went and sat down and I was like, “I didn’t hear what he said.” And then this girl said it...she told me what he said again. And so I was like, “I do get my work done. I’m not like last year”... or I said something like, “I always got my work done last year.” And he said, “I can’t hear you.” And he told me to come up to the desk and tell him what I said. So I said it again and then he tried to say, “What did you do last year?” And I was like, “I did my work.” And then -- it was weird. I just got mad cause that’s a teacher that I already didn’t like and he just wanted to put me out there like that -- like I didn’t do anything.

At the time that Derrick and I had this conversation, I had the opportunity to get to know him well. Regarding this story, there were two main things I knew about him that were causes for concern. First, I knew that Derrick was sensitive about how rough his time at Lakeside had been, especially his freshman year and especially regarding his history with this teacher. In his freshman year, Derrick was in a college preparatory class (AVID), which was a class that this teacher taught. While explaining what AVID was, he discussed academic struggles he had during freshman year and how he was subsequently dismissed from the class:

C: What is AVID?

D: It is like a class that helps you get prepared for college. I used to be in it back in eighth grade or back in middle-school but when I got in high-school, I sort of messed up. In ninth grade the teacher for AVID was the teacher that said that stuff about me.

- C: ...He was the one who was like, “You’re still not getting your work done.”
- S: Mm-hmm.
- C: What do you mean by you messed up?
- S: Actually the first semester I was below a 2.0 because that was my first year and I was getting used to it. I thought it was just easy and I thought, um, and girls and stuff so I was just like hyper and all that. And then the second semester, after the first semester they told me if you do bad if you’re below a 2.0 then next semester you’re kicked out of AVID. And so the next semester, I was like at a 1.9 and then all I needed was from my -- what was that class? I forgot what it was -- personal health. I needed a C in there and I had a D. All I had to do was to turn in these assignments that I needed to turn in and then my grade would have went up and I could have stayed in AVID but they kicked me out before they could see my grade had changed and I was over a 2.0

Like most of the other boys in the program, Derrick described his transition to high school as being tough and full of mistakes. These mistakes seemed to be present on his mind whenever he was in school; a possible contributing factor to his angry reaction.

On the other hand, I knew that Derrick was not perfect and would find himself in trouble more frequently than any of the other boys. Additionally, he did not seem to have the best relationships with teachers in general; so, I was curious and a bit suspicious about this interaction. In an extended exchange where I admittedly asked questions as if I were his parent, I sought clarification on the details:

- C: Was there anything else that happened between you getting pushed. You got pushed so it is like I get pushed and then the teacher was just like, “I see you’re still not getting your work done.” That’s how it went down?
- D: Yeah.
- C: And so that was in the classroom. Were you sitting down? Were you standing up?
- D: What do you mean...when I was --?
- C: When you were pushed.



- D: I was standing up.
- C: And then teacher said that and right after the teacher said that -- what happened then?
- D: Then I said to him I did get my work done last year. Or, I did get my stuff done or something like that.
- C: Okay, I did get my stuff done. And after that –
- D: He said, “I can’t hear you.” And then I went up there and told him. I said it again. And then he said, “What did you do last year?” I said I did my work. And then I just like -- I got really mad and I walked out of class.
- C: You got really mad. Were there any other words exchanged?
- D: No. Well after or the next day -- I had the Saturday School -- I forget what day I had him as a substitute but I saw him after my Saturday School and he said hi to me. I just thought like -- I was just like, “why would you do that after you know I got mad at you in class.”
- ...
- C: Did it happen in front of other students?
- D: It happened in front of the whole class.
- C: So the whole class, was the whole class paying attention?
- D: They were all paying attention.

In hindsight, the minor details were not germane to the point Derrick was trying to convey: *he felt like he was targeted for embarrassment in front of his class, by a White teacher, because he was Black.* Derrick was hurt and angered by the comment from the teacher. One important detail to be gleaned from the incident is that Derrick was caught off guard; from what he shared, there was nothing cueing the teacher’s comment—especially in front of the entire class. In his retelling of the confrontation, Derrick exuded little emotion in his face. He seemed mildly disappointed, but it seemed like it was not something that still bothered him. Nonetheless, he restated how upset he was: *“Oh, I was mad. I was really mad.”*

It was encouraging to hear that Derrick told his father about the incident. His father was

upset, because Derrick chose to walk out of the classroom:

- D: I was in the car coming back from training and I told my dad that the teacher did that. And then we just talked about it and stuff.
- C: What types of things did you talk about?
- D: Because I walked out of class too cause I got really mad. And so he was mad about that and he was like, “You shouldn’t have done that. Life is just going to be like that. What would you do if somebody did that to you in the workplace?”
- C: What did you think about that conversation with your dad?
- D: I thought it was like -- it was, I guess, inspirational but at the same time I didn’t want to listen to it because I was still mad about it.
- ...
- C: Did he say anything about the teacher?
- D: He said that wasn’t right by him but I shouldn’t have walked out.
- C: Okay. And then where did being Black come into it?
- D: Well like -- just like the stuff that -- [Pause]. I guess like where he started to say you should -- what would you do if you were in the workplace? He was trying to make it like make it be about Black people I guess.

Derrick processed his father’s message about not walking away from experiences like the one he faced as being (1) somewhat inspirational and (2) about Black people. He recognized the value of the message, but recognized that he did not want to listen because he was still angry. From what Derrick shared, his father seemed to recognize that the teacher was wrong; however, that recognition seemed to be superseded by his expectations for Derrick not to leave class.

I was also interested in whether Derrick told any adults at school about the incident. He told an administrator and wanted to tell his guidance counselor, Sharon:

- C: Did you tell anyone about this in the school?
- D: ...I told the assistant -- like the director of discipline or something like that. The person who does discipline and stuff, I told him and he just told me to go to this one room, the room across the hall. I think it is called ISS. And he told me just to go in there and sit down in there.

- ...
- C: Were you there for the rest of the day?
- D: No, just for that hour.
- C: And that was it?
- D: Yeah.
- ...
- C: Would you feel comfortable telling anyone?
- D: Yeah, I was going to go tell my counselor, [Sharon], but I was just like it is not really that important.

The administrator sent him to the in-school suspension (ISS) room, a room generally reserved for short-term punishment at Lakeside. Derrick explained that ISS isolates students who were given disciplinary referrals; usually, they spend 1-2 full school days in the room and do school work under the supervision of an administrator. Derrick clarified that he was only asked to sit in the room to calm down for the rest of the period and that he could go to the rest of his classes. It seems like the tactic was used to account for his (or any student's) whereabouts during a time where he would otherwise be roaming the halls unsupervised. Nonetheless, Derrick was held in ISS for the period while working through his anger after being called out in class.

His decision to refrain from talking about the incident with Sharon was influenced by his conversation with his father. He resolved that an incident he initially deemed as not being right was eventually unimportant to discuss. He also resolved to "just move on and just show him that [Derrick] could do better":

- C: Why do you feel it is not that important?
- D: Just the way that -- just the way my dad had said it to me like it is not important. You just move on and just show him that you could do better.

One of the under-explored aspects of this incident by Derrick and everyone else involved is the role of the adults. At his father's advice, Derrick chose not to dwell on the teacher's words

but to use them as inspiration for doing “better.” Again, his father recognized the teacher’s inappropriate interaction with Derrick, but focused on Derrick’s reaction. Derrick did not feel like the situation warranted a visit to Sharon to discuss how he felt. The administrator in the ISS room instructed Derrick to sit down and cool off. Finally, instead of talking to Derrick about why he was off task in *that* moment, the teacher brought up Derrick’s negative academic history in front of his classmates. Every adult (and Derrick himself) held Derrick accountable, but there was (at best) minimal attention paid to the teacher’s misjudgment.

***André & Ms. Hart.***

As mentioned earlier, Ms. Hart had an interesting reputation with the boys in the program. Many of them had her during their freshman year. After she explained what she thought of the boys in the program with her during my tour of Lakeside, I was interested in what they thought of her. André described his time in her class:

André: Me and Ms. Hart had an on and off relationship. So, it was like -- now like I say hi to her and she’ll say hi if she sees me but like -- it was. When I had her as a teacher, it was me and Stacy was in my class and [two other friends - Black boys]. And she always put us either together at the same table or corners of the room. I think one time she had us all in the front row like me, him, him, him [tapping on the table] in the front row.

C: She put you all there.

A: Yes, I guess, we were the troublemakers of the class. I guess she was stereotyping us. We were the main Black people in the class. We were the most popular people in the class. She would either separate us or put us together. She would always yell at us. Sometimes for no reason, sometimes we might have done something minor and she would just go off on us.

The content of André’s description of his and Ms. Hart’s “on and off relationship” was not too surprising, but some of the charged words he used in the description were (i.e., troublemakers, stereotyping, the main Black people, most popular, separate, together, yell, no reason, something minor, go off). The surprise comes from the lack of charged emotion in his face during this

conversation and his consistent neutral descriptions of Lakeside whenever we spoke. This reflection, though, involved André reading the overall classroom environment, racial dynamics, and an understanding of injustice (“sometimes for no reason”) and personal responsibility (“we might have done something minor”).

André went on to describe a specific incident where he received a disciplinary referral in Ms. Hart’s class:

A: One time she kicked me and [another friend - Black boy] out of class; she gave us referrals. We were sitting on top of the desk because she put me and him in the way back of the class and I couldn’t see. So, I raised my hand and I was like, “Can I move to the front?” She was like, “No.” I sat on the desk because nobody sat behind me and so I just sat on the desk -- me and him did that. She told [friend] not to do that so [friend] sat down. And he was like, “Get down from the desk; she’s probably going to do something.” So, I sat down and she comes back and she starts going on a rampage and yelling at us like we did something completely wrong and gave us referrals and kicked us out of class. It was like really for no reason. I listened to what you said. You didn’t tell me to get down; he had to tell me and then she just kicks us out. From like that point on, I was like I don’t care about this class.

André’s description of the climate for he and his friends in the class and this incident specifically seem to demonstrate a sense of hostility created by Ms. Hart. On one hand, it seems that André and his friends may have created some trouble in the past and even in this situation. On the other hand, it seems like Ms. Hart regularly targeted the group of Black boys for unfair treatment (i.e., periodically changing their seats, yelling at them excessively, kicking them out of class).

André went on to describe another incident involving Ms. Hart’s class where he was forced to call his mother during class:

A: Then she had me call my mom in the middle of the class and had a conversation with her.

C: She made you call -- so class is going on; she’s teaching. What happened to make you?

A: I have no idea.

- C: She's standing up there doing the lesson and what happened?
- A: I don't even -- I might have been talking or something. I might have been whispering to somebody. Oh, my ex-girlfriend was in the class too so we always partnered up and I was whispering to her. [Ms. Hart] was like, "Come here." And she made me call my mom in the class.
- C: Was she teaching and stopped the lesson?
- A: Yeah...She just stopped and made me call my mom.
- C: So the entire class was watching you call your mother.
- A: Yeah.
- C: How was that? How did that go?
- A: [My friends] were, "Hi Mrs. [André's mother]"...They were all in the background. My mom, when I got home I got in trouble because she doesn't want a teacher calling her in the middle of the day. It was weird. But it wasn't like I was awkward.

Similar to the incident Derrick described, I was struck by Ms. Hart's decision to have André call his mother in the middle of class and in front of everyone. The mid-class phone call to his mother only occurred once, but the hostile climate was a consistent reality of the class for André and his friends:

- C: Okay. When stuff like that happened, was that every once in a while?
- A: She only made me call my mom once.
- C: But I mean just the –
- A: Trouble.
- C: Just the trouble?
- A: Like every day I had her.
- C: Every day?
- A: For the whole year.

C: What grade did you get out of that class?

A: D or C and then I switched teacher midway, after half the year; I switched teachers to [another teacher].

...

C: When she would yell at you, what kinds of things would she say?

A: I don't even remember. She had a whole bunch -- I stopped listening after a while. When she started yelling I was just, "oh, she's talking to me again." And so I'd just blank out and start talking to somebody else while she's yelling at me. I'd just start talking to somebody else. I was just that type of kid freshman year.

André explained that the change in teachers was due to the routine semester schedule change. When I asked whether he would have requested a switch, given he had the option, he said that he would not have switch: "I would have just stuck with her -- push it through."

André's resolve to "push it through" echoes the sentiments of Derrick's decision to move on from his substitute teacher calling him out in class. His decision to "blank out" and talk to other people every day as he was yelled at or in trouble marks an emotional withdrawal and an act of passive resistance. In hindsight, he refers to himself as "*that type of kid*" during his freshman year, cueing either a sense of self-judgment and/or growth regarding the way he acts in class now.

On one hand, André recognized that he and his friends were being called out due to them being the popular, troublemaking, football-playing Black students in Ms. Hart's class. He actively ignored her *every* day, because she yelled at him *every* day. On the other hand, he was understanding, if not forgiving, of her actions toward him:

C: Was anyone else getting that kind of treatment, in the front row?

A: I mean other people -- I mean she's good. She had like a Black boyfriend.

C: Interesting.

A: So it's not like she's discriminating against us. She wanted us to succeed more so

she treated us a little differently. We were the football players in the class and so she wanted us to do better.

C: Do better, why?

A: So we could keep going, maybe make it to the next level in football, so we could keep playing.

André presents some tensions in his meaning-making in this situation. Although he could see some form of injustice in Ms. Hart's actions, he did not want to assign her a "bad" or racist label. Additionally, he did not see her as being able to discriminate because she had a Black boyfriend. It was not clear what prompted this interpretation; he did not share explicitly whether Ms. Hart said that or if that is what he gathered from her actions. Nonetheless, he made meaning of her actions, as problematic as they were for him, as a sort of tough love to promote his success in life and in football. My reading of Ms. Hart's actions was not as generous.

Admittedly, there are unanswered questions around André and Ms. Hart's interactions. First, given the daily trouble and yelling, how much of it was warranted by André's actions? Under what circumstances did he learn of her boyfriend's race? Were André's mother and Ms. Hart otherwise in contact regarding André's behavior? Finally, what gave André the cue for the "she wanted us to succeed more" narrative?

**Left out in Cherry Hill.** Some of the boys also reported experiences of racial discrimination that occurred outside of school, but among school peers in Cherry Hill. This discrimination involved them being denied access to or kicked out of certain spaces—occurrences they attributed to being Black. For instance, during a conversation about race and racial identity, I asked André about racial discrimination in Cherry Hill and Lakeside. He briefly shared a story of a time when he was kicked out of a Jewish community center in Cherry Hill:

C: Do you think there is discrimination?



A: Out of everywhere you got there's probably that one person that is racist in some way.

C: Have you experienced that?

A: Sometimes.

C: Give me an example.

