

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR? LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF TEACHERS IN  
URBAN SEGREGATED SETTINGS

by

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies  
in the Graduate School of  
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2020



## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the practices of teachers in designated failing segregated urban setting. Many students in poor urban settings live in generational poverty and do not have visible role models to emulate. Most are overexposed to a Hip-Hop philosophy that supports misogyny, over-sexualized masculinity, and violence. There is a gap in the research on teachers' perspectives from this setting and how their practices are actualized in the classroom. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews, observations, post-observation interviews, and document analysis of five teachers working in a southeastern segregated middle school. The teachers told tales reflecting times when their values conflicted with that of the school and how they learned to maneuver around them. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy was utilized as a framework to analyze the practices of teachers. Teachers in this setting bartered with their students and cashed in on students' cultural capital in strategic ways. This allowed them to teach them content while also engaging them in discussions about critiquing problems and strengths associated with Hip-Hop music and culture. Although teachers did not verbalize it, they were able to delicately integrate art via Hip-Hop culture into their curriculum, and support the overall goal of the school while focusing on needed standards. Educators need to prioritize the needs of students above policies and mandates for educators in urban settings. The needs of the students are paramount in these settings. The academic needs must be met, but we must also understand that there are ways to honor students' cultural assets.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, Roosevelt Martin. I knew I could do this because you told me I could. I wish you were here to see it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am pleased to have this opportunity to thank my husband, Jason, for always supporting me in every endeavor. I want to thank my children (J.T., Jeremy, Donovan, Jackie and Willie) for pushing me to complete this degree. I am most indebted to Dr. Nirmala Erevelles, the chair of this dissertation, for sharing her expertise and encouraging me to believe that I could accomplish this task. I would also like to thank all of my committee members, Drs. Natalie Adams, Becky Atkinson, Aaron Kuntz, and Stephen Tomlinson for their invaluable input, inspiring questions, and support of this dissertation. I want to thank my cheerleaders, Makeda Dabney, Deloris Elridge, Alycia Hartley, Rodriquez Leonard, Dr. Emeka Nzeocha, M.C. Pruitt, and Raynetta Wiggins, for your unwavering support and belief in my abilities. Last but not least, thank you, Alberta Howard, for molding me into a fearless, independent woman.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

George Santayana (1953) said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it ( p. 284)." Despite this quote being passed down for centuries, it appears to represent only a precautionary tale instead of a way to learn life's lessons. The obvious way that history has been ignored in education gives credence to Burke's adage. Rarely is history used to avoid or correct mistakes in instructional practices, policies, legislation, or reform agendas. My experiences in education serve as the preface for this study. I have worked in urban settings that consist of 90% people of color. I often reflect on the thousands of teachable moments I experienced daily and wondered if I utilized them to impart useful knowledge to my students. Therefore, I attempt to apply those experiences in subsequent practices and continually seek to learn from my past experiences to improve my students' outcomes

Recently, I read a newspaper article that listed 18 of the worst crimes in one of the local papers. As I scanned the pictures of the offenders, I noticed that 11 of the 18 offenders were students I had taught or worked with at some point in their middle school years. Most of them were under 21 years of age and were charged with egregious crimes such as murder, attempted murder, and armed robbery. One of the young men, Deven (pseudonym), I remember as a soft-spoken student with impeccable manners and a huge grin. He was smaller than most of my other students and would always make sure my desks were organized. Before he left my class, he would staple my papers and ask me if I needed him to carry anything to my car. As I looked at his arrest picture, I saw the same innocent face of the boy who carried my bag to my car. As I

scanned the images of the other familiar faces, I contemplated what could have happened for these young men to end up in this infamous line-up in six years.

My heart fluttered, and my eyes filled with tears because this is one of many stories where I have recognized the offender. I use to have the Mary Engelbreit print on my wall, which says, *Bloom, Where you are Planted*. I realized that most of the flowers in the garden where I have taught were not surviving amongst the weeds. I noticed that many of the students I taught have found themselves in predicaments that caused their lives to end with imprisonment or death. Although this is not the path of all of my students, there is a disproportionate number of students who deal with the criminal justice system. I realized that some of these encounters with the criminal justice system result from the systematic oppression of people of color. This photo array made me begin to think of the trauma of other teachers who deal with these harsh realities. I wondered how they coped, knowing that they encourage students to dream about the impossible; while also juxtaposing those dreams with the systematic strangleholds that engulf our students. This history needs to be explored to understand the dynamics of teaching in an urban area with the past of segregation that still lingers today.

### **Problem Statement**

Contributing to the problem statement of this study is the achievement gap, incarceration, and death rate among urban youth. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), by the end of fourth grade, African Americans and Hispanics scored an average of 20 to 25 points below their white counterparts on the National Assessment of Educational Progress math and reading assessments at 4th and 8th grades (NAEP, 2011). Further analysis by NCES in 2009 and 2011 showed that black and Hispanic students lag behind their white peers by approximately two grade levels. These gaps persisted even though the score differentials

between black and white students narrowed between 1992 and 2007 in 4th-grade math and reading and 8th-grade math.

The literature on marginalized students and the achievement gap may seem dismal to many educators, but the numbers are staggering. According to the Campaign for Educational Equity (2009), about one out of 50 students of color can read and comprehend specialized text compared to one in 12 white students. The Campaign for Educational Equity further estimates that about one in three African American males will be incarcerated in prison, and one in six for Hispanic males. The most tragic statistic is that the leading cause of death since 1978 for African Americans ages 15 to 34 is homicide. Teachers in urban settings are involved with the aftermath of these numbers. They experience the achievement gap. They are there to comfort and console families dealing with tragedies. The teachers in these settings witness and experience the violence that occurs at schools and are tasked with helping students process the reverberations.

Another contributor to the problem statement is the lack of equality in urban settings. The inequalities are often more compounded for urban youth due to the complex resegregation of public schools (Ayscue et al., 2018; Devoto & Wronoski, 2018; Kahlenburg 2013; Kozol & Kahlenberg, 2001; Klaf, 2013, Mickelson, 2001; Ryan, 2010; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Wells, 2015). According to Ryan (2010), educational reform over the last four decades has tried to implement changes to remedy the achievement gap, such as school choice, more tests, and teacher accountability measures. In essence, this practice of resegregation has created a separate and unequal educational system for poor and minority students (Haberman, 1994, Kozol, 1990, Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Ryan 2010), inherently defeating the intent of the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Teachers in these settings are charged with helping

students understand why life is not fair. They must help students to understand their frustration while teaching them about injustice and social injustice.

Just as some urban minority youth must juxtapose their cultural identity with being a student, so do teachers in these settings. Today, there are many competing and conflicting factors for teachers as well. Teachers bring their own cultural identities and beliefs with them as educators into the classroom. Teachers must meet the mandates of testing and other accountability measures. Teachers are also charged with teaching life and coping skills while teaching their content. Teachers must navigate the cultural norms of today's youth and engage students with tools that speak to their generation. The problem is that separate but equal exists in urban settings not only for students but also for their teachers.

The problem addressed in this study is that these teachers are tasked with producing outcomes despite the disparities. They are often given less to do much more while the inequalities compound. These teachers often experience trauma from practicing in these settings. They have to console students when students are hurt by violence and disappointed with living in an impoverished environment. Teachers who are tasked with helping students work through systematic oppression are often silenced. These teachers' voices can be impactful in gaining knowledge and changing the narrative about urban students. We do not have enough urban teacher leaders' stories being told to provide insight into powerful practices.

### **Purpose**

Although there is evidence that the most significant indicators of student success in schools is the knowledge and belief of the teachers who teach them (Howard 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Scheidecker & Freeman 2015; Shulman 1987), very little attention is given to the experiences of teachers in designated failing segregated urban schools. The purpose of this study

is to provide these teachers with the opportunity to serve as experts regarding their practice.

There is a gap in the research on these teachers' perspectives and how their practices are actualized in failing segregated settings. I endeavor to better understand how teachers working in these schools function in light of resegregation and how the culture relates to the curriculum and school climate in urban schools.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the experiences of teachers working in “designated failing” segregated urban settings?
2. How do teachers view segregation, poverty, and cultural influences impacting the outcomes of their practice?