A: Uh like, I go to the JCC, Jewish Community Center; it is like a rec center. Playing basketball, we go upstairs to get something to eat but we're not really supposed to be up there. I'm hanging with my White friends, playing basketball and we go up there. A security guard comes and he kicks us out but he tells -- he tells the office upstairs that I was doing it and they weren't. Like they weren't even there and I was just there by myself so I got kicked out of the gym but they didn't.

André recognized that racism, even if small in presence or influence, is present everywhere. This scenario parallels James' experience with being kicked out of class while his White friend was not reprimanded. In each of the stories André shared, he talks about the rules he broke and the ways in which he is responsible; yet, he also recognizes unfair treatment from authority:

C: And so how was that experience? How did you feel after that?

A: It just made me mad. It was unfair.

C: Do things like this happen often?

A: It doesn't happen often. Most people are good with handling everybody.

In addition to experiencing discrimination from adult figures in Cherry Hill, the boys also reported discrimination from their school peers. For instance, Terrance shared a story about being turned away from a house party (in Cherry Hill) thrown by Chaldean students (from Lakeside) because he was Black:

T: Like I went to this Chaldean party -- oh, my goodness. I got turned away at the door because I was Black. [Terrance's best friends] -- I went with them. Me and [Black male friend] could not get in... We are two good looking dudes. How can we not get into this party? But it was all Chaldean. [Terrance's female friend of mixed-race heritage] could not get in and [she] is very pretty...

While describing being turned away from the party, Terrance was visibly still disturbed. His voice was raised and his face cued disappointment and frustration. Apparently, Terrance expected discrimination by physical attractiveness at the door, but not by race. He continued by explaining what Chaldeans thought of Black people:

T: Basically it is just like -- [Chaldeans] think Black people is like, "You all are dirty." You know I felt dirty being rejected from the party at the door. It is like, "You cannot get in. What is wrong with you? What you thought this was?" And it is just like, "Dang, I thought this was going to be a good time." But it is just like...you know it made me feel very, very [pause] dirty. It just didn't make me even want to be Black that night.

C: By it being a Chaldean party and they rejected you at the door. Were they rejecting at the door because of looks or race?

T: Because of race.

C: What did everyone inside look like?

T: Chaldean.

C: So this was like a Chaldean-only party.

T: Yeah, he didn't need to say it. He was like, "This is an all-Chaldean party, what are you doing here?"

One word sticks out from Terrance's telling of this story: *dirty*. *Dirty* was his answer to my original question which prompted the story: What do people from other groups think about Black people? It is not clear where nor how he learned that Chaldeans think Black people are *dirty*, but he internalized the belief in that moment. His repetition of feeling *dirty* signified an emotion different from the feelings of "angry" and "pissed off" that the other boys described in the face of racial discrimination. *Dirty* signified Terrance's embarrassment in the moment of being rejected in addition to some self-rejection and shame associated with being discriminated against at the door of an all-Chaldean party ("It just didn't make me even want to be Black that night").

Terrance and André shared these Cherry Hill-based stories during the racial identity portion of their interviews. Their stories illustrate some of the ways in which Black boys face racial discrimination as community members. The role of peers was striking in each story. At the Jewish Community Center, André was the only one of his friends (all of whom were White) to be called out for wrongly taking food and he was subsequently kicked out of the gym. His peers were *invisible* and *innocent* while he was *guilty, shamed, and shut out*. Guarding the door at the Chaldean party, Terrance's peer served as a *racial gatekeeper*—regulating the all-Chaldean environment.

It is important to note that in these two stories, the boys were not simply Black boys in Cherry Hill's general (and consequently predominately White) spaces. They were Black boys visiting ethnic enclaves. André did not fully explain the details of the food he was eating, what and who the food was for, and why the space was restricted in the Jewish Community Center. Similarly, the details of the Chaldean house party's purpose were unknown. What is known is that the boys made meaning of these experiences as being discriminatory and hurtful—a conclusion that is rare in their analysis of their environment.

**The “White” Black boy & the “illegal immigrant.”** As best friends, James and Tim shared a larger group of friends. They took pride in how racially diverse their friends were. They both highlighted and celebrated their friend group as being models for ideal racial diversity in the pictures they took for their photovoice projects. Additionally, overall, they did not report the same degree of racial discrimination as some of the other boys. André and Derrick each reported direct and public discrimination from adults at Lakeside. Even as James shared the story of being kicked out of his class, it did not seem to carry the same type of baggage that it did in the case of Derrick (unwelcome memories from freshman year) and André (Ms. Hart's hostile classroom

climate). As generally agreeable A-students, save Tim's self-proclaimed disrespect for certain teachers, they may have been shielded from some harsh treatment from teachers at Lakeside.

This shield did not always extend to their shared friend group.

As he talked about racial dynamics at Lakeside, James described his observations of White people's interaction with Black people. In response to a question I asked each of the boys, "(How) are students here treated differently?", James replied:

I think people act different around different races probably to try to fit in or try not to cause any trouble or anything. And the White people here, some of them try to stay away from the ghetto, the really ghetto Black people.

The question referred to the racialized differential treatment of students by adults at the school. James' response highlighted the difference in peer interactions by race. His description of people acting differently around different races seemed to refer to a survival technique at Lakeside. The adaptation did not seem to be meaningful for popularity in school, rather a skill one employed to not cause disturbances associated with their race (i.e., "try not to cause any trouble or anything"). Then, there are the White people at Lakeside and the distance they maintain from "the really ghetto" Black people. James followed his first statement with the notion that White people stay away from *ghetto* Black people as if it is the consequence of not acting "different" or as if it is the "trouble" he mentioned. Some lingering questions from this statement are, "Acting 'different' than what? What is the norm?"

James continued by sharing how this dynamic played out in his friend group:

J: Yeah. And like [pause] it's just [laughs]. Some of my White friends, they consider me White but they say, "If you acted more Black, then we probably wouldn't have been friends" and stuff like that.

C: Okay so they consider you White.

J: Yeah.

C: What does that mean?

J: I guess to them I don't act like a typical Black person most of the time.

C: How does a typical Black person act?

J: To them, it is like ghetto talking and bad grades and stuff like that.

“Consider me white,” “acted more Black,” “wouldn't have been friends,” “typical Black person,” “ghetto talking and bad grades” are all phrases that struck me as James spoke. Because James spoke in a manner that was acceptable to his friends and maintained an A+ average, it was more likely that he would have White friends. James saw their definition of *acting Black* as acting ghetto and getting bad grades—this differed from James' definitions of Blackness:

C: How do you see the typical Black person?

J: [Pause] just like everybody else.

C: Just like everybody else.

J: Yeah...Most of the time—I don't like say or like think that somebody is ghetto until I met them or know them.

Furthermore, when I asked James what it meant for him to be Black, he said:

J: Hardworking -- we work hard for the stuff we earn. And uh, we have pride in the stuff we do. We're proud in who we are. We come from -- for the most part -- a strong family...We're close and we don't want anything bad to happen to each other and we look out for each other, and we love each other.

Given James' thoughtful and proud definition of being Black, it was no surprise that he did not take well to being called White by his friends:

C: Okay and so then if they say they consider you White, how do you feel when you hear that?

J: It makes me mad because obviously I'm not White. It makes me mad [laughs].

C: I mean so what do you do -- if anything?

J: [Pause] [laughs] I just ignore it.

As James referred to his anger at being called White, he shrugged and laughed. The laugh seemed to signify a recognition of his frustration yet a sense of apathy regarding their feelings:

J: Uh -- sometimes, I say, "In Rome, do as the Romans do," and so just to fit in with them and just act like them -- just around them...I'm obviously Black. Look at my skin color. And uh [pause] I don't really know...

Although James' words described anger, similar to the way each of the boys told stories of racial discrimination, his affect was flat. He seemed to have accepted his friends' opinions as reality and chose to adapt.

While talking about his family's communication around race, Tim talked about a race-based joke in his friend group:

C: I mean what about race in general? Does your family talk about race -- not just Black but about race?

T: A little because I'm bound to get some racial slur thrown at me every now and then. We talk about race a little bit as a family. But I think we're pretty open-minded as a family so we don't really talk about it that much, I would say.

C: When you all do talk about it, what types of things do they say or you say? What do you all talk about?

T: Um, just --- myths of Black people, myths of Brazilian people -- Latinos are all portrayed as illegal immigrants. My friends joke around with me about it. I've been called an illegal immigrant a lot. The amounts of Latino jokes are insane. My friends kid around with me about it but it is like -- we just talk about stuff like that -- myths, stereotypes of both races, Latinos and Blacks.

Tim asserted that his family talks about race sometimes and then proclaims that he is "bound to get a racial slur thrown at [him]." He attributed their infrequent conversations about race to being "open-minded." When they do talk about race, they discuss racial myths—one of which was the center of his friends' jokes about him. Because of his light brown skin color and Brazilian heritage, his friends jokingly referred to him as an illegal immigrant. Tim expressed no emotion in his words nor his face regarding the jokes. He assured me that it was simply a running joke

between friends and not reflective of actual discriminatory beliefs:

T: My friends only do it to me to joke around; they don't mean anything by it...They just joke around with me about it because we're friends. I don't think everybody is really discriminatory to Latinos here at the school at all.

James and Tim's stories about their friend group offer some insight into the ways Black boys at Lakeside may navigate race in their peer groups, especially when adults are not supervising. First, the climate of James and Tim's multiracial friend group appeared all-inclusive, yet race-based jokes were normative in their interactions. They both discussed jokes about race as being a regular aspect of their friendships. Tim described the group of friends as being open about discussions of race, so much so that they are comfortable with making jokes about it. His description suggests that the space between friends is playful yet conscious of the sensitivity of the group's racial dynamics; James' description only highlighted the playful nature of this space.

On one hand, given the grave tone of this work, it is easy to overestimate that which is offensive *and* to underestimate humor among high school sophomores. That being said, it may be useful to consider these jokes as non-harmful banter between friends. Even André described the regular, seemingly harmless exchange of racial jokes he had with his White friends:

A: Oh my white friends make Black jokes all the time.

C: Like what?

A: I mean sometimes, we'll bring it upon ourselves to make Black jokes of ourselves. And they'll make Black jokes and we make White jokes. So I mean it is not -- we joke around with it sometimes. They're never serious about it because they know. They know that line not to cross.

C: Give me an example of a joke.

A: If we're in line for something and I want to go first and as like one of my Jewish friends [laughter] I'll be like, "You should just let me go first. No-no. Come on, we went through slavery. We had to pick your cotton and something like that." He

was like, “We had the Holocaust and we died.” And it will just go hand-in-hand for that stuff.

C: How often does that happen?

A: That happens somewhat every day.

C: How do you feel during those experiences?

A: It’s just funny.

He explained that sometimes he introduced Black jokes and friends would joke along with him. His description of jokes that happened “all the time” involved references to racial oppression (i.e., the Holocaust in Nazi Germany and the chattel slavery of Africans in the Americas) which were presented in light-hearted situations (e.g., who should go first in the lunch line). Not only did André seem not to be offended by the jokes, he seemed to welcome or enjoy them. His narrative echoes Tim’s sentiments about the illegal immigrant jokes; they each nearly laughed at me when I asked them how they felt about the jokes.

On the other hand, all jokes may not be created equal. André and Tim described oppression-based race jokes, but James described a racial identity joke. Furthermore, James expressed anger (a rarely expressed emotion in my interactions with him) in regards to being called White. In an effort to keep fitting in with his friends, he never shared his anger regarding the “if you acted more Black” jokes. As he described wanting to “do as the Romans do,” it seemed like his discomfort with being called White was inappropriate given the social dynamics within his friend group. This runs counter to Tim’s perception of their friend group as being conscious of sensitive issues around race even as they are playful. One explanation for this could be that, given their developmental level, they were able (and possessed the vocabulary) to thoughtfully discuss ethnic-racial oppression but not the politics of racial identity.

Finally, despite the insistence of how harmless and/or normative the racial jokes are, it is



likely that the described jokes are problematic and cause for concern. Through a CSA lens, joking about oppression—especially from the mouths of the privileged/traditionally-oppressing groups—is not friendship. In the context of adolescent identity development, jokes about oppression and Black youth being “White” are operationalized as racial microaggressions (conscious or unconscious, subtle insults directed toward people of color—verbal, nonverbal, or visual) and have been linked to unhealthy outcomes (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These stories illustrate the ways in which the boys in this study face racial discrimination even in light-hearted spaces.

**Riding the bench & running the poles.** Given that each of the boys in this study were athletes, they spent a significant portion of their time with teams at Lakeside or in the greater Hope City Metropolitan area. For Lakeside athletes, their participation was an extension of their social and academic life. This was especially true for Greg, who at the time of the study played football and wrestled for Lakeside’s teams; he also played for a travel baseball team in Cherry Hill. With a large build, a hard work ethic, and an easy going temperament, he excelled at each of these sports. While asking him about his hobbies and sports, I asked whether he would try out for Lakeside’s baseball team:

C: Are you going to play for the high school or do you want to play for the high school eventually?

Greg: Well last year it wasn’t so good so I decided to stick with our travel team right now because we’re going on a lot of tournaments. But I’m guessing I’m going to try out in my junior year and senior year again.

In all the times we talked about sports and the teams the boys played on in the program, this was the first time he ever mentioned playing on Lakeside’s freshman baseball team. When he said being on that team “wasn’t so good,” his affect remained the same, but he started to mumble. He continued:

- C: When you said it wasn't so great in freshman year, what do you mean?
- G: Like [pause] basically saying all minorities sat on a bench.
- C: All minorities sat on a bench? What did the team look like racially?
- G: Racially, there're basically all the White kids are on the field even if they sucked or were really good...
- C: So everyone on the field was White.
- G: Yeah.
- C: What did the bench look like?
- G: We had about...four to five Black kids came out. We had about six, um, Asian kids come out. And about -- there was two. Oh yeah and there was one Mexican. And so the one Mexican made it; two of the Asian kids made it and two Black kids made it.
- ...
- C: How did that make you feel?
- G: First, I was like, "Um maybe, maybe they were pretty good out there." I didn't know. When we came around to our first game, we started saying, "Why is he out there?" And it made me pissed off. And so then...they would throw us out there in like the last inning...and then say like, "Why did you do so bad?" [Greg then said in response to the coaches] "We haven't thrown the whole game and you turn us out in the last inning."

Greg's description of the players of color sitting on the bench and the White players on the field prompted a disturbing image. After giving the coach and players the benefit of the doubt regarding the talent of the nine White players that were selected to play on the field, he expressed that he was "pissed off" once he realized that they were not playing well. A regular high school baseball game lasts for seven innings; the amount of time in innings is variable based on the play of the game. From Greg's description, during the first game, the players on the bench were finally able to play on the field in the sixth or seventh inning after not playing the entire game; then, they were questioned as to why they played badly. Greg explained (correctly) the bad play as being a result of not moving or throwing the entire game. At this point, I understood his

frustration with playing baseball at Lakeside; yet he continued.