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is that it takes place in a newly configured middle school. The middle-grade years are an instrumental time for adolescents. Students in this age group are negotiating the period between childhood and becoming teenagers. Middle school settings were designed to help students navigate the impact of puberty on their academic, social, and emotional lives (Armstrong, 2006). It is this time where student identity is formed (Erikson, 1997). For schools to foster a positive self-identity for students, there must be a school-to-community connectedness. According to Seider et al., 2013, school “connectedness refers to the sense of acceptance, respect, support, and caring that a student experiences in a school context” (p. 790). School connectedness improves academic outcomes and classroom involvement, and helps students develop trust for teachers and administrators. Most middle schools fail because they do not reflect the qualities of good middle schools in the first place. They do not offer that



connectedness for the students because they are often overcrowded, large, unsafe, and impersonal places.

Adolescents in urban settings are inundated with negative images through the media and Hip-Hop Culture. It is imperative for teachers to arm students with tools to engage with the world through discourse in these settings. Young adolescents do not understand the socio-political agenda in education that are evident in school, but they are capable of learning the emancipatory skills needed to debate in a democratic society (Andreotti, 2011; Apple, 2005, 2006, 2014; Apple et al., 2009; Au, 2012, 2010, 2009; 2008; Bourdieu, 1986; Brown & Au, 2014; Lareau, 2000, 2003; Tuck, 2013; Vincent et al., 2013). Teachers in these settings can help students learn to articulate their feelings in positive ways instead of through violence or other destructive habits. The narratives of these teachers can be compelling to researchers because examining teachers' perspectives in these settings allows experiential knowledge to be shared and gives a voice to the community of teachers charged with educating in an urban system (Zarate & Conchas, 2010). This study provides power to teachers' words, experiences, and beliefs in urban settings, which have the potential to impact the outcomes of urban youth.

### **Overview of Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology**

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as a theoretical framework is important because it goes beyond the mainstream curricula that often caters to middle-class Caucasian populations. Recognizing the power for people of color to see how they positively fit in educational settings is important (Ladson- Billingsley, 2013). The root causes of the achievement gap go beyond the social responsibility of the poor students of colors in urban areas. Allowing students of color to achieve academic success by using a culturally relevant pedagogy can help marginalized groups feel more confident about their academic domain. Hearing the negative rhetoric associated with

urban schools and students can have a significant impact on the teachers and students in these spaces. Presenting students of color with images of successful inventors, scientists, doctors, poets, writers, and mathematicians who are African American, Hispanic, and disabled allows students to see positive images of marginalized people. The stereotypes of African Americans are so prevalent in the media that students do not always see intelligent and accomplished people who look like them. This could also be used to teach the dominant culture's positive images of black people.

This qualitative study investigated the lived experiences of teachers in urban settings deemed failing by the state. The study explored teachers' perceptions and practices. The narratives of teachers in this setting reveal how history, politics, race, and class work together to form a unique point of inquiry. This qualitative study allowed teachers to give their views about working in these settings and offer useful insight to other teachers tackling the perceptions of urban schools, students, teachers, and communities. The insight into their perspectives provides insight into working in an urban setting and how culture influences their practices. According to Fontana and Frey (2008), qualitative studies can offer a useful format to understand the complexities of participants' experiences as they reflect on the role of educators in segregated urban spaces. Remaining open-minded and genuinely listening for understanding produces more fruitful data as participants relay their experiences in the school.

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted in an urban school district in a city located in the southeastern part of the United States. I drew upon the experiences of five teachers in this qualitative study. Study participants are veteran teachers who have taught for more than 10 years. The teachers work in a school classified as failing or have received a letter grade of "F" on the Alabama State

Department of Education (ALSDE) report card. The study focused on teachers' personal experiences with students in these settings and allowed them to provide a voice to their experiences.

Educators serve many roles to their students. Allowing teachers to give voice to how the classification of failure impacts their roles as educators and how the moniker of failure impacts students is essential. Their narratives also can provide an impact on how they see segregation, poverty, and cultural influences impacting the outcomes of their practice. Educators in this setting skillfully use their voices to paint a realistic portrait, the good and the bad, of their experiences. This is appealing because educators often use stories to retell, relive, and revise our instruction. We regularly assess our students to garner what they remember from instruction. Reflection on the social and cultural ramifications of our practice is important as well.

We must evaluate the lessons learned, the connections made, and our impact on our students. The study allowed teachers to retell, reflect, and possibly reimagine what it means to empower our students. As a researcher, I positioned myself in a way to tell the stories of participants and allow their voices to be heard. However, I understand that my own experiences played a role in the writing of these stories. I am a colleague of these teachers and have experienced trauma while teaching. It is vital to always reflect on the objective and what was learned during the lesson. As teachers, we teach content-based lessons but also life lessons. Schools are often the first instructor on how students view how the world works. Therefore, the narratives of teachers is important in understanding why students see the world in certain ways and social implications on inequalities. This study will give voice to how teachers position themselves in building students' self-efficacy. A purposive sample was used to select participants based on their knowledge and experience in urban settings.

## **Assumptions**

There are assumptions about how teachers in urban areas function as a result of the power dynamics associated with race and class. One assumption is that marginalized groups' voices are often silenced and ignored in deciding what influences educational achievement. Teachers situated in urban settings have different views based on their experiences working in areas that are predominantly minority and lower-income. Allowing these silenced voices of teachers to provide a narrative to mainstream ideology is essential. Another assumption is that race is socially constructed and continues to change due to the contestation of traditional ideologies. With the new rhetoric used, such as *Make American Great Again*, and the claims that political correctness has gone too far, we must remain vigilant in revealing the self-interest of dominant groups.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. One of the limitations of this study is that the area of research is a setting in which I work. I have worked in the school system for 17 years. All of my teaching experience has been in segregated urban settings. Although I attempted to remove myself as the researcher, the data were filtered through the lens through which I view life and society. Another limitation is the number of participants in the study and the time spent with participants. I spent approximately four to five hours with each participant. Ethnographer research is designed to last for at least one year (Creswell, 2007). This was not ethnographic research; therefore, the time spent was not the most crucial of details. The stories that unfolded from the narratives were the most important aspect, and the inquiry method of this qualitative study allowed those stories of teachers to be told. This process provided an opportunity to gain insight into the perspectives of urban teachers.

## Summary

For educators in urban schools, teaching involves overcoming more than perceptions and developing a critical disposition toward listening to marginalized voices. This goal is often derailed because of what Hammerness (2006) described as the conflicting struggles for teachers' vision. The demands of teaching subject matter, tending to students' needs, and wondering if any of it is working interferes with teachers' abilities to recognize the strengths of marginalized students. The isolation and blaming of failing schools often permeates the educational practices of many urban teachers and leads to student and teacher disillusionment (Esposito et al., 2012; Fine, 1987; Nieto, 1992; Weiss & Fine, 1992). This disappointment may lead to hopelessness among teachers in these settings. There are community-based master teachers that connect with their students and provide culturally relevant curriculum choices and recognize the strengths of their students and community.

Cultural Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as a framework is important in examining how teachers blend pedagogical knowledge and relationships evident in teaching to overcome the hopelessness of many students. Pedagogues use knowledge of content with an understanding of the student to produce an ideal learning environment. CRP is important to this study because it recognizes that students' cultural experiences are paramount to their education, especially in urban settings. Successful teachers in these settings recognize the strength of students and the experiences they bring. They use those understandings to develop new possibilities through examining and problematizing of content. The teachers who can successfully maneuver CRP have the potential to create new realities. We first must realize that this disillusionment of urban students in segregated impoverished settings requires scrutiny.

Although this study began as a personal narrative, I understand that other teachers in urban settings have stories of their own. Despite many strides made towards race relations, an achievement gap persists, and many southern urban students are not achieving on similar levels of their white peers. The narratives provide a glimpse of some of the experiences that occur in urban settings. This study allowed teachers to give voice to their opinions as self-reflective practitioners and provides a window towards addressing inequality in educational settings.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

“Looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future” (Friere, 1970, p. 77).

#### **The History of Integration of Education in the South**

From the inception of public school, it was seen as the *great equalizer* and an essential part of developing our citizenry (Hirsch, 1998). However, for decades (legally) and over a century (structurally), education's best has been denied to students of color. The literature on the history of integration plays an important role at Magnolia Academy. It paints a picture of the past and helps develop a narrative of the societal wrongs that have plagued communities of color. History is vital in the study of education to trace the roots of many educational policies. According to Anderson (2016), even as schools were forced to integrate by *Brown versus Board of Education*, many southern states refused to allow integration. Despite the intentions of many Southern states to avoid a law issued by the Supreme Court of the United States, many asserted their states' rights. They held that this was their patriotic duty to hold onto discriminating practices. Anderson (2016) argued that this is an example of white rage being displayed due to pressures to integrate and advances made by African Americans. Since slavery, African Americans have strived to attain education. Education is seen as a liberating process that allows people to socially and economically transform. Despite this accepted fact, from Reconstruction to the present day, education for marginalized students has been neither fair nor equal.

The racial discrimination of students in education has continued to plague the educational system. The historic *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* (1954) declared separate but equal

schools were unconstitutional. Three southern states willfully complied with *Brown* (Adams, N., & Adams, J., 2018). Those states included Oklahoma, Texas, and Kentucky. According to Adams and Adams (2018), several states vowed to fight integration with every means necessary, which often meant retaliation towards parents who sought to integrate. These states were Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Whites who favored integration were also dealt with harshly. Many southern states refused to integrate, and politicians who supported integration were ostracized and mostly not reelected (Klarman, 2004). The Governor of Alabama, Jim Folsom, was defeated in the gubernatorial race of 1958 due to his refusal to join with other Southern Governors to denounce *Brown*. Although Folsom changed his stance, he was defeated by the most extreme of candidates, John Patterson.

In the participants' setting, the school system was slow to integrate. In September of 1963, black students attempted to enter an all-white public school in the area. The governor refused by ordering state patrolmen to block entrance to these schools. The city and state were already embroiled in a battle with Civil Rights leaders regarding integration in public facilities, schools, and businesses. This led to a major Civil Rights protest and demonstration, which resulted in the arrest of key Civil Rights leaders and protesters such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The majority of protestors were black school-age children who left school with the understanding that they could be arrested. It is in this setting where some of the most egregious acts were perpetrated upon children. In 1967, federal courts, following pressure for the unrest, ruled that the city would begin the freedom of choice plan towards desegregation (Barrett, 1964). Students had the option to choose to attend any school in the district, providing it was not overcrowded. The plan further ordered that all classes were to be filled regardless of color or race and that this was open to students from kindergarten to 12th grade. The plan allowed a slow



integration of the city's schools; however, the city did not provide busing services. This limited the choice for some students due to transportation issues.

In the year following the Freedom of Choice Mandate, the board of education managed to make some strides toward integration, but it gave white families a choice to attend individual schools. It also did not provide any means for true integration because of transportation demands (Loder-Jackson, 2015). In regards to teachers' placements, many black people expressed feelings that all of their excellent black teachers were taken away to teach in predominantly white schools. According to Loder-Jackson (2015), as a result of the Freedom of Choice Mandate, 31 black staff members were assigned to white schools, while only three white staff members were assigned to black schools. The lack of meaningful integration led to *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County Supreme Court Ruling* of 1968, which outlawed Freedom of Choice Mandates and forced integration. *Green* ruled that giving students a choice to attend a specific school did not advance integration. It gave states and school boards flexibility to create a plan but was deliberate in stating the federal government would intervene if integration were not accomplished.

Another influential case that helped to force towards integration was the *United States versus Jefferson County Board of Education*. The cases consolidated for appeal involved Alabama and Louisiana public schools. In Alabama, as of December 1965, 1,250 black students were enrolled in schools, which comprised less than 1% of the eligible black students. In Louisiana, there were 2187 black students, less than 1% of eligible black students. In the opinion, the justice wrote:

Freedom of choice is not a goal in itself. It is a means to an end. A schoolchild has no inalienable right to choose his school. A freedom of choice plan is but one of the tools

available to school officials at this stage of the process of converting the dual system of separate schools for Negroes and whites into a unitary system. The governmental objective of this conversion is — educational opportunities on equal terms to all. The criterion for determining the validity of a provision in a school desegregation plan is whether the provision is reasonably related to accomplishing this objective. (*United States v. Jefferson County Bd. of Education*, 380 F.2d 385, 390 (5th Cir. 1967))

Following these rulings, the board of education in the study site, developed attendance zones to achieve unitary status in 1970 (Board of Education Minutes, 1970). Some of these decisions called for a racial quota, busing, and an evaluation by the federal government with possible noncompliance penalties. Fears of integration and private norms superseded constitutional rulings. During the 1970s, the white population declined by 28%, and the black population increased by 25% (Wilson, 2013). From 1975 to 1980, the study site experienced a loss of 27,000 residents to neighboring suburbs. Many white parents with school-aged children left to avoid educating their children with black children, while older white families remained. Before *Brown*, the study site had an enrollment of 65,000 students, 28,000 black students, and only 37,000 white students (Klarman, 2004). By 1975, there were 18,000 white students and 35,000 black students. This white flight has continued with less than 25 students in the system's population classifying themselves as Caucasian. Understanding the past of the study site is instrumental in prefacing the present and improving the future. Teachers of urban students are tasked with providing opportunities while also dealing with the many demands of their settings.

### **Teachers' Beliefs and Expectations**

The teacher that a student is assigned can inspire or discourage learning. The expectations of teachers play a significant role in the outcome of students of color that may contribute to

inequalities (Thys & Houtte, 2015). Kagan (1992) generally defined teacher belief as “[T]acit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students in the classrooms, and the academic material to be taught” (p. 65). Teachers may believe that they have more control over high expectancy students and may feel more successful in challenging them with higher cognitive skills. This production of who is teachable can create a school culture of low expectations that looks beyond the capability and focuses on perceived ability. These perceptions can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies based on the beliefs of teachers.

The self-fulfilling prophecies manifest in the academic options presented to students and the way teachers convey the possibilities to students. This also contributes to what Tuck (2011) referred to as school push out. These are the components that affect marginalized students inside and outside of school that keeps students from completing high school. Some students are told that they are not "cut-out" for school and are not wanted in the educational setting. Students are embarrassed, but they also begin to develop a defense mechanism to cope with the indignities thrown upon them. Tuck (2011) referred to these as humiliating ironies that "stab at students' experiences of themselves as intelligent enough or worthy enough to do well in school" (p. 821). All of these indignities work against students believing that they can succeed and that their knowledge is essential. According to Landa and Conwell (2014), the self-fulfilling prophecy may have a profound effect on how all students learn to racialize achievement and believe that academic success is a trait for Caucasian students. Educational settings place students in a racialized hierarchy. The designation of "failing schools" and reports card grades of "F" further stigmatize schools. This is especially problematic for students in urban low socioeconomic areas that do not experience success in school. Categorizing the entire school as failing also marginalizes students and teachers. Therefore, even when students of color are integrated into

predominantly white schools, there is still the fact that for students of color, the achievement is not automatic (Fanon, 1967).

Many teachers are ill-equipped to deal with the combination of teaching in raced and poverty settings. According to Laughter (2011), although the majority of the teaching force is white and middle class, there should be no assumption that they cannot teach students of color or that being a minority teacher automatically prepares you for teaching students of color. It would be detrimental to marginalized students to assume that oppression and race can be overcome by merely beginning to racialize teachers. Gass and Laughter (2015) studied a 10<sup>th</sup>-grade class of black students who repeated English I, a 9th-grade course. The student-teacher, who was a white female student completing her internship, found a way to relate to students who classified themselves as gang members. The teacher built relationships with the students to discuss gang life and how it impacts schools. The young Caucasian female teacher was able to relate to a different culture surrounding gang membership while acknowledging the gangs' value and helping students problematize some of the downfalls of gangs. Gass and Laughter (2015) stated:

The school-to-prison pipeline begins when schools see students as more likely to be incarcerated than achieve academically. Throughout Kayla's time with her students, they often discussed how school reminded them of being incarcerated: Failure in one class resulted in a label that restricted their placement in other courses, limiting where they could move within the school. Even cinder block walls, and the imposition of a schedule over which they had no control reminded the students of prison. The reality of in-school suspension reified the idea that isolation was an effective disciplinary policy. (p. 342)

Participants stated on surveys, focus groups, and during member checks that the teacher had a positive impact on their belief of achieving a high school diploma. They credited the change in

perception to the teacher's acceptance of what others considered a deficit. This perception helped students examine their position in the gangs by serving as experts in a class and gave them the confidence to believe that graduation was possible despite their gang affiliation. There are far too many factors to consider when understanding the role of a racist and classist system and how structures are put in place to maintain the status quo. However, we must focus on how we can overcome these systems to provide a better outcome for students in urban high poverty settings.