G: So then, yeah -- and then there was one day where we were shagging balls during practice and we were out there. I went and dove for a ball in outfield and then I got up and the coach told me, "Go, start running poles." I said, "For what?" and he said, "You were on the ground for like at least a minute." [Greg then said in response] "What are you talking about?"...because he's in there just throwing pitch after pitch because we're speed-batting.

In baseball, *shagging* refers to catching *fly balls* (baseballs hit high in the air) in the outfield; this usually occurs in team practices. The *poles* that Greg referred to lie on the extreme ends of a baseball field; they mark whether a ball is in the field or not. Additionally, the distance between poles is the longest distance on a baseball field. *Running the poles* is a form of cardiovascular activity where one runs that distance; generally reserved for warming players' bodies at the beginning of practice *or* used as a method of punishment during practice. In the context of this story, Greg performed a dive to catch a fly ball during practice and did not stand back up fast enough to the coach's liking. Thus, he was punished and asked to *run the poles*. He continued:

G: He's like, "I threw a pitch already and you're still on the ground." [In response to coach] "I just dove for a ball; I had to get up for a second there"...So he made me run the poles for the whole rest of the practice. And one of my friends who was also on the baseball team didn't like it. He went and told his father and then his father told my parents.

C: What did your parents...?

G: They were pretty mad and so they came up to [Assistant Principal; a Black man]. And they told him, "What's going on with the team? Why aren't all players getting equal time? It's a freshman baseball team and it doesn't really matter."

C: When your parents talked to you about that, what did they say, after they found out?

G: They were like, "What's going on?" I was like, "I guess he is racist." And then he [Greg's father] started talking to me like, "Why don't you keep going and do your best?"

As Greg ran poles for the remainder of practice, one of his friends was so disturbed while watching that he told his father. The friend's father told Greg's parents who confronted an assistant principal at Lakeside. After their conversation with the assistant principal, he investigated the problem. An interesting fact emerged from the assistant principal's efforts: this coach had no experience playing on a high school nor college baseball team. At the time of this study, that coach had been demoted to an assistant coach role; however, he completed Greg's freshman season as coach.

After describing his conversation with his father and his conclusion about the coach ("I guess he is racist"), Greg shared a final story about his freshman baseball season:

G: And so there was one game that came around and I was sitting on the bench. I'm sitting out there. I'm like -- I didn't show up late. I was there on time and then we went out there throwing. We started throwing and we ran out of players and so I figured a coach would come over and start playing catch with me. He sent somebody's little brother out there to play catch with me and so my parents got pissed off at that one.

Greg described a regular practice that occurs before baseball games begin; team players split into pairs to throw and catch the ball. According to Greg, when there is a player left over without a partner, a coach usually steps in to throw with that player. When Greg was left without a partner, instead of the coach throwing with Greg, the coach asked a teammate's little brother to throw with Greg. Both Greg and his parents found this to be problematic. Greg continued:

G: And so after that, I went out there during the first inning because something happened. I was playing first base and then...I was hitting, stealing bases and I scored a run. And then he benched me because I didn't get one of his signs saying don't hit. He just benched me immediately. After the game, me and him had a little dispute where I cussed him out and I had to leave early [laughs]...Yeah. I cussed him out and my parents heard me saying stuff and then they took me and said, "You gotta go." And then I just like -- I didn't come back after that one.

C: Was that at the end of the season?

G: It was more towards the middle. My parents were like, “We know you’re not going to do anything and so you don’t have to go.”

Because Greg missed a sign from the coach not to hit the baseball during the game, he put Greg on the bench—much to Greg’s disliking. Greg’s description of the “little dispute” was the only confrontation of its kind mentioned in this study. Ironically, the story of the most direct confrontation with an adult involved Greg—one of the calmest boys in the program. This was indicative of just how angry Greg was with his coach.

**Defensive strategies of critical social analysis: Discussion.** Each of the boys’ stories painted an image of the ways in which they were ostracized, shamed, or rendered invisible at Lakeside and in Cherry Hill. James left me with an image of him sitting alone in the hallway after being kicked out of class; his friend still seated in class. I can imagine his uncomfortable laughter as his friends downplayed his Black identity during conversations at lunch. The image of Derrick’s disappointed face as his substitute teacher commented on his freshman year academic performance in front of all his classmates left an impression. I can see Terrance’s face of shame while being turned away at the door of a house party because he was Black. There is also the disheartening image of André ignoring Ms. Hart while she yells at him each day in class. Finally, I can see the progression of Greg’s anger during his freshman year baseball season—from *running the poles* in practice to cursing at his coach during a game and subsequently quitting the team. Taken together, these images demonstrated a broad range of racial discrimination experiences that Black students may face while at Lakeside and they ran counter to the “ideal school” narrative that was often presented by everyone at Lakeside (i.e., school administration, staff, parents, and students). Again, these stories emerged during conversations about the boys’ overall school experiences; most of them were unprompted and related to a description of themselves or their experience at Lakeside. Despite these stark (and often public)

instances of discrimination, most of them maintained that race and racism were not big issues at Lakeside.

One finding of note was that each instance of racial discrimination was succeeded by a form of withdrawal. Black boys' physical withdrawal from school spaces ranges from being kicked out of class for disciplinary reasons, being suspended, expulsion, or dropping out (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba et al., 2002). James and André, for instance were forcibly withdrawn from class after being called out by teachers inequitably for classroom behavior. Derrick, on the other hand, withdrew himself voluntarily from class after he was embarrassed by a teacher. Black boys' discipline-based withdrawals from classrooms and schools continue to be cause for concern, because they tend to be associated with emotional engagement in school and the broader school-to-prison pipeline (Howard, 2013; S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). In the cases of these boys, they did not serve any out-of-school suspensions nor did they ever withdraw fully from high school; however, they and other boys of color were the primary demographic to be disciplined at school (e.g., reprimanded in class, visits to the discipline office, in-school suspension).

Nearly all the boys responded to instances of discrimination with an emotional withdrawal from school spaces. The most prominent example of emotional withdrawal was André's choice to ignore Ms. Hart and to intentionally talk to other classmates while she was instructing in class. Because André and his group of friends were yelled at by the teacher each day, his choice to stop caring about the class seemed to be a defense mechanism—protecting him from being hurt by her daily comments. Some of his behavior in Ms. Hart's class reflected the scholarly narratives of Black boys who disengage with school through “acting out” (Q. Allen, 2013a; Ogbu, 1989); however, it was not clear what occurred first—his acting out or her singling

him out in class. It is also important to note that André did not seem to have problems like these in any of his other classes or with any other teachers.

Although outside of class, Greg also shared a prominent example of withdrawing from the Lakeside freshman baseball team. His physical and emotional withdrawal from the team was rare but not unfounded in scholarly literature. Although school athletic programs are generally thought to be places of celebration or refuge for Black boys in school, there is evidence that some Black boys attending suburban school actually experience racial discrimination in athletic programs (Gordon, 2012). Like Greg's story, this discrimination often takes the form of unjust practices around playing time—a practice seemingly rooted in White coaches not wanting a star player to be Black.

It is important to note that the boys in this study did not experience the extreme forms of physical or emotional withdrawal from school that are highlighted in the literature (i.e., dropout, suspension, destructive instances of acting out); this is most likely a function of the culture at Lakeside. Suspension was a rare form of punishment, usually reserved for fighting or possession/use of drugs at school—offenses that resulted in 5-10 day suspensions. Very few people were suspended out of school each year; the boys reported that Black and Chaldean boys were the ones who were getting suspended. At the time of this study, though, none of the boys were getting in enough trouble to warrant any kind of suspension. That being said, a few of them *were being kicked out of classes*, which was a source of negative attention and embarrassment.

By design, the findings centered the boys' experiences with injustice; however, their non-Black peers were in the periphery of each the stories. It was clear that their White peers did not share in the experiences of injustice. They were playing on the baseball field, not called out in nor kicked out of class, making and laughing along with the jokes, or they were dancing in the

house parties. In most of the cases, they were neutral or benevolent bystanders—rendered nearly invisible, especially as their peers of color were facing hurt or trouble. In a couple of other cases, though, the boys’ non-Black peers were guardians of social dynamics. The image of Terrance being refused entrance to the Chaldean party, based solely on his skin color, is a prominent example of guarding the racial dynamics of a party. Additionally, the ways that James and Tim’s White friends influenced conversations about race in their friend group demonstrated a form of guarding their group’s social dynamics. Although it was clear that each friend in the group participated in the conversation, it did not seem to be appropriate for James to express the ways he may have been sensitive to their redefinition of his racial identity. The policing of racial sensitivity seemed implicit in order to maintain the group’s lighthearted status quo.

The fact that the boys in this study faced and were able to recognize racial discrimination is unfortunately not a surprising finding (Howard, 2013; S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). Black students’, especially boys, experiences with racial discrimination in school is documented in scholarly literature from multiple sources, across multiple contexts (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Hope et al., 2014; L. L. Rowley & Bowman, 2009). Still, middle class Black boys’ experiences in suburban schools is less documented and explored in the literature; thus, this dissertation. While interacting with the boys and listening to their stories, I reflected on the core tenets of CSA—the awareness and rejection of systemic oppression—and I looked for intersections. The boys were aware of the role of racism in the stories they shared; they recognized that they received negative attention in and out of school because they were Black. Furthermore, most of them recognized that racism and systemic oppression existed in the world; however, they seemed hesitant to connect their discrimination stories to these larger trends of oppression.



Through my interactions with the boys, my understanding of CSA evolved; I began to think of the two main components, awareness and rejection of oppression, as related yet different strategies. Their CSA involved the overall cognitive fight against racial injustice at Lakeside. I likened their awareness of oppression to a defensive strategy where students knew that racial injustice existed; they were able to employ that knowledge in their meaning making of experiences of discrimination. The rejection of oppression seemed like both a defensive and offensive strategy where students might have incorporated a challenge of injustice into their reflection and spoken language. Simply put, the boys in this study mainly employed a defensive strategy in their CSA.

It became clear that only “playing defense” was a useful and positively reinforced survival strategy for Black boys and other students of color at Lakeside. For instance, it was obvious that racism was not a comfortable topic among students at Lakeside. During individual and group conversations, whether asked directly about race or not, the boys made it known when a certain situation or person was not racist or had nothing to do with race. Given the repetition of this behavior across all boys, it was almost as if they were coached to further de-emphasize the role of race in certain situations. In this case, “playing defense” involved diverting attention away from the idea of racism at Lakeside; a potentially useful strategy in an environment that is uncomfortable with anyone (especially students of color) speaking about racism.

“Playing defense” also took the form of excusing discriminatory behavior. In concert with their stories of racial discrimination, a few of the boys *explained why they faced discrimination*. For instance, Tim described his receipt of the “illegal immigrant” comments as a function of the joke-filled atmosphere he and his White friends shared. That meaning making, his definition of it as a racial slur, and *his own exchange of racial jokes and slurs with his friends*

demonstrated a clear tension between understanding racism and living out the principle of rejecting racism. Another example of excusing discriminatory behavior was present in the past André gave Ms. Hart while she yelled at and embarrassed him daily. He resolved that the romantic relationship with her Black boyfriend rendered her an ally for Black boys; thus, she was being hard on him and his friends to promote their success. Even if Ms. Hart was an authentic ally who wanted the best for André, there was still a clear tension between the potential harm she caused André by chastising him publicly on a daily basis and the noble intentions that André perceived in his meaning making. In both cases, *even though they said that everything was fine*, it seemed like the boys employed a defensive strategy of excusing the discriminatory behavior to move forward and not dwell on potentially hurtful circumstances.

Finally, in a defensive *and* offensive effort, the boys converted instances of discrimination into motivation for success. Some of the boys made meaning of their discrimination experiences as a pivot for their success; thus, responding by trying harder in school or working to defy negative Black male stereotypes. André and Derrick referred explicitly to ignoring the negativity they received from teachers and using them as fuel “to do better” moving forward. Greg channeled the negative energy from his coaches into another baseball team and other athletic teams at Lakeside. This seemed to be yet another useful strategy for the boys, which allowed them not to dwell on injustice and move forward. They seemed to lean on hard work as a protective strategy (e.g., if they worked hard, they would no longer be targets for discrimination) and a proactive strategy (e.g., working hard should yield success in general); they seemed to experience a sense of agency through hard work. Additionally, their parents seemed to encourage this strategy (whether directly or indirectly) whenever they got involved in the boys’ experiences of discrimination.

Taken together, by virtue of them sharing their experiences of discrimination, the boys were aware of the abstract notion of oppression and what it looked like in their various daily social interactions. There seemed to be a barrier, however, to rejecting the oppression that they faced. In most cases, it seemed as if they refused to call out the ways in which they had been wronged by peers and authority figures; instead, they seemed to ignore those issues or find ways to move forward. In terms of progressing in Lakeside, an environment unlikely to embrace the disgruntled voices of Black boys, this strategy appears to be pragmatic with a possibly high yield of success. I argue that the resistance to rejecting oppression is a classed barrier, where “rocking the boat” and the hyper-expression of emotion around injustice creates more problems for middle class Black students than it solves. In terms of CSA, this barrier may be stifling for Black boys; in some ways, the immediate coping mechanism may evolve into a long-term submission to oppression.

### **Critiquing Peers, Calling Out Lakeside, and Living the Counternarrative: A Complicated Critical Social Analysis**

Throughout the duration of the *Voice Project*, each of the boys demonstrated a form of hesitance to discussing race and racism. This hesitance was present as we walked through the school and I asked them “What it is like to be a black boy here at Lakeside?” The hesitance was present in program sessions as we discussed general problems at Lakeside. The hesitance to talk about racism was even present when the boys described instances where they knew they were discriminated against based on being Black—especially as a Black boy. This was a source of tension in a program aimed at understanding their experiences in school as Black boys; race and racism were core topics for discussion in most interactions. As we began to deal with the differences in experiences between Black students and non-Black students in group discussions,

some initial responses might include “here we go making it about race again”—as if they were annoyed by the topic.

After all our conversations, it was my suspicion that their hesitance to discuss race and racism was rooted in more than just personal annoyance or discomfort; it seemed like it was a cultural norm at Lakeside at the time. This was evident in the content of the race-based jokes they shared with their friends and the ways they explained or defended those that discriminated against them. It was as if Lakeside had somehow transcended problems of racial discrimination; so much so that jokes about African chattel slavery were appropriate and teachers were immune from criticism when they negatively targeted Black students in class. Beyond the potential influence of racial climate at Lakeside, it is also possible that the boys assumed racial ideological standpoints that de-emphasized the role of racism in society. Given the boys’ (and possibly Lakeside’s) cautious orientation to conversations about race, a space like the *Voice Project* may have been challenging. Each week, we led conversations with a focus on understanding/calling out problems (e.g., racial inequity and unjust school policies) and talking about topics that may have been actively avoided in most other spaces at Lakeside. Although we continued to have these conversations, the boys’ hesitance was evident and informed the content of their work with the program.

It was well known among the group that the core purpose of our conversations about race was to identify the problems that Black boys face at Lakeside; however, one of the main recurring points of discussion was the boys’ criticism of Black students. When I asked them how they felt about Black people and how they thought other people felt about Black people at their school, they expressed concern about the way their Black peers acted and how that would be perceived by non-Black people:

C: How do you think [non-Black people] feel about Black people in your school?

Derrick: I think they think we're all like —ignorant.

C: What gave you that cue? What makes you think people think you're ignorant?

D: Because a lot of people act ignorant in the school. That's another thing that irritates me too.

C: People acting ignorant?

D: Yeah.

C: Is it Black people acting ignorant or --?

D: Just Black people...I'm just irritated when Black people [act ignorant] because I know they're better than that.

Greg expressed a similar sentiment. In response to me asking him what he would say if he could sit all of the Black students at Lakeside down and address their behavior, he said:

Greg: Why?

C: 'Why' what?

G: Why do you act like this? Why do you want to be received this way when you get older? ...Sometimes, if you try to tell them, "You're acting retarded," they act like they get really mad or some stuff like that...if someone tries to tell them, they just get mad.

James and Tim echoed Derrick and Greg's thoughts, but their concerns and frustrations could be consolidated into one word—stereotypes. They both described the ways in which Black students at Lakeside exemplified negative stereotypes about Black people in the United States.

Additionally, they expressed a sense of urgency around breaking these stereotypes:

C: How do you feel about Black people as a whole?

James: They -- We make ourselves like -- We carry on the stereotypes of what others think about us. I think we're going in the wrong direction with our -- like how we act and our grades and stuff. We just need to prove to people that we're the same as them. We just want to break the stereotype.

- C: How do you think other people feel about Black people as a whole?
- J: I don't think they like us that much, because they think we're loud and rude and annoying sometimes. They think we're violent all the time. And that we don't care and they think we're scary [laughs].
- C: Do you agree with any of that?
- J: No.
- C: How do you think others within your school feel about Black people? Like within the school now...
- J: I think they accept us more because they go to school with us but there are still some people that don't like us.
- C: Who are those 'some people'?
- J: Like maybe, some White kids that have grown up to think that way. Their family thinks that way and maybe were racist -- grew up in a racist background.

James referred to some of the implicit biases that he believed his White peers had regarding Black people. While recognizing the existence of racism broadly, he explained a trend where non-Black peers were accepting of Black students because they go to school together. Still, James placed the onus on Black students "to prove to people that we're the same as them" and "break the stereotype." Tim responded to the same question:

- C: How do you think others feel about Black people in general?
- Tim: I'd say there is still -- even like the nicest people -- there's still a little bit of being afraid of them a little bit. I think some people are afraid of Black people because there are so many bad stereotypes about Black people -- even the nicest. And of course there will be people who love Black people -- we're all going to be racist. There is always going to be racism in society. Now, deal with it because there's always going to be some. But you have to change people's belief in us. I think we're doing that well with President Obama. We've been doing it well. We're not just a bunch of drug dealers that go to jail. We actually try hard and we're just as equal as everybody else.

Tim also associated the importance of breaking stereotypes with his connectedness to

being Black. In describing what it meant to be Black to him, Tim said:

Tim: I say it is important because as a race, we've been through a lot. We show that stereotypes are rampant: "We don't care about school and we do drugs. We end up in prison. I think it is important as a race that we start." We've been overcoming the stereotypes for a while. We just have to try really hard to overcome the stereotypes. We're equal with everyone else. We're equal with White people and everybody else with equal rights in the world. I care about everybody being equal because everybody is equal.

...

T: In the school, there is -- I don't think I've ever heard of an encounter of someone being racist with another student like being intentionally racist to a Black or any sort of general. There are some kids who you think might be like -- they might be racist for all I know. They might not like Black people that much for all we know. But um, there are some -- there is definitely some beliefs -- belief of stereotypes at the school. Some people think Black people are scary; that they'll shoot you or whatever. There is some beliefs of that at the school but I think mostly everybody is cool. Everybody is cool with Black people until -- some Black people at our school perpetuate the stereotypes by [sigh] — Some people at the school perpetuate the stereotypes. They don't try at school. They just like ruin the name.

C: They ruin the name of...?

T: Blacks -- of African-Americans -- they live up to the stereotypes. It is just annoying.

C: That's how you feel about Black people in school but how do you feel about Black people as a whole?

T: As a whole, there are still Black people who like — I would say embarrass the race. They don't do well, kill people and do drugs. But I'd say as a whole, as a race, most of us are trying as a race trying to overcome the stereotypes and try to show everybody that we're just as equal.

It was clear that negative stereotypes about Black people were always present on the boys' minds. Their words demonstrated an emotional investment not only in their own actions—but also the actions of their Black peers; this emotional investment did not extend to their peers of other racial groups. Derrick and Greg, for instance, regularly observed their Black peers acting "ignorant" or "retarded" (a pejorative term referring to being loud in public, usually in a group of more than 3 people, and attracting the negative attention of non-Black peers and adults who may

see the behavior as off-putting) and seemed to feel shame in those moments. On the other hand, James and Tim emphasized the pervasive reality of racism; they knew they were interacting with racism each day via their peers (and their peers' families). They asserted their belief that, based solely on race, some of their school peers: do not like them, are afraid of them, and/or think they are underachievers. James and Tim, however, prioritized their efforts, and the potential efforts of other Black students at Lakeside, to defy these negative stereotypes. They saw these efforts as paramount to dismantling their peers' racial prejudices and healing the racial divide at Lakeside.

Their preoccupation with the ways in which they and other Black people at school were perceived negatively was not a surprising finding itself. Previous scholarly literature suggests that Black students: are aware of the negative stereotypes that exist about Black people, actively work to refute those stereotypes, and they associate anxiety with those efforts (Q. Allen, 2013a; 2014; Harper & Williams, 2014). Their disdain with peers' negatively received behavior was a somewhat surprising finding. Although the shame of stereotypical behavior is consistent with trends in the literature, their lack of connectedness to other Black students was surprising (Rogers & Way, 2016). Again, for all intents and purposes, *they were the Black peers being targeted in their critiques*.

We incorporated the photovoice projects into the program as an extension of our conversations about being a Black boy at Lakeside. While our general conversations privileged a range of information from the mundane details of their daily school lives to their experiences with racism, the photovoice projects were framed as a way for the boys to explore and highlight problems at Lakeside. They were encouraged to identify problems at school using "their own lenses" as Black boys. This process began during a program session where the boys listed issues at school they wanted to address in their photovoice projects. They narrowed the list of



problems, developed research questions from those problems, and then took pictures aimed at addressing those research questions.

The boys identified two problems and accompanying research questions to address in their projects: segregation by choice among Lakeside students and poor achievement among Black students. The problems they identified aligned with the critiques of their Black peers at Lakeside. In terms of segregation, they expressed frustration with the ways students chose to spend most of their time in school with peers of the same racial group. They noticed race-based clusters of students in many spaces throughout Lakeside's campus. They described the cafeteria as being noticeably segregated by race; White students sat near the doors to the cafeteria, Chaldean students had a small cluster of tables in the center, and Black students usually sat in a far corner. They noted a similar pattern in hallways where peers of the same race walked or sat together. In their classes, they saw Black students occupying a small section of desks while surrounded by White classmates.

Although the boys originally framed this as a problem for all students at Lakeside, most of their attention and frustration was drawn to their Black peers—possibly demonstrating patterns of victim-blaming (Ryan, 2010). Essentially, they were critiquing the pattern of Black students primarily socializing with other Black students. The boys' language around this problem consisted of two words: *hate* and *separate*. They described Black clusters as being hateful spaces toward White people; thus, their resulting research question: *Why do Black students separate themselves from/hate White students at Lakeside?* In its raw form, this research question made (and still makes) me cringe. While they noticed patterns of segregation by all racial groups in multiple contexts within the school, the boys chose to focus solely on Black students and their potential feelings of "hate" for White students.

In terms of poor achievement, they expressed frustration with the academic performance of Black students at Lakeside. The language around this frustration usually involved the optics of Black students in class; according to the boys, their Black peers did not appear to be engaged in classes. Terrance, for instance, often critiqued the ways in which Black students at Lakeside did not seem to prioritize their academic performance nor exhibit focus while in school. It was not clear what the boys saw as an ideal Black student in our earlier conversations, but they somehow *knew* that Black students were underperforming. Their communication of an achievement problem at Lakeside echoed sentiments expressed by Geoffrey, Sharon, and their parents—especially in reference to Black boys. Additionally, their resulting research question was nearly identical to the question those same adults posed to me while developing and recruiting for the program: *Why aren't Black students achieving?*

Even with the congruence of concern between the boys and the adults, the boys asked their research questions from an interesting vantage point—they *were the Black students at Lakeside*. Of course, this is the design of photovoice methodology—the facilitation of often unheard and undervalued voices with the goal of bringing awareness to community problems (Wang & Burris, 1997). Whenever they discussed the achievement problem, however, they spoke about their Black peers as being others—as if their peers' experiences were in no way connected to their own. A similar pattern was present when they talked about segregation in school spaces; they described Black peers who only hung around other Black students and did not make the connection to their own experiences. Much of the group's collective language around these research questions would suggest that I somehow encountered a group of seven Black boys who were *nothing* like their peers. I knew this was not true.

In terms of achievement—Derrick, André, Stacy, and Greg all had low C/high D

averages. In terms of segregation, outside of James and Tim, the boys mostly spent their free time with other Black students. Even though their language did not reflect it, in most cases they seemed to be asking questions about and critiquing *their own behavior*. And if they were not talking about themselves, they were talking about their close friends. The discussion of intentions and language surrounding the research questions is of note because it informed the pictures they took and the subsequent narratives they developed. As the boys took rounds of pictures of their peers and school environment between program sessions, they did so with the questions “*Why do Black students separate themselves from/hate White students at Lakeside?*” and “*Why aren’t Black students achieving?*” in mind. From their research questions, multiple rounds of photography, and conversations during program sessions, the boys developed their photovoice projects. These projects are discussed in the sections that follow.

**From *Unfocused and Unbalanced* to a call for action.** Because the photovoice projects were guided by two inter-related research questions, the boys returned to program sessions with similar pictures. Most of the pictures depicted the contrast of Black students and non-Black students in a given space. In some cases, a Black student was visibly disengaged in class. In other cases, Black students were grouped together away from other racial groups in the hallway or cafeteria. The boys seemed to be calling attention to the ways in which Black students stood in active and passive forms of opposition in multiple spaces within Lakeside. One of the emergent narratives from these pictures involved Black students’ lack of focus in class.

A prominent example of this narrative came from one of André’s pictures (see *Figure 1*). The picture is set in Lakeside’s media center; in the foreground lies a Black boy who is looking at his cell phone under a table. The phone looks to be hidden, as if it should not be out at the time the picture was taken. The boy is sitting alone at the table with papers scattered and his book bag

on the ground by his side. In the background, there are two girls of color sitting together at a table; both of them facing in a similar direction, seemingly paying attention to something off camera. There is also a student (almost off camera) walking toward the same direction of the girls' attention.



***Figure 7. Where's the action? (André): “This student is pausing for a moment while the teacher lectures at us about a project. It shows how our minds need a break from the lecturing need lessons that are more interesting and include more movement. Sitting and getting is not always the best way for a Black male to learn.”***

André explained that the picture was taken during an English class session in the media center. Outside of the camera's vision, his English teacher was delivering a presentation; this is what occupied the other students' attention. André wanted to depict the subject of the photo (the Black boy) as separating himself from the rest of the class in addition to ignoring classroom instruction. He saw the boy's disengagement as representing the anger that fueled Black

students' self-separation at Lakeside. The *Voice Project* group responded positively to the picture and helped André to develop its initial title: *Slackin'*.

Along a similar vein, Derrick shared a picture that featured Black students being off task in class (see *Figure 2*). In it are five girls sitting in two rows of desks in a classroom. The perspective of the photo is slanted where the girls in one row are tilting downward while the girls in the other row are raised. The former row includes three Black girls; two of which are looking at their cell phones and one appears to be napping. The raised row included two girls writing in their notebooks, one of which was Asian American and the other White. Derrick admitted that he staged this picture and explained that he wanted “to show how the school actually is.” He intentionally slanted the row of Black girls downward to depict Black students as being off task during class. He explained that he was “not trying to put us (Black people) down” and he “was just trying to show how we (Black students at Lakeside) really act.” Given the picture’s physical slant and its message, Derrick originally titled it *Unbalanced*.



**Figure 8.** The Finish Line (Derrick): “I took this picture during my 7<sup>th</sup> hour Japanese class nearing the end of the day. This picture shows how people can get off task after a long day, but it also shows how some people work harder at the end. On the left, people are off task and sleeping. While on the other side, people are doing their work and having fun. This shows 2 ways that students cross The Finish Line. Some go harder and some fall asleep.”

Like Derrick’s *Unbalanced*, Stacy presented a picture originally titled *Unfocused* (see *Figure 3*). The foreground features two Lakeside Black students, one girl and one boy sitting at a lab table in a science classroom. The boy was looking at something on his cell phone screen; his paper and pen lie under his phone on the table. The girl was sitting to his right, leaning toward him and also looking at his phone; both of their chemistry textbooks were laid to the side. Stacy explained that he wanted to depict a classic example of students not doing their work and not being focused on appropriate tasks in class.



**Figure 9.** Minutes of Relaxation (*Stacy*): “After listening to the teacher lecture for 30 minutes, these students gave their brain a break. Everybody takes a break!! Whether it is a desk job, playing football, or cutting grass—a break is a great stress reliever. After all, this is only a 5-minute break out of 90 minutes of class.”

Initially, the group responded to *Slackin'*, *Unbalanced*, and *Unfocused* as being acceptable pictures and narratives to represent the *Voice Project*. The notion that Black students are often off-task, disengaged, and self-isolated while in class was normative to them; there was no push-back or challenge of these concepts. As a facilitator, I intentionally withheld my opinions regarding the boys' meaning making of their experiences; the program space was about *facilitating* the voice of Black boys and not *dictating* it. As a researcher, I was interested in where they were in terms of their CSA of Lakeside—the extent to which they saw, experienced, understood, and recognized inequity as Black boys at Lakeside. From the pictures and narratives they shared, they demonstrated a shallow analysis—one that reflects the very stereotypes of

Black students the boys expressed wanting to escape.