### **Self-fulfilling Prophecy**

The teacher is one of the most influential factors on academic achievement in schools. The teacher holds the power of perception. He or she holds the key to empower or discourage. However, the stage is partially set when the state begins to label schools, teachers, and students as failures. The microaggression of labeling marginalized schools as failures contributes to the self-fulfilling prophecies for teachers and students. The quotidian instances of characterizing students as less than unconsciously contribute to prejudice and racism. How students perceive themselves as learners is often a neglected factor when discussing achievement outcomes. Students are equivalent to a pawn in the accountability game. Their knowledge via test scores is used to evaluate an entire system. The self-fulfilling prophecy and how teachers' expectations can impact the progress of students is real and relevant. The cultural capital, which many urban students possess, needs to be addressed and nourished in academic settings, which promotes raising expectations and countering negative narratives (Neumann, 2013).

Frequently, the mainstream curriculum does not support students of marginalized backgrounds and usually classifies them as failing or non-proficient in the academic realm. The proliferation of reform agendas has pushed for higher standards, more accountability, and a businesslike dichotomy that encourages producing a viable workforce. This agenda does not

promote developing a language of possibility for marginalized students and leaves the most under-supported student out of what is considered success in schools (Giroux, 2004).

Marginalized students should have a challenging curriculum, and they can be classified as proficient. Students in these settings also need to be provided with the best resources that are afforded students in more affluent areas instead of further marginalizing them as failures.

The narrative begins to shift towards negativity, promoting a damaging self-fulfilling prophecy. The failure to recognize students' social capital can lead to low expectations and differential treatment of marginalized students (Benner & Misty 2007; Normore 2004; Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968; Springer, 2016; Tuck, 2011). Although teachers may not purposefully set out to undermine students' expectations, teachers' expressed and unexpressed demeanor can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for individual students and impact the school as a whole (Springer, 2016).

The power of persuasion is very impactful for students identified as high poverty. According to Dell'Angelo (2016), although students of lower socioeconomics may encounter many obstacles, teachers can make a difference by setting high expectations and reframing students' outlook on learning. This outlook gives credence to the adage that as a man thinketh; so is he. Often there is a narrative that many marginalized students' failures are due to their lack of a strong work ethic and play slowly into the myth of meritocracy. The impact of stereotypes and lowered expectations are examples of social mechanisms that illustrate how prejudice towards marginalized groups materializes (Becker, 2013; Hedstrom, 2005; Merton, 1948). This phenomenon was attributed to the Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The authors determined that positive expectations of students positively influenced student performance. The adverse was also determined to correlate, which meant that negative expectations had a negative

influence on students as well. Ovid *Metamorphoses*' main character, Pygmalion, was a sculptor who fell in love with one of his creations. He was so enamored with his ivory statue that he begged the gods to create a wife in the same image. The story was later adapted by George Bernard Shaw to illustrate how Professor Henry Higgins' ambitious ego believed that he could pass a simple commoner off as a royalty. In both stories, the Pygmalion effect spoke their beliefs and desires into existence.

Hinnant et al. (2009) conducted a longitudinal study of children from 10 locations within the United States. The children were followed from one month of age to 5th grade to examine if teachers' overestimation or underestimation of ability correlated with future academic performance. Participants were contacted shortly after birth. One thousand six hundred and four families agreed to participate. The sample consisted of 11% of mothers who did not complete high school, 14% single-parent mothers, and 24% minority children. The study involved six visits to the home of the children from one month until the child entered school. Mothers and children also came to the site on four occasions. The children were observed at school in grades 1 (966 students), 3 (971 students), and 5 (955 students). They were seen in the home around the same time. The study provided insight into how teachers' expectations influenced younger children. The students' sex was a predictor of teachers' beliefs for high reading achievement in all grade levels studied. For female students, teachers' expectations were overestimated. Also, the study found that teachers' estimation of students' academic ability were exaggerated.

The authors found that "for reading minority boys had the lowest performance when their abilities were underestimated and the greatest gains when their abilities when their abilities were overestimated" (p. 669). This is very impactful in working with minority boys and students who may be classified as difficult to manage. Other empirical studies also support minority students

who were less likely to be referred to as gifted and ranked as being seen as unmotivated (Irizarry, 2015; Jussim et al., 1996). Teachers' expectations of those students are diminished, and they are the group that may need the most encouragement and motivation to achieve in subsequent grades. This is the same power of persuasion that Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) spoke into existence regarding how teachers can impact the outcomes of students by setting high expectations or by just believing in the potential of the students. Believing in students could be extremely beneficial to students of color and low-income students. Frequently these students face insurmountable odds, and they need champions who can counter the narrative of inevitable failure.

Scott et al. (2019) analyzed 41 black and white teacher relations in an elementary school. They also evaluated 41 teacher/student dyads in a high school setting to determine how teachers' and students' race intersected in regards to teachers' and students' behaviors. The researchers proposed that their behavior can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. The researchers conducted over 7,000 observations. Students were more likely to receive negative interactions from teachers regardless of their actions. Teachers overgeneralized students' behaviors and were more likely to predict that black students would fail. This false prophecy tainted the ways that teachers interacted with these students as they became more hyper-vigilant, expecting the misbehavior. This constant surveillance becomes a part of the self-fulfilling prophecy that characterizes students of color as deficit.

In a study by Smith and Eccles (1999), the researchers studied examined the relationship between teachers' perceptions and student achievement over a seven-year-period, analyzing students' final math marks and standardized math-test scores from 6th through 12th grade. The authors studied whether self-fulfilling prophecies accumulate, dissipate, or remain stable over



time by using data from more than 500, 6th- through 12th-grade students in public school math classes. The authors used teachers' expectations in both 6th and 7th grades to measure the effect of accumulation and whether the self-fulfilling prophecy decreased over time. The researchers found that teachers' expectations in lower grades can impact students' achievement in younger grades. Still, the study demonstrated that the effects diminish due to multiple perceivers over the years with different expectations. The authors concluded that there is a need to study how the impact of the self-fulfilling prophecy accumulates over time. The importance of my research is to see how placing a failing moniker on a school can impact teachers and students in urban settings. It is also an example of how the systemic stranglehold of labeling schools and students serves as a way to marginalize these settings further instead of encouraging them to overcome obstacles. Finally, it speaks to teachers knowing their students and using strategies to engage students in the learning process.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

There is power in the words that we speak. Educators can use their pedagogical prowess to empower the students they teach or to passively teach facts or skills that seem unimportant to the youth of today. The media, politicians, and society frequently portray urban living as a dismal place to justify re-gentrification. The community is classified as needing improvement, and this is evident by reform efforts such as charter schools and grading schools by standardized test scores. These efforts send messages that our students are less than, inferior, and doomed for failure. The pedagogical knowledge of teachers is essential. Teacher should know their content, but they should also understand that teaching in urban settings brings a different perspective and requires a skill set that recognizes the needs of students. Teachers must also be knowledgeable of the implication of race and class in urban settings. Understanding that race plays a significant

role in students' learning, and the history of racism is integral in what goes on in schools and society (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as the theoretical framework of this study helps paint a picture of how using the community's cultural capital and resources is an essential tool in empowering teachers and students.

At the beginning of this study, I told the story of a young man whom I taught in middle school many years ago. He is currently in prison for murder. Personally, his story is not an anomaly but a cry for help to find out how teachers of marginalized students in urban settings (especially in my setting) can achieve favorable outcomes, how teachers' expectations influence these outcomes, and the part that classifications of *failing schools* influence these outcomes. Although empirical studies have been conducted about teachers' expectations on students' outcomes, the literature regarding the history of the setting, teaching in a racialized society that negates the potential of students of color, politics, and willingness to close the achievement gap must be examined.

For educators in urban schools, teaching involves overcoming more than perceptions of urban schools and to develop a critical disposition towards listening to marginalized voices. This goal is often derailed because of what Hammerness (2006) described as the conflicting struggles for teachers' vision. The "constantly shifting demands of subject matter and the student's needs; and dealing with the uneasy tension between their ideal and their current practice" (Hammerness, 2006, p. 5) interferes with teachers' abilities to recognize the strengths of marginalized students. The school reform mandates evident in mainstream schooling leave many marginalized students feeling disconnected and unsupported. The isolation and blaming of failing schools often permeate the educational practices of many urban teachers and leads to scripted curricula (Esposito et al., 2012; Fine, 1987; Nieto, 1992; Weiss & Fine, 1992). Teachers must be willing

and able to examine their critical dispositions to raise the *consciousness of possibility* (Greene, 1992) and make success accessible in the classroom to urban students.