A key learning emerged from this process: *at every stage, photovoice is all about choice*. A researcher chooses a community with whom they will collaborate. That community chooses what they share about community problems and ultimately decides what the focus of their photovoice projects will be. Participants choose the subjects in the pictures they take; they work with given lighting and adjust angles to their liking. Participants choose what they share with other participants and ultimately the broader community. Then, participants choose the words in, and create the frame for, their co-constructed narratives about their community problems. Finally, informed by all this work, they pose suggestions for solutions to these problems. In the case of the *Voice Project*, the boys were guided by me and Blake to talk about problems they saw in their school as Black boys. From that point, they chose to talk about Black students in a certain way. They chose to take pictures that reinforced the ways they talked; thus, the resulting narratives about Black students' lack of focus at Lakeside.

In a word, the resulting narratives were *problematic*, especially for a photovoice project. First, they reflected a deficit framing of Black students in school--a framing espoused in popular media, in some scholarly research, and mentioned in Chapter 1 of this dissertation (Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, 2013). This very framing runs counter to the conception of the *Voice Project* and this dissertation study. Additionally, the narratives critiqued Black students (individual/person-level blame) while paying no attention to the role of Lakeside (system-level blame). Photovoice is designed to critique and eventually fix systems and environments--not people (Carlson, 2006). I reached the conclusion that neither the boys nor I should stand by these narratives in a photovoice gallery walk.

During the last few program sessions, I led the group in an exercise where we analyzed



each picture and revisited the group's narratives. In these sessions, I challenged them on their meaning making of the pictures they took. I asked them about their intentions in capturing moments where Black students were not working in class. Derrick, Stacy, and, André all expressed a desire to depict things "the way they really are." As we revisited the same pictures in each session, other members of the group began to challenge their narrative. For instance, in response to Stacy's *Unfocused*, Tim commented on the ways a picture with that title might pervade negative stereotypes about Black students; Derrick and Stacy then pushed back in frustration. They asked Tim why he wanted to make everything about race and assured the group that race had nothing to do with these pictures. André interjected and said, "All of these photos *are about race*."

I was also curious about their level of attention while they were in these same classrooms featured in their pictures. During the same session, I placed printouts of *Slackin'*, *Unbalanced*, and *Unfocused* on a table in front of the boys. I then explained that all the pictures had a similar message according to their own descriptions. Finally, I asked them, "So, given all of this, you mean to tell me that you all are always paying attention in class—never glancing at your phones—right?" Almost in unison, they all said, "No." They went on to explain how boring their classes typically were. They reflected on the fact that, except for one school day per week, each class period lasted for 90 minutes. In a normal class period, the boys reported receiving 30-45 minutes of lecture; the remainder of the time was unstructured and reserved for students to work on individual homework or group assignments. Greg and André commented on challenges with their attention span given the boring style and long length of lectures. Tim and Stacy emphasized that the unstructured time was boring and at times useless. All the boys thought that class time could be used more wisely than it was.

After this session, our conversations about Black students shifted and, in some ways, so did the boys' narratives. For instance, Stacy changed his project's title from *Unfocused* to *Minutes of Reflection*. In the caption, he explained that the students depicted chose to look at the cell phone as a form of a break after an extended lecture. Similarly, André shifted *Slackin'* to *Where's the action?* In addition to emphasizing the need for a break, André critiqued the lecturing culture in Lakeside classes; he suggested that class instruction include more movement. While André and Stacy countered their previous narratives that emphasized lack of student focus, Derrick was persistent in keeping his original narrative; but he altered his framing of the *Unbalanced* moment. He changed his project title from *Unbalanced* to *The Finish Line*. He described that he took the picture at the end of a school day, a time when students were usually exhausted from the school day. He wanted to capture the ways that students respond to completing their schoolwork while tired; thus, his closing sentence: "Some go harder and some fall asleep."

The shift in narrative was also represented at the gallery walk, especially in the case of André's *Where's the Action?* As Andre discussed the project with his parents, they emphasized the ways in which the boy (subject of the photo) was not paying attention—echoing Andre's original description of the project—but Andre pushed back and argued that the teacher should incorporate hands-on activities into his teaching methods:

Andre: [Describing *Where's the Action?* to his parents] Everybody was paying attention and he just wasn't feeling it...

Andre's Dad (D): He lost focus.

Andre's Mom (M): So what was the topic about that day? [Andre shrugs, not remembering that particular day] Ok, so how long did he spend texting and being distracted? [Andre shrugs again]

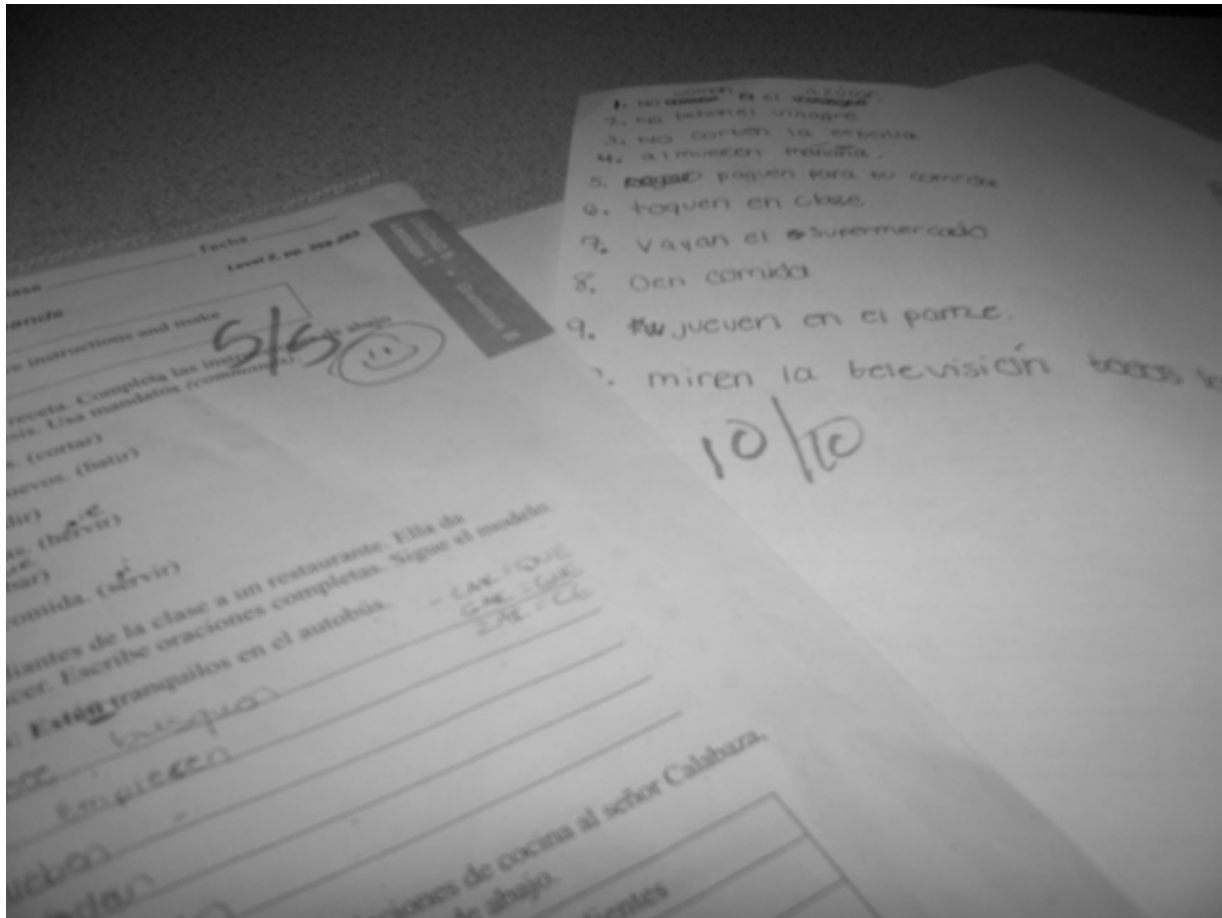
D: You're missing a key point here...

- A: But the key point is not in what [the student in the photo] is doing, but it's how the teacher is teaching him.
- M: So the teacher...
- D: So, he was not interesting?
- M: ...he wasn't interacting. He was just talking, standing pointing at the board and...
- A: Boring...he was boring.
- M: So, what would you suggest that he do?
- A: Make things more interesting and interactive...where he could keep it lived up a little bit.
- M: So when you say interactive, what kind of ways would be interactive for you all to pay more attention?
- A: Have us get up and do something more hands-on?
- M: Was the topic more about things that you could be interactive with or was it just lecturing?
- D: Well, he was taking a picture; so, he wasn't in that scenario...
- A: [Raised voice in debate] It's possible that he could have did something more interactive...I mean, anything you can do *something* with...you don't have to just stand there and lecture to us and give us information.
- D: Did *you know* the information that that person was lecturing about?
- A: [Shaking his head in disappointment] You're parenting right now. You're parenting right now.
- D: I'm just asking.
- A: [Shrugs] I'm paying attention. I got an A on that project.
- D: I'm just making sure you know you have to pay attention...[Andre and both of his parents laugh together] Good project, man. [Andre's Dad hugs Andre]

The tone of the exchange between Andre and his parents was inquisitive and playful; Andre's parents pushed him to defend the narrative he presented *and* they wanted to emphasize the

importance of paying attention in class under any condition. Andre's assertion of "the key point," that the student was bored due to an uninteresting lecture, marks a shift in his analysis of the moment captured in *Where's the Action?* In his early discussions of the project, he focused on the student in the picture as "texting and being distracted" much like his parents did; however, in his conversation with his parents, he identified a problem with the instruction of the class *and* was able to suggest a plausible solution (increased hands on activity in classes). Not only did Andre shift his narrative and engage in a CSA of his experiences in lecture-heavy classes, he was also able to own and defend that analysis when pushed.

**Counternarratives of achievement.** The boys initially presented a deficit-based narrative regarding Black students' achievement at Lakeside; this prompted their question, "*Why aren't Black students achieving?*" In response to their concerns about Black student achievement at Lakeside, though, a couple of the boys presented a counternarrative in their photovoice projects. In summary, the counternarrative that Terrance and Tim presented was a simple answer to the achievement question the group posed: "*We are achieving.*"



**Figure 10.** What is your purpose for school? (Terrance): *“Honestly ask yourself why do you come to school? Not because your parents make you. The picture you see below is a full 15 assignment points earned fair and square. I go to make a better person of myself.”*

In his project, Terrance depicted two graded homework assignments from his Spanish class. One paper was graded 5/5 and the other 10/10. Terrance titled the project *What is your purpose for school?* Expressing pride in his grades, in his caption, he explained that he goes to school “to make a better person of [himself]”—this aligned with Terrance’s priority of achievement in individual and group conversations. More than anything, the caption read like a critique of, or public service announcement for, other students. In program sessions, Terrance demonstrated a wariness to speak negatively about Lakeside, which may explain why his project’s caption varied from the rest of the group’s projects. Still, he used the project as an avenue to promote a narrative that recognized and celebrated of himself as a focused student.

Tim presented a project called *All Alone in Honors*. It is a picture of his Honor's American Literature class. Half of the class seems to be posing for him while the other half is engaged in other activities. The class consisted mostly of girls and a handful of boys; the class seemed to be racially diverse. Tim shared his observations about Black students in the class: all the Black girls sat together and he was the only Black boy in this and most of his other advanced classes. Then, he made a comment about the statement of Black boys in advanced education: "Even though there aren't many Black guys in these classes, there are a lot of Black guys who do try. It may look bleak, but it's getting better." In this counternarrative, he recognized how discouraging the image of an Honors class with few Black boys looked and he asserted that there are Black boys present and many more who try; finally, he declared that "it's getting better."



**Figure 11.** All Alone in Honors (Tim): ***“In my Honors American Lit class, all of the Black girls sit together. I am the only Black guy in that class. In all of my Honors/AP classes combined, there is only one other Black guy. Even though there aren’t many Black guys in these classes, there are a lot of Black guys who do try. It may look bleak, but it’s getting better.”***

Tim and Terrance used their projects to say “We *are* achieving” in different ways. In *What is your purpose for school?*, Terrance positioned his own achievement as a counternarrative. He expressed pride in his “full 15 assignment points earned fair and square” and his quest “to make a better person of [himself].” In *All Alone in Honors*, Tim discussed the achievement of being in an Honors class while noting that he is the only Black boy in most of his advanced classes. The words in the project’s title (*All Alone*) and his recognition of how “bleak” it was for Black boys indicate that he was disappointed to be the only Black boy (or one of two) in his advanced classes.

**A call for diversity.** The boys maintained that Black students at Lakeside separated themselves from, and in some cases even hated, White students. This was evidenced by their observations of Black students maintaining friend groups consisting only of Black peers. Tim captured this phenomenon in a project titled *Backed Up Against the Wall*. The subjects of the picture are two Black boys sitting close to each other in the hallway; one sat against a wall looking directly at the camera with a blank stare, the other laid on the floor looking toward the ceiling. Tim explained that the two boys did not know each other. He saw the moment as being representative of the safety that Black students feel around each other as opposed to the discomfort they felt around students of other races. He described a mindset Black students possessed where they positioned White students as enemies; a mindset he claimed as being untrue. He then called for Black students to "branch out and interact with other races."





*Figure 12. Backed Up Against the Wall (Tim): "After school, 2 Black kids (who didn't even know each other) sat next to each other on one side of the room, while the other side was filled with white people. Some Black kids only feel safe and comfortable around other Black people. They are put into a mindset that White people are the enemies, which just isn't true. Overall, we should branch out and interact with other races, because the world is not just Black and White."*

On the other hand, boys in the group also took pictures of racially diverse friend groups. The prime example of this is James' *Lunch at the U.N.*, a candid picture of his primary group of friends sitting for lunch in the cafeteria. The "U.N." in the title is a reference to the United Nations because of the representation of various ethnic and racial groups at the table. James explained that the students sitting at the table are of "different shades and tones," yet he felt "comfortable." He referred to a broader context of segregation in the cafeteria and how he was not surrounded by his "brothers" (referring to other Black boys). He concluded by asserting that he enjoyed his group of friends and he did not "need to see [his] own skin tone on every person."



**Figure 13.** Lunch at the U.N. (James): “For every non-marathon day, this is my lunch table, which is filled with different shades and tones. I feel comfortable at this table, in the midst of segregation, even though I’m not surrounded by my “brothers.” I have fun with these people, and I don’t need to see my own skin tone on every person.”