The needed critical dispositions involve teachers' beliefs and how they can apply what knowledge is essential to them and their students (Neumann, 2013; Tarlau, 2014). To change mindsets, there must be a desire for change. Critical dispositions involve understanding the mandates and how the teacher can meet them while also meeting the needs of students (Schwab, 1983). The challenge is to make teachers aware of the hegemony that exists in schools and how to intertwine it in the curriculum (Holland & Lave, 2001, 2009). A desire to circumvent the status quo and examine the organizational structure, curriculum mandates, textbooks, the concept of teacher as the authoritarian, giver of knowledge, and the students as passive receivers is critical to changing marginalized students' outcomes (Friere, 1990). Critical dispositions of urban teachers and students can be realized by incorporating experiences for students to see their views and perspectives in curricula. Educators cannot begin to help students truly understand the democratic process until they recognize the systemic issues rooted in the lives of marginalized students. Teachers must also teach marginalized students how to critically articulate their perspectives and to help students formulate how change might come about in society (Collins, 2000; Dewey, 1992; Gay, 2009, 2013; Sahin et al., 2013; Shulman, 1987). It is through this critical analysis that students can "see the contradictions and inequalities" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 32) throughout society. Ladson-Billings (1999) stated that this critical inquiry needs to occur in a safe place where students can develop their worldviews and gain the insight to problematize injustice.

Ladson-Billings (1994) further explained the use of culturally relevant pedagogy as a way to "empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural

referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (p. 18). Historically, people of color and low socioeconomic status were excluded from the majority group's economic and democratic freedoms. The injustices have been documented throughout history but are not presented in ways that illuminate past situations. The narratives of history in all domains (economic, geography, political science, and history) serve as a way to problematize the mistreatment of marginalized groups and to allow students to critically examine unjust policies (Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Webb et al., 1993). It is through this dialogic process that students examine the multiple perspectives evident throughout history (Kane, 2015) and how culture and consciousness contribute to discourse (Vygotsky, 1978). Educators need time and the autonomy to structure the curriculum to engage students with varying perspectives. These critical dispositions are neglected due to other priorities superseding them.

Often with the demands of testing, instruction is diminished to the quick perusal of dates and facts. Therefore, the dialogue that plays a significant role in the construction of useful knowledge (Dewey, 1992) is a deficit. Providing students with exposure to relevant materials, while giving them the chance to problematize situations, could be empowering to urban students. Culturally relevant education is a conceptual framework that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural backgrounds, interests, and lived experiences in all aspects of teaching and learning within the classroom and across the school (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2009; Milner, 2017). Culturally relevant education is considered a significant factor in successfully refining the outcomes of students of color. It improves their academic achievement, engagement, and college preparedness and accomplishments. Culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach that hones in on skills that empower students to authentically examine their society and how society responds to people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2009). Ladson-Billings identified three

interconnected tenets developed from understanding the practices of successful teachers of black students. The tenets focused on student learning and achievement, the declaration of students' cultural competence, and the promotion of an awareness that allows and encourages students to problematize social issues and seek a resolution.

### **Critical Dispositions: Hip-Hop Pedagogy**

Crucial to the frameworks of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is the study of Hip-Hop Culture. For urban youth, Hip-Hop tells stories of the dynamic of living in the inner city, and there is a knowing that occurs from that shared experience (Chang, 2005; Dimitriadis, 2015; Edmin & Lee, 2012). From the 1970s until today, there is no denying that Hip-Hop culture has impacted our entire culture. This impact spoke of trials and tribulations of marginalized youth. The appeal of Hip-Hop has spread to the masses, across different ethnicities and races. Hip-Hop was rooted in community-based performances in New York, which included break dancing, graffiti artist, and live battle performances (Chang, 2005; Dimitriadis, 1996). The art form became mainstream in 1979 with New Jersey's Sugarhill Gang performance of Rapper's Delight. Their style of community dance and social interaction was indicative of the known display of community for black people throughout history (Dimitriadis, 1996).

Hip-Hop's legacy of telling stories did not just entail the telling of positive or political justice stories. It also describes the harsh, gritty tales detailing living in high crime impoverished areas. The negative references to violence cannot be discounted. According to Sargent (2012), youth who had exposure to rap music in videos were predisposed to maladaptive behaviors such as being twice as likely to be arrested and three times more likely to hit a teacher. They also found that black males were more disposed to violence after listening to Hip-Hop music. Black girls were more prone to be accepting of abuse from a partner. Although Hip-Hop has its

detractors, which critiques its misogynist lyrics, violence, and conspicuous consumption, there are still possibilities to challenge oppressive regimes.

Hip-Hop Pedagogy allows this discourse to take place in our classrooms in a transformative way. According to Low (2012), the impact of culturally relevant education is too significant to ignore. Low stated:

Hip-Hop pedagogies in which the culture is used as a tool to teach skills such as writing, poetry, grammar, and critical language awareness are principally justified based on Hip-Hop's cultural relevance to contemporary urban youth and links between students' interests and self-esteem. Other pedagogical rationales include the social relevance of rap music's themes, the poetic and linguistic vitality of rap music and Hip-Hop language practices, rap's multimodality, and rap's potential for developing critical consciousness among linguistically and culturally marginalized youth through critical language awareness and critical multiculturalism. (p. 196)

Understanding that some educators are opposed to utilizing Hip-Hop music and only see the negative associated with the music, a strategy that integrates Hip-Hop in legitimate ways, must be employed. Teachers need to juxtapose the negative images portrayed by Hip-Hop and the political messages that can teach students about race and inequality. Teachers need to understand the dominant pedagogy practiced has used a subtractive policy to deduct the cultural values of marginalized students (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). Instead of utilizing all of the cultural capital that students bring with them to class, the school attempts to rid the students of their cultural identity instead of adding to it (Steele, 2009).

The promotion of the dominant group's ideology of what is relevant to know and learn has been a predominant basis for most educational inequalities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009).

Teachers can use a culturally relevant pedagogy to help students make sense of the disparity in the world. Students can form positive images about school when they believe they possess the correct skills, knowledge, talents, and interests to succeed. Students who are not able to form a positive relationship with the academic domain will not be successful in school. Steele (2009) stated that this is more important than race, class, or gender. African Americans and other marginalized groups are confronted with negative stereotypes regarding their academic abilities that can contribute to negative self-image. Negativity is evident in Hip-Hop culture, but students need to be able to critique this depiction.

Allowing students of color to achieve academic success by using a culturally relevant pedagogy can help marginalized groups feel more confident about their academic domain. Developing students' disposition to think about themselves and their communities through familiar lyrics critically can empower them to envision a change in the world. The stereotypes of African Americans are so prevalent in the media that students do not always see intelligent and accomplished people who look like them. The ones portrayed in *gangsta* rap videos, which are marketed to mainstream culture, are almost caricatures of authentic black people. Students need to build the capacity to critique those stereotypes and understand that stereotypes do not define black and brown people's outcomes.

Although the engagement aspect of Hip-Hop Pedagogy is evident, we cannot overlook the critiques of its connections to raising achievement levels of students. The debate about the value of Hip-Hop Pedagogy is open to discussion, and more empirical studies about its relationship to academic success are needed. Hill (2009) worked with a teacher to create a Hip-Hop Literature class. Hill's narrative worked mainly on their ability to engage students with literature using Hip-Hop. The students, who were mostly black, discussed the importance of

identifying black people and the commonality of the black experience. Students were able to explore culturally relevant material, which piqued their interest in the literature. Consequently, very little focus was given to the quality of the work of the students. The critique is that Hip-Hop Pedagogy has to go beyond hooking students into the lesson and producing high-quality analysis of the content to be accepted as a relevant educational tool (Dimitriadis, 2015).