These two projects called for diversity in different ways. In *Backed Up Against the Wall*, Tim highlighted Black boys who separated themselves from other racial groups. He critiqued a mindset among Black students where they saw White people as “enemies”; this critique was tempered with his understanding that some Black students only felt “safe and comfortable” around other Black students—a feeling likely developed in response to experiences of discrimination. In *Lunch at the U.N.*, James described his personal experience as a Black boy with a racially diverse friend group. He also used the word “comfortable,” describing how he felt with this friend group amid the segregation at Lakeside. Even though James centered his own

experience in the project, the caption seemed to refer implicitly to the same mentality among Black students that Tim described—he recognized the norm of racial segregation among Black students but talked about the comfort he experienced with other racial groups.

**A complicated critical social analysis: Discussion.** In conversation with existing literature on the ways in which Black boys make meaning of their experiences in school, the boys' photovoice projects served as a mechanism to explore a complicated CSA. Photovoice and CSA are founded in the existence of and the need to critique/challenge oppression. Regarding the premise of this dissertation, it was expected that Black boys from middle class backgrounds who attended a suburban public high school—given the privilege often acquired in suburban contexts and the historic adherence to a belief in the power of meritocracy (see Lewis-McCoy, 2014)—might struggle with an analysis of systemic oppression. There is also evidence that this expectation is not reasonable for adolescents of any demographic (Watts et al., 2002; Watts & Guessous, 2006). The goal of employing photovoice was to gain an understanding of Black boys' narratives surrounding school with the use of a visual, liberation-centered method.

Some of the initial narratives the boys shared in their projects were surprising in that they promoted a deficit framing Black student achievement. From Black students' lack of focus in class to their isolation from White students, many of the boys had negative things to say about their Black peers. On one hand, the intentions behind these narratives stood in agreement with a common narrative around Black boys attending suburban schools in the literature. Essentially, these students have to be conscientious of the negative stereotypes that follow Black boys in academic spaces; in response to these stereotypes, Black boys *must* stay focused and achieve (Gordon, 2012; O'Connor, 1997). Given this, their attention to achievement and attention in class was expected; however, the choices they made in representing their peers in their photovoice

projects were surprising.

With initial titles like *Unbalanced* and *Unfocused*, the boys' projects highlighted the ways in which Black students at Lakeside were confirming some negative stereotypes. Upon probing them about their choices of picture and narrative, they initially maintained that their projects were representative of the Black experience at Lakeside. Their stance on this issue reflected the values of *respectability politics*, an informal set of rules created by upper middle to upper class Black people in an effort to “uplift” the Black race and correct the traits deemed undesirable to gatekeepers within the White majority (Harris, 2014). The subscription to respectability politics run counter to the values of CSA and photovoice as it places the burden and blame of inequity on marginalized populations (Carlson, 2006; Watts et al., 2002); a major rationale for my executive decision to guide the boys in a new direction for their narratives. I saw value in the boys engaging in a more strength-based, system-focused framing of problems at Lakeside.

After the encouragement of a new direction, the boys' photovoice projects presented counternarratives to the narratives *they* originally promoted. The process of photovoice, paired with facilitator and peer feedback, was in many ways *transformative for them first*. Photovoice is usually seen as a tool that can be transformative for communities and a facilitator of conversation with people in positions of power (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2007). In the context of the *Voice Project*, though, the boys challenged their own deficit-based narratives of Black students at Lakeside.

Lastly, through their projects, the boys exposed two of their core values regarding being a Black student at Lakeside. First, they foregrounded the importance of achievement. For instance, Terrance's display of his grades echoed a common counternarrative of Black males in academic

spaces—“we are achieving” (Harper & Davis, 2012). In addition to promoting his achievement in *All Alone in Honors*, Tim also commented on the underrepresentation of Black boys in honors and Advanced Placement classes at Lakeside. Even in the projects highlighted student boredom in classes, the boys suggested activity- and movement-based instruction to promote engagement in classes. Second, the boys shed light on the ways in which they value diversity and would like to see more unity among students, across racial groups. James and Tim were frontrunners for this cause as they emphasized the potential power of multiculturalism at Lakeside (Johansen & Le, 2014). James discussed his comfort in a racially diverse friend group. Tim commented on the ways in which Black students may only experience that level of comfort among other Black peers. He critiqued this comfort and called for Black students to no longer see White students as enemies. Overall, the photovoice projects provided time and space for the boys to: explore their thoughts regarding Black students at Lakeside, share those thoughts, challenge those thoughts, and explore their core values for themselves and their Black peers as students.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the ways in which seven Black boys (André, Derrick, Greg, James, Stacy, Terrance, and Tim) made meaning of their experiences in high school. Each of the boys were from middle class backgrounds and attended Lakeside, a high school nested in an affluent suburban community—Cherry Hill. The boys were participants in a youth participatory action research (YPAR) program, the *Voice Project*, which aimed to facilitate CSA around their experiences in school; thus, CSA plays a central role in the analytical lens of this dissertation. There were three guiding research questions. First, *in what ways do middle class Black boys make meaning of their school experiences?* Next, *what strategies do middle class Black boys employ to cope with negative school experiences and succeed in their school community?* Lastly, *what solutions do middle class Black boys suggest in response to challenges they face in their school community?*

Multiple methods were employed to address these questions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to explore meaning making. Photovoice was used to complement interview meaning making in addition to promoting CSA. Finally, participant observation of program sessions was conducted in order to provide more context of meaning making and to complement findings from interviews and photovoice projects. In this chapter, I summarize the findings per their respective research questions. Then, I discuss implications for future research. Lastly, I conclude with a discussion of implications for practitioners, youth development program workers, and educators.

#### **In what ways do middle class Black boys make meaning of their school experiences?**

A considerable amount of attention in this study was paid to the boys' recognition of, and subsequent fight against, oppression in the school context. Black children's experiences of oppression in

school, often manifested in various forms of racial discrimination, has been well-documented in the scholarly literature (Chavous et al., 2008; Neblett, Chavous, & Nguyễn, 2009). At the intersection of being Black and male, Black boys' experiences of oppression in school have been associated with disproportionate punishment (e.g., disciplinary referral, detention, in and out-of-school suspension), diminished engagement in school, and challenges to academic performance. Given the privilege associated with being middle and upper middle class, it may be expected that middle and upper class youth will have access to more resources and have a higher chance for success (Lewis-McCoy, 2014). Unfortunately, in the case of Black boys from middle class backgrounds attending suburban high schools, previous research suggests that this is not the case (Q. Allen, 2010).

With an intentional eye to CSA and the recognition that Black boys face inequity-centered challenges in their school experiences, it was expected that the boys would discuss these challenges in individual interviews, group discussions, and/or through their photovoice projects; it was expected that their meaning making would center experiences of oppression. *To some extent*, this expectation was met. Most importantly, though, it was expected that notions of CSA would be challenged and complicated at the intersection of identities present in this dissertation's focus: middle class Black boys. This expectation was met.

First, most of the boys in this study initially described Lakeside with a sense of apathy; they mostly saw it as a decent yet boring school. Their boredom and apathy were not rooted in any disdain or feelings of being oppressed; to them, it was a *normal* school; this sentiment is common among all adolescents (Martz, Schulenberg, Patrick, & Kloska, 2016). This finding is of note for two reasons. On one hand, this finding privileges the mundane aspects of their daily lived experiences at Lakeside (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000). It was important that more than just their struggles were reported, but that extreme situations be differentiated from their usual daily experiences. Similarly, their reflection of the school as a boring space emphasizes the ways in which—at minimum—they felt safe and not

threatened at school. Often, the stories shared in the literature around Black youth's school experiences reflect an urban, unstable, and sometimes violent (or otherwise dangerous) social context (Howard, 2008). In the case of this study, *boring* can be read as suburban, stable, and generally safe—ideal characteristics for many families regarding their children's education (Lewis-McCoy, 2014). It seems that the very *boring* nature of Cherry Hill and Lakeside fueled the questions posed to me by Geoffrey, Sharon, and some of the boys' parents: “these boys have *everything* they need, why aren't they achieving?”

Despite their feelings of boredom at Lakeside, the boys reported having healthy social lives. They each had large friend groups with peers of different ethnic and racial backgrounds; and no report of being an outsider or feeling left out in school. They all reported having teachers and classes they liked. The boys varied in their reported levels of engagement in class and their grades; yet, they *all* reported a sense of urgency around earning better grades and attending 4-year colleges/universities directly after graduating from Lakeside. Additionally, they all recognized the privilege they had in attending a highly-ranked and reputed high school. They named the school's physical (e.g., facilities, college and career centers) and human (i.e., good teachers) resources as unique and strong assets of Lakeside. The boys also contrasted the strengths of Lakeside with the highly publicized shortcomings of some Hope City neighborhoods. Most times, though, the discussion of these contrasts were based on assumptions about Hope City schools and not facts or personal experiences.

Regarding their meaning making of race, the boys noted two trends unique to being Black at Lakeside. First, they highlighted the existence of segregation within school spaces (e.g., hallways, classrooms, cafeteria, and athletic fields). In the cafeteria and classrooms, they reported students as self-segregating—choosing to socialize with peers of the same race. There was some recognition that Black students may have felt most comfortable around other Black peers in social settings; however, the boys adopted a narrative that their Black peers *hated* White students. This self-segregation and hate narrative



became a centerpiece of their critique of Black students at Lakeside. For the most part, this critique did not extend to peers of other racial groups; the boys seldom made note of the roles of White, Chaldean, Latino, or Asian peers played in welcoming or excluding Black peers. Some exceptions to this point were mentioned during individual interviews (i.e., Stacy's denial at a house party by Chaldean students and James' mention of White students not wanting to befriend Black people who act "ghetto").

Second, the boys noted that the primary demographic of students receiving disciplinary action in school (e.g., detention, in and out-of-school suspension) were Black and Chaldean students—particularly boys. Although they recognized that the primary recipients of disciplinary action were boys of color, they did not see it as a reflection of inequity; rather, they accepted it as fact—*boys of color were the ones getting in trouble at Lakeside*. During discussions of discipline practices, the boys generally saw Lakeside's administration as being fair. Additionally, they spoke of the trend where mostly boys of color were getting in trouble with a sense of distance. The boys in this study spoke as if neither they nor their friends were the ones getting in trouble. The ones getting in trouble, rather, were a group of distant others—the Black boys and stories *never* to be captured in this dissertation. In discussions of other topics, however, it became clear that these stories were not so distant and they did not only belong to others.

Nearly all the boys in this study reported receiving some form of negative disciplinary action during their two years at Lakeside. Four of the boys shared stories of getting into trouble and believing it to be a discriminatory act based on race. These instances were public, occurred in a classroom or an athletic field, and involved some level of embarrassment for the boys. The boys made meaning of these instances as unjust, hurtful, and rooted in racial prejudice; however, they did not attribute the behavior to a larger system of racism or oppression. They thought of these instances as isolated, individual events of which they would often take personal responsibility; in fact, they would even defend the perpetrators of the discrimination (e.g., "...but no one at the school is *really* racist though"). The boys also reported

experiencing racial discrimination in certain instances or regularly from their peers and other adults in Cherry Hill. These instances involved the boys being rejected from or shut out from certain physical spaces (i.e. parties and community centers) because they were Black. The boys tended to respond to these instances with disappointment and see them as explicitly racist. The argument can be made that the lack of connection between the boys' personal experiences of racial discrimination and the attribution of blame to Lakeside (and the power structures within it) is a manifestation of internalized oppression (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). The lack of connection may also be the result of the CSA at their developmental level (Watts et al., 2002; Watts & Guessous, 2006). Nonetheless, even as the boys recognized racial discrimination, they did not see it as potentially connected to racism within the structure of Lakeside and Cherry Hill.

**What strategies do middle class Black boys employ to cope with negative school experiences and succeed in their school community?**

Much of the scholarly literature on Black boys from middle class backgrounds centers on discussions of coping—particularly the ways in which Black boys respond to the conflicting expectations of peers, parents, and teachers (Q. Allen, 2013a; Gordon, 2012). A dominant narrative in this literature is that peers expect a certain performance of “cool” from Black boys—characterized by apathy, comedy, and athleticism. Alternatively, aligned with the promises associated with middle class suburbia, parents expect high levels of academic performance, eventual college attendance, and overall success (Lewis-McCoy, 2014). Also included in this dominant narrative are the low expectations of achievement among Black boys in suburban high schools harbored by their mostly White teacher population. Taken together, scholars argue, this conflict of expectations may present middle class Black boys with a special set of challenges that are often excluded from the discourse on Black boys in school (Q. Allen, 2013a; Gordon, 2012). In response to these challenges, it is argued that middle class Black boys employ equally unique coping skills; scholars have called for more research on these skills.

It was expected that the boys in this study would also discuss or demonstrate coping skills that were specific to their race, class, and gender identity intersection. This expectation was met. Previous research suggests that middle class Black boys' coping mechanisms vary, ranging from acting out and performing negative stereotypes to intentionally pursuing friends of different ethnic/racial backgrounds and striving for superior academic performance (Q. Allen, 2013a; Gordon, 2012; Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boles, 2013). In some ways, the boys' discussions of coping, surviving, and/or thriving at Lakeside echoed findings in previous research. In other ways, their narratives complicated or even refuted claims in the literature. There were three emergent coping trends among the boys in this study.

First, and most notably, the boys all demonstrated some intentionality around de-emphasizing the existence of race and racism at Lakeside. This de-emphasis took multiple forms, including directly defending others' racist actions (as mentioned earlier) or emphasizing the invisibility of race at Lakeside. This de-emphasis seemed to reflect assimilationist (emphasizing the similarities between Black Americans and people of other races in the United States) or humanist (emphasizing everyone's similarity; focused on the human race, de-emphasizing race/racism) racial ideologies outlined in the MMRI (Sellers et al., 1998). One explanation for this could be that discussions of race and racism were not welcomed, or even shunned, as part of the culture at Lakeside that seemed to promote a colorblindness that is potentially harmful (see A. Allen, Watson, & Childers-McKee, 2015; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). This speculation is based on the consistency with which the boys would follow the descriptions of a problem at school with a similar qualifying statement that denies the role of race in certain actions or the existence of racism (e.g., "people aren't really racist here" or "she's [teacher] like with everyone—not just the Black kids"). Overall, the boys recognized that race-based inequity generally existed and had an idea of what it might look like, but there seemed to be a looming hesitance to seeing/calling out that inequity at Lakeside—even when it was present and directly affecting them.

Related to the last point, the boys' de-emphasis of race and racism at Lakeside is also of note

because it runs counter to the awareness of systemic oppression associated with CSA. I positioned CSA as a core component of my analytical lens for this dissertation, as it was central to the mission of the *Voice Project* and to photovoice methodology. That being said, it was not inherently expected that the boys' narratives would reflect the awareness and rejection of systemic oppression within school; rather, it was intended that their narratives be put in conversation with CSA—given their participation in the program. It was interesting to observe the de-emphasis of race and racism at school as an emergent coping trend among this group of Black boys, especially when scholars have found the opposite (Evans et al., 2012; Neblett et al., 2009; Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012). It is also important to note that the boys' de-emphasis of race and racism informed the stories they shared, the pictures they took, the ways they analyzed their photovoice projects, and the framing of their final narratives. Because the *Voice Project* was a space where the discussion of race and being a Black boy at Lakeside was central, the boys' de-emphasis created a tension that ultimately ended in my intervention and push for system-level blame of problems they presented. Although their de-emphasis of race and racism was alarming in the program context, it is less alarming in the broader discussion of CSA; their de-emphasis may have signified what the development of CSA looks (and sounds) like during middle adolescence.

Related to the de-emphasis of race and racism was the second emergent coping trend among the boys—their subscription to a narrative of personal responsibility and integration for success. On one hand, this narrative was defined by their firm belief in the power of meritocracy; the boys believed that they would be successful as long as they worked and tried hard at school. Each of the boys, academically successful or not, subscribed to this narrative; and through my observation, that subscription seems logical and even necessary at a school like Lakeside. Lakeside was a well-resourced school with myriad opportunities for academic enrichment including support for college applications, tutoring during and after school, and a comprehensive engineering curriculum. Additionally, students like James and Tim, who maintained A-averages, put forth what they described as *not that much effort*

and saw large returns on their relatively small investment of time spent on homework and studying. Essentially, there was evidence to support that hard work and persistence were positively reinforced traits for Lakeside students.

On the other hand, the personal responsibility and integration narrative was also defined by the boys' belief that they needed to reject and disprove the negative stereotypes associated with Black people at school. Most of the boys mentioned the existence of negative stereotypes about Black people that were associated with poor academic performance in school (e.g., laziness, apathy around school, being loud); they seemed to accept that these stereotypes were believed by people of other racial groups and promoted by popular media. As they described their experiences as Black boys at Lakeside, one of the common annoyances they reported was seeing their Black peers "living down to the stereotypes"—engaging in behavior that is associated with negative stereotypes about Black people. As a result, the boys would often call for a need to "break the stereotype"—a goal to be accomplished by superior academic performance, good behavior, and maintaining racially diverse friend groups (Q. Allen, 2014; Harper & Williams, 2014; Rogers & Way, 2016).

The third emergent coping trend was emotional withdrawal in the face of discrimination. In some of the instances where the boys faced racial discrimination at Lakeside, there was no conceivable opportunity for the boys to physically escape the space without serious consequence. André had to be present in Ms. Hart's class, Derrick had to face the substitute teacher that made fun of him, and Greg needed to cooperate with his baseball coach even when he received differential treatment. In each of these cases, the boys reported withdrawing emotionally from discriminatory environments by resolving to no longer care about the space. In some instances, the descriptions of their responses to instances of discrimination depicted protest; in other instances, the descriptions depicted a passive and uninterested silence. Additionally, the boys' emotional withdrawals from spaces was often followed by or paired with an eventual physical withdrawal.

A cursory reading of these emergent coping trends can read innocently—don't focus so much race, work hard and break those negative stereotypes, and don't pay attention to the negativity. In some cases, these coping trends may even promote certain types of success as they signal compliance and persistence in certain contexts. I argue, however, that these trends do not demonstrate healthy coping. The de-emphasis of race's role in society, the lack of awareness of inequity, and the justification of occasional racism can be damaging to the academic performance and identity development of Black adolescents (Chavous et al., 2008; Neblett et al., 2012). The boys' emphasis on working hard to achieve success was encouraging; however, it was alarming to see that hard work being linked to (and sometimes defined by) a pressure to disprove negative stereotypes about Black people. The boys' choice to adapt to racial discrimination through emotional withdrawal from discriminatory spaces and people not only suggests a decline in their school engagement, but it also marks a way in which their school community, especially the adults, have failed them.

### **What solutions do middle class Black boys suggest in response to challenges they face in their school community?**

The study of Black boys' experiences in school is overwhelmingly problem-centered with much attention being paid to gaps in achievement and discipline (Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2003). Ironically, though, very little is known about the solutions Black boys would pose as solutions to the problems they experience in school. This is likely due in part to the sparse existence of Black boys' narratives in the scholarly literature (S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). One goal of this study was to guide Black boys through a process of exploring solutions to problems that they identified in their school community—problems that bothered them as Black boys in their school. To this end, photovoice and group discussion were employed as methods to capture group processing of school problems and possible solutions. Photovoice is aimed at facilitating participants' identification of community problems and exploration of solutions for those problems (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Wilson, Minkler, Dasho, Wallerstein, & Martin, 2008).

Group discussions during program sessions were designed as an opportunity for the collective meaning making of school experiences and brainstorming of solutions.

It was expected that the boys in this study would explore and present solutions to problems they experienced at Lakeside through their photovoice projects. This expectation was partially met. As a group, they presented two problems and respective solutions in their photovoice projects. A surprising finding across photovoice projects was the boys' critiques of their Black peers at Lakeside and the resulting counternarratives they presented to themselves. What follows is a discussion of (1) the two problems they identified—segregation at Lakeside and boredom in class—and the solutions they presented in addition to (2) the counternarratives they presented in response to problems they attributed to Black students at Lakeside.

A popular problem raised during group discussions was the existence of racial segregation in spaces within Lakeside (i.e., cafeteria, hallways, and classrooms); this problem drove one of their photovoice research questions (*Why do Black students separate themselves from/hate White students at Lakeside?*). The boys expressed irritation with Black students at Lakeside; they reported that their Black peers would often separate themselves from students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds—particularly White students. They initially attributed this voluntary separation to Black students' hate for White students; this was evident during the analysis phase of the photovoice projects. From the analysis phase to their final photovoice projects, there was a shift in the collective narrative on Black students' choice to spend time primarily with other Black students. The boys shifted the focus of their narrative from *Black students' hate for White students* to *Black students' sense of comfort around other Black students*. They still maintained that it was imperative for Black students at Lakeside to be open to friends of other races. As a result, the solution they posed was geared toward their Black peers: "Overall, we should branch out and interact with other races, because the world is not just Black and White." Although most of the boys in the group had friends with various racial backgrounds, the call for

diversity seemed to be a function of Tim and James' large racially diverse friend group in addition to the personal value they placed on diversity.

The other problem explored in the boys' photovoice projects was the boredom they experienced in their classes. Initially, the boys expressed concern with Black students' achievement in school; thus, their second research question (*Why aren't Black students achieving?*). They attributed their achievement concerns to Black students' lack of focus during classes. To represent this visually in their photovoice projects, they captured pictures of students demonstrating a lack of engagement while in their classes (e.g., Black students on their cell phones, not looking in the direction of instruction, and/or actively disengaged from their text books). The boys shifted the focus of their narrative from *Black students' lack of focus* to *Black students' boredom with school curriculum* over the course of the analysis phase of the photovoice projects. During group discussions, they noted that each of their classes were 90-minute long, lecture-based classes with little opportunity for movement. They posed two solutions in their photovoice projects. First, they suggested that students might need a "brain break," given the draining nature of lectures. Second, they suggested that class sessions incorporate more activities that require physical movement to keep them engaged throughout a full 90-minute session. Additionally, although they did not directly suggest that class periods be shortened, they described how much more they enjoyed "marathon days" at Lakeside. Typically, Lakeside students were enrolled in eight classes each semester; they alternated attending four 90-minute classes on Monday through Thursday. Friday was considered a "marathon day" where students attended all eight of their classes in 45-minute sessions; the boys remarked on how much they enjoyed the shorter class periods.

The final key finding in this study involved the ways in which the boys constructed counternarratives about Black students at Lakeside through their photovoice projects. This finding was interesting because *the boys were countering their own deficit-based narratives of Black students at Lakeside*. Early in the project, the boys asserted that Black students were not focused on their



schoolwork and that they hated their White peers. It was expected that they would use their photovoice projects to highlight major problems they observed as Black boys attending Lakeside; most of the projects did this. However, there were several projects that intentionally contradicted the deficit framing they originally presented. For instance, Terrance shared a picture of two of his assignments where he earned a grade of 100%. James highlighted his racially diverse friend group sitting and enjoying each other's company at lunch. It is also worth noting that they did not always frame themselves and their depictions as being exceptions to a rule, but they described the normality of their depiction for Black boys in addition to an occasional CSA in their commentary. For instance, in *All Alone in Honors*, Tim explained that he was often the only Black boy in his honors and advanced placement classes; he also recognized that things “may look bleak” for Black boys, “but it’s getting better.”

### **Contributions & Future Directions for Research**

In the growing body of literature on Black boys and their experiences in school, there has been a call for more qualitative work that captures their concerns with, victories in, and general meaning making of the school context (Howard, 2013; Lozada et al., 2016; S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). Similarly, scholars have asserted the value of more qualitative and participatory research in order to examine and explore the ways in which CSA may be complicated across various dimensions of identity (Diemer et al., 2015; Shin, 2014). In this dissertation, I brought these two lines of study together to gain an understanding of the ways in which Black boys make meaning and critically analyze their experiences in school.

The program space of the *Voice Project* was designed with organizational settings that were established as beneficial for Black boys' CSA: photovoice in a safe, dialogue-centered Black and male space. The curriculum included activities aimed at facilitating CSA of their school environment and their experiences within it in addition to facilitating their completion of a photovoice project. For example, in the planning stages of their photovoice project, the facilitator guided them through an

interrogation of the ways in which race and racism influenced their school experiences as Black boys. This interrogation extended into the collective processing of photos taken and the boys' definition and revision of the narratives associated with the photos. Previous research has suggested that programs similar to the one described in this study serve as constructive spaces for Black boys to develop a healthy sense of self (Fuller, Percy, Bruening, & Cotrufo, 2013; Woodland et al., 2009), especially in the midst of racial discrimination (Hope et al., 2014). Additionally, in a previous study, my colleagues and I found that the program described in this study served as a safe space to discuss and process racial inequity in school (Smith et al., *in prep*).

The participants in this study reflect an understudied intersection of identities in the educational and psychological literature: middle class Black boys. It was expected that some of their stories would be congruent to existing narratives in the scholarly literature Black boys' school experiences; however, it was also expected that their social class (in a suburban context) would nuance existing narratives and/or present new narratives. Both of these expectations were met. The boys in this study reported experiences of discrimination similar to that of Black boys in other studies (Ferguson, 2001); they were targeted for disciplinary action at higher rates than their peers of other races and genders. They reported disengaging in some form upon experiencing discrimination. The boys in this study also faced a daily risk that is shared among all Black boys—their Black male bodies were read as threatening in most contexts. Because of societal biases against Black male bodies, starting as early as elementary school, Black boys face the risk of their boyhood being stripped away by the time they reach high school (J. E. Davis, 2003; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2003; S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). In many ways, as Black boys, their entire being may be reduced to their bodies—bodies that are criminalized, hypersexualized, scary, and lacking in reason. The reduction of Black boys and men to threatening bodies is a common theme in the literatures on Black boys and men that span nearly a century (Brown, 2011). My fight against this reduction is partially reflected in my use of the term “Black boy” in the dissertation, as opposed to

“Black male” or “young Black man”; it appropriately reflects their humanity and the vulnerability of their developmental level between the ages of 15-16.

In my discussion of these participants at the intersection of Black and boy, it is important to note that each of the boys were athletes—all but one played on Lakeside athletic teams. Historically, athletics are a mechanism through which Black male bodies, the same bodies that are read as threatening, are valued symbolically and financially (Gordon, 2012). Although not explored in depth in the scope of this dissertation, there were cases in which the boys’ status as athletes provided them with some protections and privileges that non-athlete Black boys may not have been afforded. Andre alluded to his athletic privilege while explaining his saga with Ms. Hart during freshman year; he made meaning of her disproportionate disciplinary action toward him as her investment in his good behavior as a soon-to-be successful football player. Although Ms. Hart’s choices in disciplinary action were problematic and reflected racial discrimination, Andre’s reading of her actions—subtle as they are—hint at a culture of investment in Black boy athletes as assets to Lakeside (e.g., extra academic support, access to mentoring and social support via coaching staff, and minimal *documented* disciplinary action). Still, the athletic protections and privileges are not uniform for all Black boys. Derrick expressed his distrust of and disappointment in Lakeside athletic programs, as he was not extended the opportunity to join the Lakeside basketball team—a disappointment he attributed to racist coaches as he observed a mostly-White basketball team. In the case of Greg, a talented and celebrated multi-sport athlete at Lakeside, he experienced blatant racial discrimination at the hands of his baseball coach at Lakeside; this ultimately led to his parents’ complaint to administrators and his mid-season self-dismissal from the team. In the cases of Derrick and Greg, as their status as athletes was compromised or rejected, they withdrew emotionally from Lakeside during their freshman year.

As reflected in the title of this dissertation, the participants in this study employed defensive strategies of CSA where: they acknowledged the existence of racism and oppression, they sometimes

recognized its role in their lived experiences at Lakeside, yet they seldom rejected oppression. Instead, they opted to de-emphasize the role of racism in their experiences and work harder to disprove negative stereotypes about Black boys. I argue that these defensive strategies are classed strategies and may be unique to middle and upper middle class families of color, especially middle class Black families.

Although it was clear that the boys de-emphasis of race and racism was prompted by social cues from Lakeside's colorblind racial climate, it was also evident that their parents encouraged this strategy (at the very least indirectly). For instance, Derrick's father emphasized that Derrick's decision to leave class after the substitute teacher called him out in class was not wise and that he should be able to compose himself in the face of discrimination. It seemed that the de-emphases of race and racism (e.g., not dwelling on experiences of discrimination) may have been an explicit racial socialization message shared by parents. The message partially reflects messages that prepare Black youth for racial bias in society (Hughes et al., 2006).

Also reflected in the title are the counternarratives that the boys shared in their photovoice projects. One counternarrative—the disengagement of Black students in class at Lakeside is partially a result of the extended and often boring structure of classes—was largely influenced by my intervention as a program facilitator aimed at promoting CSA. The other counternarrative—Black boys are trying *and achieving* at Lakeside—seemed to be one that the boys accessed from parental racial socialization messages. The boys reported receiving positive cultural pride messages from their parents (see Hughes et al., 2006) that centered Black people as creating and maintaining a culture of achievement in multiple avenues, including education. This seemed to fuel parents' expectations of strong academic achievement for the boys; it was clear, though, that social class also fueled this expectation. Because the boys in this study do not reflect a demographic of poverty, parental absence, or lack of access to well-funded and valued schools, it is likely that the parents expected them to excel. Lakeside's school district was one that many families in the Hope City Metropolitan area fought to opt into; therefore, it seems that the

boys' parents expected to see a return from their investment of time, energy, and money that afforded the boys the privilege of attending Lakeside—a privilege they likely did not experience as adolescents (Lewis-McCoy, 2014).