Love's (2012) study also focused on a grounded empirical research of six black girls in Atlanta as they critically analyzed Hip-Hop from a feminist perspective. Love collected data for one-and-one-half years. As a methodology, Love utilized semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Through this study, Love was able to see how black females fell prey to the negative message of Hip-Hop that supported hegemony. The study examined the words that young black girls eternalized due to the messages associated with Hip-Hop music that over-sexualized them and portrayed them as objects used to gratify the male gaze. Most of the studies of the usage of Hip-Hop Pedagogy were structured similarly to Hill (2009) and Love (2012) and focused on students' engagements and the formation of black identities in urban settings. The literature focused on the researchers' thoughtful perspectives in a grounded study format (Dimitriadis, 2015). The research does not focus on other locations (outside of urban) and the possibility of how the researcher's positionality (worthy to study) influences the outcome of the research. Dimitriadis (2015) posited that for Hip-Hop to realize its full potential, scholars must evaluate the pedagogy. It cannot be seen as a curriculum to be studied by people of color or used with only poor black students.

Despite the critique of the reflexive nature of ethnographic studies, some of the stories inherent in rap music are experienced daily by urban teens. Hip-Hop Pedagogy allows students and teachers to turn down the beat and dissect Hip-Hop music's lyrics. Ladson-Billings' (1994)



culturally relevant pedagogy found that students who are treated competently, display competent behavior. Furthermore, the goal of education should be to creatively stimulate students to use their interests. Also, there must be a connection between student and teacher. Hip-Hop culture can help provide a bridge to understanding and academic achievement.

### **Youth Speech and the Usage of Profanity**

Hip-Hop is the music of the streets. Some of the music is gritty and profanity-laced. Many adolescent youths are inundated with the vernacular of the streets that they listen to in all avenues of life, not just music. The use of profanity is a common rite of passage for all children and adolescents. According to Jay (2009), profanity for adolescents is a chance to appear worldly to their friends and unafraid to be bad. Profanity is closely tied to words that discuss sex, bodily functions, or religious terms. Often courts have sought to limit some forms of speech such as hate speech or harassing speech. Jay asserted:

Courts presume harm from speech in cases involving discrimination or sexual harassment. The original justification for our obscenity laws was predicated on an unfounded assumption that speech can deprave or corrupt children. Still, there is little (if any) social-science data demonstrating that a word causes harm. A closely related problem is how harm has been defined — harm is most commonly framed in terms of standards and sensibilities such as religious values or sexual mores. Rarely are there attempts to quantify harm in terms of objectively measurable symptoms (e.g., sleep disorder, anxiety). Psychological scientists could certainly make a systematic effort to establish behavioral outcomes of swearing. (p. 157)

Although Jay acknowledged the use of profanity as having some adverse consequences such as verbal abuse or discrimination, the author found that most swearing by adults and children had minimal adverse outcomes.

Suganob-Nicolau (2016) examined the usage of swear words among young learners. The researchers used a Likert survey and an open-ended survey to determine what triggered 109 participants to use profanity and to determine the most significant contributor to learning to swear. The author found that all of the students admitted to using some form of profanity while in school or at home. The study also revealed that most students used profanity when they were upset and that the main contributor to them using profanity was hearing their mothers curse. Bergen (2016) posited that people from all walks of life use profanity. It is not limited to nationality, language spoken, race, or class. Some of the words deemed profane 20 years ago are not classified as profanity today. The culture decides which words are more offensive as time passes.

Society is often hyper-vigilant regarding the conduct of students of color. Therefore, marginalized students' usage of profanity may be stigmatized and punished differently than their peers (Short & Winston, 2016). Structural racism plays a part in determining whose speech is detrimental and characterizes profanity used by blacks as dangerous. There are negative stereotypes in schools surrounding students of color due to portrayals in the media or culture (Dowd, 2018). Black boys are especially stigmatized for being dangerous and likely criminals. In a study by Todd et al. (2006), black boys were perceived as a threat as young as five. Another study found that black boys as young as 10 were regarded as guilty or presumed to be much older than their age. The boys were not considered the same as white boys of the same age (Goff et al., 2014). The same assumptions can be made for students of color using profanity. The

speech of students of color is concerned more detrimental because of structural systems that categorize them as violent.

### **Cultural Capital and Stereotype Threats: How Do We Decide Who Is Worthy of a Quality Education?**

It is the language, the speech of students, and the culture of students in urban areas that begin to paint a negative picture of students in urban settings. According to Yosso (2002), it is often the belief that urban high poverty students cannot succeed that permeates the minds of teachers, and these beliefs are manifested in their teaching practices. Stories of students who lack motivation are dominant in urban settings. Lleras' (2008) study of public high minority urban schools versus suburban low minority schools found that African Americans who attended urban schools were seen as being less engaged in the learning process by their teachers, and they did not have the opportunity to take higher-level math classes.

The academic rigor and the message that African American urban students are not engaged enough or given access to challenging coursework contributes to the belief that these students are destined for failure. Teachers often blame students for their lack of motivation and exonerate themselves from the role they play. Students are expected to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and develop based on merit. The myth of hard work and achievement helps to alleviate white people's responsibility to confront racism (hooks, 1995). There is a pervasive problem with low self-esteem that plagues African American communities. These feelings of inadequacy, coupled with everyday hardships, make life almost unbearable for urban youth. It is easy to understand the despair of many marginalized teens and how a life of crime almost seems inevitable. Implementing a discourse in classrooms that allow students to relate their experiences to content can cause a metamorphosis of self-esteem.

According to Steele (2009), students' academic achievement is related to their perception of success within the educational domain. Students can form positive images about school when they believe that they possess the correct skills, knowledge, talents, and interests to succeed. The ideals that America is founded on democratic principles do not line up with what many marginalized students experience. In the politics of education, there is a heavy reliance on the theory of participatory democracy, which communicates that all people are created equal, and each person has the right to exercise their rights through political action and influence. This theory does not consider that many marginalized people do not hold the notion that they are a part of the all, in *equality for all*. Therefore, they may not benefit by participating fully in civic practices.

In *Williams vs. California* (2004), a class-action suit was filed alleging that California failed to provide adequate facilities, supplies, resources, or qualified teachers to students in public schools (Fine et al., 2004). One of the researchers, Fine, agreed to testify to interview students in the identified schools. The interviews were made available to all attorneys in the case. To collect a representative sample, the lawyers placed 400 calls. Their goal was to have a focus group of 10 to 12 adults who they classified as *educational survivors*. The educational survivors were students who were able to graduate. There were also 11 focus groups involving 101 students attending school in the plaintiff's class.

The result of the focus group and conversation found that students in these settings expressed feelings that they were educated towards mediocrity and away from academic mastery (Fine et al., 2004). Students wanted and needed quality instruction and a challenging curriculum. According to Fine et al. (2004), "The evidence suggests that the more years these youth spend in plaintiff's schools, the more shame, anger, mistrust they develop; the fewer academic skills they

acquire; and the more our diverse democratic fabric frays" (p. 2217). Improving the quality of instruction for students at risk is a significant concern.

There is also evidence that schools' characteristics and structures are a reason some marginalized students leave without completing coursework for graduation (Tuck, 2011). Many factors contribute to this phenomenon, which baffles educators and frustrates students. These schools often provide low standards and expectations. The small academic achievement, coupled with other factors such as high absenteeism and tardiness in urban settings, exacerbate and frustrate most plans implemented for achievement growth. There is a belief that these problems can be countered with better teachers and classroom instruction (Haberman, 1994), but those plans rarely address the myriad of socioeconomic concerns of urban students. Others merely document a problem with the differential treatment that teachers exhibit for some types of students (Babab, 1990, 1992). According to Babab (1990, 1992), studies have found that teachers commonly praise and encourage white students more than their minority classmates. It is also common for teachers to have lower expectations for minorities as well (Lucas & Scheter, 1992; So, 1987; Waxmon & Padron, 1995). These lower expectations are often wrapped in drill and repetition exercises that overemphasized remediation to address standardized test scores over critical thinking skills (Guyl et al., 2013; Knapp & Shield, 1990; Waxman & Padron, 1995). According to Noguera (2003), students of color, specifically African American male youth, have high aspirations for their future, but they are often deterred by a perceived lack of support by teachers.