In addition to the strengths of this research, there are several limitations to consider. The program space was designed to value the honest meaning making of André, Derrick, Greg, James, Stacy, Terrance, and Tim; however, they may have experienced pressure to censor their narratives for several reasons. Although I am young and intentionally maintained a non-punitive program culture, as an adult and program facilitator, they may have associated my presence with that of authority and the potential of punishment for certain narratives. Additionally, given the push for CSA in the program culture, other important narratives about their school experiences may not have been addressed. To mitigate the possibility of compromises to the boys' authentic narratives, I reminded them regularly of the value of their honest narratives and that the program was *a safe space for and about them*; still, caution should be exercised in attempting to transfer these findings to other groups of participants in future study.

Again, echoing the sentiments of other scholars, more work examining the school experiences of Black youth will be valuable, especially in the case of Black boys. Like this study, future studies should employ multiple methods—especially more qualitative and participatory methods in addition to building on the growing body of quantitative work—in order to gain a greater understanding of nuances that are not conspicuous in single-method studies. Regarding the qualitative study of Black boys, methods employed should continue to examine their school experiences across multiple identity dimensions (gender identity and sexual orientation, social class, ability status, and academic identity); additionally, Black boys CSA around gender identity and gender politics (i.e., heterosexism) will prove valuable in understanding the mechanisms of CSA across privileged (i.e., cisgender heterosexual male) and marginalized (i.e., Black/African American/Afro-Caribbean) identity dimensions (Coffey, 2014; Diemer et al., 2015). One of the most valuable assets of this study was the abundance of group

discussion in the *Voice Project* in addition to photovoice activities; future YPAR studies should be attentive to the mechanics and benefits of group discussion (e.g., sociopolitical debate and CSA at a collective level) among Black boys in program spaces in addition to the products of their participatory action research projects. Additionally, the participant observation conducted in this study followed a phenomenological method, was grounded in understanding the essence of the boys' experiences, and was presented in narrative form; however for future studies employing other interpretive paradigms, structured observation tools for YPAR sessions may prove beneficial for data reliability and transferability (Ozer & Douglas, 2013).

### **Implications for Practice & Society**

I arrived at Lakeside with a battery of questions and curiosities; yet in my initial interactions with Black adults at Lakeside, there was one question they asked me: “these boys have *everything* they need, why aren't they all achieving?” On the surface, their question is understandable; the boys in this study do not reflect the demographic often studied in the SPD literature nor the Black boy literature. They lived in an affluent suburban area, attended a highly ranked and celebrated high school, and did not initially report significant hardship. Superficially, they may be perceived as privileged and not in a strong position to neither analyze oppression nor report it in school. However, the boys in this study (André, Derrick, Greg, James, Stacy, Terrance, and Tim) reported otherwise. In their friend groups, the boys had to navigate normalized racial microaggressions in their peer group. In school, they experienced inequitable and racially-motivated disciplinary action from teachers and coaches. They also reported being bored in their disengaging classes and voiced their frustration on the lack of Black boy representation in advanced classes. It became apparent that they did not have *everything* they needed to be successful at Lakeside.

The boys' parents and other Black adults at the school also asserted, “Yes! The boys *need* a program like this”; even though they knew little about what the program actually was, there was a sense

of urgency around programming specifically for Black boys at Lakeside. But that sense of urgency was still fueled by the initial questions: “...why aren’t they achieving? *What’s wrong with them?*” I agree partially with their parents—*Black boys can benefit from Black boy-centered spaces*—for two reasons. First, the boys in this study expressed that they appreciated the Black boy-centered nature of the *Voice Project*; they enjoyed the space to discuss what they thought about Lakeside. Second, even though they were reporting discrimination and other forms of inequity at Lakeside, the boys did not engage in an analysis of systemic oppression at Lakeside. When given the opportunity to address problems at their school, initially, they chose to critique and blame their peers (fellow victims of inequity) for school problems. It is probable that CSA is not socialized nor welcomed in most schools across the United States, especially at suburban schools like Lakeside. It is documented, however, that Black boys are experiencing some of the same challenges discussed in this study (Q. Allen, 2013b; J. E. Davis, 2003; Hope et al., 2014; Howard, 2013; Neblett et al., 2009; Noguera, 2003; L. L. Rowley & Bowman, 2009; S. J. Rowley et al., 2014). There are many programmatic efforts to support Black boys’ healthy development—existing and forthcoming; the grounding in or the inclusion of sociopolitical development in youth development program curricula, group discussions, service activities, academic enrichment, athletic activities and the like are all viable options to scaffold Black boys’ CSA.

Finally, this study took place at the emergence of a national social justice movement among Black people in the United States. The study began one year after the killing of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, FL (February 26, 2012), three months after the killing of Jordan Davis in Jacksonville, FL (November 23, 2012), and a year prior to the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO (August 9, 2014). During this sensitive period, there were numerous local, national, and global conversations about race and racism in the United States. Specifically, there were many high-profile discussions (and activities) aimed at supporting *and* denigrating Black people. While writing this dissertation in 2015-2016, there was a volatile and competing uptake in grass roots organizing for Black *and* White

nationalist groups. These groups rose in response to more highly publicized instances of violence against people of color and in response to the racially charged 2016 U.S. presidential election. This study was not planned nor executed because of these events nor were the events discussed in the *Voice Project* during the time span described in this dissertation; however, the resulting sociopolitical climate served as a backdrop for the program sessions and the completion of this dissertation. Later, my colleagues and I found that the *Voice Project* served as a safe space to process the realities around the highly publicized killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in New York City in 2014 (Smith et al., *in prep*). At a moment when social justice is once again at the forefront of American consciousness, more understanding is needed around the ways in which Black youth can be supported in their fight for social justice. It is my sincere hope that this study contributes to that understanding and is a tool to support that fight.



## **Appendices**

## Appendix A

### Parent Consent Form



1406 SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
610 E. UNIVERSITY AVENUE  
ANN ARBOR, MI 48109-1259  
(734) 647-0626 FAX: (734) 615-2164

03/06/13

#### Parent Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Dear Parent:

My name is Dr. Robert Jagers. I work at the University of Michigan, School of Education. My research team and I invite you and your child to participate in a research study that is designed to understand and support family, school and community influences on the positive academic, social and emotional behaviors of boys and girls in grades 4-12. We plan to ask families at several schools with students in those grades to participate in our research. We are contacting you because you currently have a student in one of these grades.

As part of the research project, we would like to ask your student about his or her thoughts and feelings about relationships with other children and adults at school, at home and in the community. For example, we ask students about the best ways teachers can help them learn and how students respond when friends and classmates ask them for help. We would also like to interview you to ask you (or your child's primary caregiver) questions about how the family is involved in the school and community.

If you agree, your child will take part in three short interviews. Each interview will take no longer than about 30 minutes. We will observe your child during the school day and/or in the after-school program and may videotape him/her if s/he participates in after-school or summer programs we sponsor. The videotaping will let us see which of our activities students like and respond to the best. We also will review your child's school records and talk with his/her teachers and after-school program staff. This will allow us to better understand your student's strengths and challenges and how best to support his/her school success.

In addition, if you agree to participate in the parent interview portion of the research, you will be contacted in the next few months by a research team member to see if you would be willing to set up an interview appointment. This interview will be face-to-face interview at the location of your choice. The interview should take about one hour. We would like to audiotape the interview to make sure that our conversation is recorded accurately. We will ask you about things like your student's household responsibilities and activities at home as well as your

perceptions of and experiences with the school, his/her teachers and other community residents or groups that support you and your student. You do not have to agree to an interview for your student to take part in this study.

While you and your child may not directly benefit from participating in our interviews, we hope that this study will contribute to the improvement of the school experience for your child and other students in your school district. All participating students will be given a small token of appreciation at the end of each interview, regardless of whether they fully participated or not. In addition, all children participating in this project will be eligible for various enrichment programs being planned by Dr. Jagers' team.

Parents who participate in an interview will receive a \$25 gift card. Because we are interested in the long-term well-being of children, we will be conducting this study for at least three years. We may contact you in the future about continuing in the study.

The results of this study will be used to understand how family, school and community can influence the positive growth and development of boys and girls in elementary, middle and high school. All responses will be kept confidential. However, if you or your child tell us something that makes us believe that you, your child or others may have been or may be physically harmed we may report that information to the appropriate agencies. Also, many people like to talk about how they think feel and act. But, it is possible that you experience discomfort after describing your thoughts, feelings and behaviors. The likelihood of this is risk is very low. If something does bother you, we will make sure that you talk with your school counselor or other school and community resources to address your concerns.

We plan to share the results of this study with students, families and the school staff. The results may also be published. However, we assure you that your responses and those of your student will be kept confidential and will not include any information that would identify you. To keep your information safe, the audiotape of your interview will be placed in a locked file cabinet until a written word-for-word copy of the discussion has been created. As soon as this process is complete, the tapes will be destroyed. To keep this information safe, the completed interviews will be placed in a locked file cabinet and researchers will enter study data on a computer that is password-protected. The researchers plan to keep this study data indefinitely for future research about student growth and development. Identifying information will be retained for future communications with you and your child.

If you have questions about this research, including questions about scheduling the interview or about your compensation for participating, you can contact Robert Jagers, Ph.D., University of Michigan, School of Education, 610 E. University Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, (734) 647-0617, [rjagers@umich.edu](mailto:rjagers@umich.edu).

If you have any questions about your child's rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB-HSBS), (734) 936-0933, 540 E. Liberty St., Suite 202 Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2210, [irbhsbs@umich.edu](mailto:irbhsbs@umich.edu).

Sincerely,

Robert Jagers, Ph.D.  
University of Michigan  
School of Education  
610 E. University Avenue  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109

Parental Permission

By signing this document, you are agreeing to allow your child, \_\_\_\_\_, to be part of the study entitled, *Growth and Promotion of Civic Activism*. Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you allow your child to be part of the study, you may change your mind and withdraw your approval at any time. Your child may choose not to be part of the study, even if you agree, and may refuse to answer an interview question or stop participating at any time, without penalty or loss of benefits to which s/he is entitled.

You will be given a copy of this document for your records and one copy will be kept with the study records. Be sure that the questions you have asked about the study have been answered and that you understand what your child will be asked to do. You may contact the researcher if you think of a question later.

*I give my permission for my child to participate in this study.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*I give my permission for my child's school records (report cards, test scores, comments about school behavior and discipline referrals) to be reviewed.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*I give my permission for my child to be videotaped if s/he participates in the project's after-school or summer programs.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*I give permission for my participation in the parent interview and I agree to be contacted to set up an interview appointment.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone

\_\_\_\_\_  
Email

I understand that my child will be under the supervision of the program staff from the University of Michigan and that school staff will not be present during program hours. Also, I understand that transportation must be arranged for my child and that they must vacate the school premises immediately after program hours.

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Signature

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Date

## Appendix B

### *Voice Project* Interview Guide

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Category	Example Questions
<b>Starting Info/Warm-Up</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Name</li><li>2. Grade</li><li>3. What do you think of the <i>Voice Project</i> so far?</li></ol>
<b>Identity</b>	
<b>Personal</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Who are you? How would you describe yourself to someone who doesn't know you)?</li><li>2. What would you say are your strengths? Challenges?</li><li>3. What do you do in your free time? In school? Out of school?</li></ol>
<b>Gender</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. How do you identify in terms of your gender?</li><li>2. What is the difference between being a boy and a man?</li><li>3. What does it mean to be a _____ (boy, young man, or man) to you?</li><li>4. Is the experience of a young man different from girls/young women?</li></ol>

<b>Class</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How would you describe your socioeconomic status?</li> <li>2. What does that mean?</li> <li>3. What do your parents do for a living?</li> <li>4. About how much money do your parents make?</li> <li>5. Did your parents go to college? Where? Highest degree?</li> <li>6. What do you think this is like for other people at your school? Black people?</li> </ol>
<b>Race</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How would you describe your race or ethnicity?</li> <li>2. What does it mean to be _____?</li> <li>3. How important is being Black to you?</li> <li>4. How do you feel about Black people as a whole?</li> <li>5. How do you think others feel about Black people in general? What about in your school?</li> <li>6. Do your parents talk to you about being Black/race? What types of things do they say? When?</li> </ol>
<b>School</b>	



<p><b>School Description</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How would you describe your school?       <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Racial Breakdown           <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Students</li> <li>ii. Teachers</li> </ol> </li> <li>b. What types of things does your school have in place for students to do well (Resources available)?           <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. What is the most valuable resource at Lakeside?</li> </ol> </li> <li>c. School Culture           <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. What is it like here?</li> <li>ii. How do you think Lakeside compare to other schools?</li> <li>iii. What do people outside of your school think about it?</li> </ol> </li> <li>d. Discipline           <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. What are things that students do to get in trouble here?</li> <li>ii. What happens when students get in trouble?</li> <li>iii. Who is getting in trouble?</li> <li>iv. When is it different</li> <li>v. What do you think about that?</li> </ol> </li> <li>e. How are students treated differently?           <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Race</li> <li>ii. Gender</li> <li>iii. Class (Rich or poor)</li> <li>iv. Temperament (How they act)</li> </ol> </li> <li>f. Why is the school the way it is?</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. How is the Cherry Hill community involved in the school?</li> </ol>
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<p><b>Academic Identity</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How would you describe yourself as a student?</li> <li>2. What kinds of grades do you make? GPA?</li> <li>3. Can you describe an average day at school?</li> <li>4. Favorite Teacher? Why?</li> <li>5. Favorite Class? Why?</li> <li>6. Least Favorite Teacher? Why?</li> <li>7. Least Favorite Class? Why?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Friends</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Who are your friends at school? (Core group)</li> <li>2. Demographics</li> <li>3. How are they in school?</li> <li>4. _____</li> </ol>
<p><b>Final Personal Info</b></p>	
<p><b>Neighborhood</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Where do you live?</li> <li>2. Can you describe your neighborhood?</li> <li>3. If we walk outside your front door...?</li> <li>4. Do you like your neighborhood?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Home</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Who do you live with?</li> <li>2. Can you describe your family?</li> <li>3. How is your relationship with your parents? Siblings?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Miscellaneous/ Demographic</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Where were you born?</li> <li>2. Where have you lived?</li> <li>3. Previous schools?</li> <li>4. Any questions for me?</li> <li>5. Anything else I should know?</li> </ol>

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