### **School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The literature evaluates the role that Hip-Hop culture plays on teachers' practices, how normal teenage behavior can be framed as a deficit for students of color, and how a failure to

recognize students' cultural attributes begins to push students out of the academic arena. Another factor affecting urban youth is the school-to-prison pipeline, where students begin to face egregious consequences for minor offenses. These minor offenses mount to form a trail of wrongdoings that place students on a path towards the criminal justice system. The beliefs and expectations of teachers play a pivotal role in setting the tone in education. Teachers' beliefs about students are also crucial in a school designated as science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics (STEAM) settings. Education in science and math academies is touted as being an equalizer for impoverished students. The opportunities and resources that are given to students in high poverty settings increases positive outcomes. To accomplish this, teachers must recognize the cultural capital that students possess and find ways to channel these energies. Illuminating students' potentials is the only way the achievement gap between Caucasians and students of color can be addressed. However, we must recognize the politics of education and how they play a crucial part in how all students experience school. We must also examine the connotation of failure to evaluate if it serves as a self-fulfilling prophecy for students' outcomes in settings like Magnolia Academy.

The fight for integration was won in the courts but lost in providing many black children with equitable educational outcomes with fair discipline practices. During the 1980s, the Reagan Administration's War on Drugs hyped the projection of a class of super predators being raised in urban areas. This hyper-vigilance projected on people of color pumped millions of dollars into prison and coercive programs aimed at penalizing juveniles (Lutze & Bell, 2005; Wilson, 2014). The ultra-punitive policies of the criminal justice system has found its way in schools. Schools seek out to punish behaviors that are perceived to interfere with the mainstream ideas of learning. Responses from many students of color are seen as deviant or abnormal because they do not

resemble that of their white counterparts. Black students being placed in special education 1.4 times the rate of their white counterparts is evidence of this inequity (Morgan & Farkas, 2015).

Since *Brown versus the Topeka Board of Education* in 1954, the perceived loss of status and privilege by whites has caused local and state legislatures to pass laws that criminalize blacks and their communities. This legislation has allowed sentence disparities amongst crack and cocaine suspects, which incarcerated a large number of black males and decimated inner cities. Incarceration not only hindered the black male's ability to be a productive citizen, but also left many homes fatherless.

According to Crain (2019), 32% of the students in the study site's state are black, but they accounted for 62% of suspensions from school. Black students are nearly five times more likely to be suspended multiple times than white students, and this disparity has grown more significant over the past few years. There are vast racial disparities in these exclusionary discipline practices, including black children being targeted for discipline three times more than white students. These unfair policies feed into students' achievement gaps and even serve as a way to *push out* students of color from the educational setting. One of the state's top leaders at the department of education stated, "Suspensions affect achievement right off the bat because the student isn't in school. When a student misses instruction, achievement will suffer" (Crain, 2019, p. 1). Although there is evidence of excessive discipline on students of color, the practice continues.

Nationally, black and Hispanic students were involved in 50% of student arrests or referrals to law enforcement (Lee, 2016; Tuzzolo & Hewitt 2006). Schools' desire to maintain quiet, disciplined halls is more important than creating encouraging spaces that teach students to self-regulate. According to Tuzzolo and Hewitt (2006), there are three reasons why these zero-

tolerance punitive policies are detrimental to children. One of the reasons is that these petty violations would not be viable charges for adults, thus, exposing children to the judicial system for offenses that are not real crimes. Another reason is that schools are changed into small military states. These military states rob students of their voices and take away their agency.

In 2016, the then-governor of the state in which the study site is located announced the proposed building of four new prisons. The new prisons would cost an estimated \$800 million. In 2017, the new governor reiterated the need to build prisons and requested a \$40 million increase in funding to build new prisons (Cason, 2019). The funneling of money to fund the building of larger prisons without investing in schools seems like a hedged bet. There is increasing evidence that many urban students' school preparation is for prison instead of college or teaching a trade (Wilson, 2014). The school-to-prison connection is often situated around a desire to curb behavior and disproportionately affects students of color. Zero-tolerance policies and reliance on suspension has played into a culture of incarceration of black and brown people (Redfield & Nance, 2016). High stakes testing and accountability have added pressure to calm disruptions. Categorizing students by test scores has an unintended consequence of contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline by creating an incentive to push students out of school (Nance, 2016; Noguera, 2012). Frequently, dedicated educators who are overworked in urban high poverty schools face difficult obstacles, and it becomes a battle between whom they think they can save and whom they believe they cannot.

Last but not least, these punishments are not doled out equally. In Nance's (2016) empirical study, the author measured the relationship between a police officer's presence at a school and the likelihood of school personnel to refer students to the officer for seemingly minor offenses. Nance concluded that incidences regarding lower-level offenses doubled when a school



resource officer had regular contact. Findings from the study suggest that the relationships between school resource officers and school personnel tend to strengthen. When resource officers are patrolling the halls, school personnel may call them to handle disruptions out of convenience more than need. The harsher punishments are disproportionately given to students with disabilities and students of color. Instead of providing students who are marginalized with extra support, they are penalized. Many studies show that children who are expelled are more likely to repeat a grade, drop out of school, or participate in illegal activities resulting in incarceration. These school-to-prison policies harken to the days of resistance following the passage of *Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, and desegregation (Epperson, 2014). This reversion to attempt to segregate brown and black children because of a perceived rise in violence deprives them of their ability to participate in the democratic process. This is a part of the structural racism that frames marginalized students as unworthy and undeserving of access to an equitable education.

### **Race, Poverty, and Achievement**

Many educational institutions fail to understand or address that race is a social construct that is evident in the way that marginalized students experience schooling. Contributing to this discussion further is the achievement gap between marginalized students and white students, which continue to exist despite efforts to overcome it. According to Noguera and Akom (2000), the separation and denial of educational opportunities have existed for so long that it is hard to overcome these disparities without looking at the long-term effects. The authors asserted that there is an assumption of a deficit among students of color due to this continued achievement gap. However, Noguera and Akom (2000) argued that opportunities continue to be afforded to mostly white students, which continues to sustain these achievement disparities. They asserted

that the reliance on standardized tests has further separated and alienated marginalized groups' access to success. The disparity is apparent because there has been a failure to address the underlying issues of racism and invariably poor social and political decisions that have seemed like a concerted effort to ensure that white students succeed. This holds true to this study's setting. The school's classification as failing has a moniker that describes the entire school based on accountability measures. In the state of the study site, 76 schools were classified as failing—over 93% of the students in the schools classified as failing received free or reduced lunch. About half of the failing schools were comprised by 94% black students. None of the school listed had less than 40% of its students receiving free or reduced lunch, which is an indicator of poverty in the school. The composition of schools in the study site's district consists of students who all receive free lunch. Twenty schools out of 46 schools from the district of the study site were on the list. The system is comprised of 98% students of color. All of these numbers indicate that there is a disparity between the classification of who is considered failing in the state by race and socioeconomic status.

Although the problem of achievement level could be evident in all schools, the achievement gap is more extensive in low socioeconomic schools. These schools are not only tasked with producing academically but also account for uncontrollable social problems such as poverty and social and emotional issues. There has been little change in the achievement of marginalized students because federal mandates do not address the "way in which poverty and inequality influence student learning and school performance" (Noguera & Wells, 2011, p. 11).

Mickelson (2001) found that racial segregation and poverty operates in several ways that impede African American students' opportunities to achieve in school. Mickelson's significant finding while studying the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System was that students who attended

racially segregated elementary schools were less likely to be enrolled in advanced courses in high school. Reardon's (2016) study further complicates the issue of racial separation, and poverty. Reardon's study is consistent with over 20 years of research on school desegregation. This research demonstrates that harm comes from a concentration of low-income students of color as opposed to just from racial segregation. The author's study indicates that low-poverty schools are, on average, more effective than students with higher socioeconomic levels.

Structural inequalities have been in place since the inception of the United States. In *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Serrano v. Priest*, the California Supreme Court ruled that all students had a right to equal educational rights, which included equitable funding. The promise to fund education via *Brown versus Board of Education* and *Serrano versus Priest* has never been actualized (Ladson-Billing, 2013). These failures to alleviate discrepancies in education have incurred a debt to students of color. According to Ladson-Billings (2013), the debt is due to years of free labor used to build this nation. Hearing the rhetoric associated with urban schools can have a significant impact on the teachers and students in these spaces. The research question helps to formulate conclusions about how teachers in urban settings respond to the overwhelming messages that paint their students as inevitable failures in the academic setting. How does this impact their role as teachers in working with their students?

It is especially difficult to close the achievement gap, considering that the American school system lags behind smaller countries such as Finland in educational achievement. The equation of inequality in funding and other resources for poor school districts further complicates the narrative. One can easily see the correlation between the struggling educational achievement levels nationally and the difficulty for urban schools to maintain high achievement levels. In addition to the perception of national achievement levels, a similar sub-context that begs

attention is the impact of teacher and instructional quality. The need for Master Teachers cannot be understated in urban schools. The New Teacher Project (2018) conducted a study to explore opportunities for students and the impact opportunity plays on student achievement. “We talk about schools as a series of small opportunities for students . . . that add up to much bigger ones later in life” (The New Teacher Project, 2018, p. 5).

The subject of their study included five school districts with varying incomes and achievement levels and reviewed thousands of student work samples and surveys. The New Teacher Project (2018) study concluded that most students (70%) had big dreams for their lives. Students wanted to have professional careers, most followed instructions at school and yet struggled with success in school. Students spent school time lacking four significant components of success at school, described as "...grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations" (p. 4). Perhaps not surprisingly, based on the small academic achievement nationwide is the harsher impact of the lack of those four main components in poor, urban, and black communities that “. . . have even less access to these resources than their peers (p. 4). The New Teacher Project (2018) study also disclosed stark findings regarding black student achievement relative to teacher efficacy. Classrooms with a majority of black, Latino, or white students and a teacher of a similar race appeared to have higher expectations. Still, when paired with a different race of teachers, only about 35% of teachers reported high expectations. Although there were no white teachers at Magnolia Academy that met the experience criterion for the study, teacher efficacy and expectations played a pivotal role in students' success regardless of race.

These findings dovetail with the need to examine the impact of inequalities in urban schools adequately. Whether by design or inherent racial conflicts, teachers perceive self and

poor practice, these harsh realities result in 66% of black students at a four-year college who need remediation once they make it to college. While the nation struggles with raising high student achievement, the poor and urban black communities are crushed under the construct and weight of racial inequalities and poor educational opportunities.

### **Politics of Labeling Schools**

Using accountability measures and depicting schools as *failing* is rhetoric that can be seen as political. Politics in education has played a role in how students of color are treated. Politics are inherent in language used to describe urban school to the policies implemented within these settings. Regardless of who we are, race is a factor. There are visible facts of blackness (Fanon, 1967) that operate in segregated urban spaces. The existence of blackness makes race such a complicated dynamic when situated within theories and in educational contexts. Despite the complications, it is vital that we appropriately engage race and racial oppression within education. How we conceptualize race and how we formulate policies and procedures within the school are crucial in constructing knowledge. Despite some current coded language to identify race in our society, race remains an important factor in who receives what in education.

Racism is a part of the politics of the American reality that is based on white privilege (Bell, 1992; Feagin, 2006). It is used to solidify a system developed and designed to sustain a hierarchy based on social-structural inequalities. These inequalities maintain white dominance despite attempts to allow *peaks of progress*, to pacify marginalized people into believing that progress is being made (Bell, 1992). Although there are peaks of growth, the hierarchy is maintained through classifications like failing schools. This list of failing schools designation began in 2013. In the district of study, seven schools have remained on the list since its

inception. There are few supports given to these schools, but the state continues to slap a moniker on these places of learning. The only options for students in these schools are a transfer to another non-failing school or a voucher to a private school. Often, the most vulnerable students do not have the resources to leave these settings; therefore, there is minimal advantage to positioning schools as failures. The rhetoric of naming these schools fosters minimal improvement in urban environments and continues to marginalize them.

The politics are at play from the new reform agendas that take away from public education. This neoliberal education reform is equivalent to the Dog Whistle politics (Haney, 2014) that seek to subjugate people of color. Haney defined Dog Whistle Politics as being aligned with the political climate of our country in all branches of government, which influence educational policies. Dog whistle is appropriate in this setting because when politicians use the terms *failing school*, the analogy is of schools in urban areas or areas serving a high percentage of students of color. This continued reliance on education reformers to loudly decry the need for privatization in education is paramount to an alarm that signifies that mainly marginalized students cannot learn unless there is a private entity involved. It is akin to Dog Whistles because it uses achievement scores on standardized tests to paint the marginalized population as deficit. The reliance on test scores to denote who is learning and the quality of the schools is a way to marginalize the most vulnerable people further.

Recently Slocum (2019) wrote several articles advertising the system's *failures* at educating students based on the Accountability Act and the state's education report card. Each section listed the failing school's track record on testing and the private school in the area that accepted vouchers to educate. The term failing in education is indicative of a dog whistle because it classifies the school as less than others. In this state, all of the failing schools are high

poverty and mostly minority students. This order of classification of schools further marginalizes them.

### **Conclusion**

Feelings of hopelessness permeate students' minds daily, often causing minority students to mentally drop out of school before physically leaving it (Bowen, 2015). Several studies support the effects of a positive self-image and the future aspirations of marginalized youth. These aspirations must be clarified and seen as plausible for minority youth (Jenson, 2010; Noguera, 2015). Furthermore, researchers have found that marginalized youth who have a vision for a successful future are likely to attend school and exhibit a sense of resiliency (Abelabu 2008; McCoy & Bowen, 2015; Noguera, 2003). The expectations of teachers can have profound impacts on what students achieve in school. Many students in poor urban settings live in generational poverty and do not have visible role models to emulate. Most are overexposed to a Hip-Hop philosophy that supports misogyny, over-sexualized masculinity, and violence.

There must be a centering of what it means to teach marginalized students to change the tapestry and projection of students of color (Milner & Laughter, 2014). Teachers admit that teaching in places where there are high concentrations of poverty is difficult. There is power in positive thinking and examining the potential of urban students. Education can be an equalizer for marginalized youth. Teachers can speak life into the perception of students. All teachers can benefit from understanding the systems that have led to the achievement gap in education. Multiple studies on teacher's beliefs and students' self-perceptions have been conducted (Blumenfeld et al., 1992; Eccles et al., 1998; Rubies-Davis, 2006; Wigfield & Harold, 1992). Eccles and Wigfield (2002) focused on theories of self-regulation and expectancy to influence students' motivation. These factors included students' intrinsic motivation, other people's view of

their ability to complete a task, and prior performance. In addition to teachers' beliefs, gender, age, and students' self-perception, poverty and the trauma associated with living in an urban setting plays a factor in motivation and students' efficacy. The current research does not explicitly focus on teachers' belief in urban environments classified as failing. There are gaps in the research as it relates to an urban setting classified as failing within a city with a historically racial past. Pondering how the failing school delineation impacts teachers' role in working with students can provide insight into the ways we teach impoverished urban students. Finally, it is valuable to ask how and why these teachers imagine change in these at-risk settings.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Introduction: [w]e began to understand how the curriculum could be seen as a curriculum of lives, teachers' lives and children's lives. Thinking in this way, of course, made the composition of life identities, what we understand narratively as stories to live by, central in the process of curriculum making. (Clandinin et al, 2006, p. 50)

#### **Introduction**

This study challenged the beliefs and practices of teachers with students in segregated southern schools. The use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as a theoretical framework allowed for the voices of teachers in marginalized settings to be heard and their practices observed. CRP takes into account the importance of teachers using the students' cultural attributes to teach the curriculum. The research was associated with teachers' experiences in hard-to-serve schools. Teacher experiences in hard-to-serve areas are different than in other settings. These teachers must contend with structural inequalities while also facing the accountability measures mandated through policy. We cannot begin to understand urban schools, teachers, or students without examining their location, history, and the cultural/social aspect of these settings. I argue that the best methodology to understand the context of urban education is a qualitative study using a lens that recognizes that structural racism exists and explores how pedagogical practices shape the outcome of students in these settings.

## Research Design

This qualitative case study focused on the narrative of five teachers in an urban school classified under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as a failing middle school (Ed.gov, 2015). The failing school designation occurs when a school performs persistently low on state standardized tests. In this state, the department of education has deemed that schools whose scores for three years are the lowest 6% are failing schools. Since this school has been considered a *failure*, the research examined the experiences of these teachers and their practices as they navigate the connotation of success in a contested space. The study examined how and when teachers use alternative pedagogies and the impact of reform on their practices.

I utilized interviews to help understand how teachers effectively use the curriculum in critical ways to encourage dialogue and analyzed how school content can allow students to influence the discourse about their lives. These interviews were beneficial because it helped teachers to realize the pedagogical benefits of utilizing a culturally relevant pedagogy within an urban setting with marginalized students. The inclusion of qualitative interviews was useful to allow "the participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest to unfold as participants view it (the emic perspective), not as the researcher view it (the etic perspective) (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 101). By allowing people to tell their stories as experts gives validity to the story and their experiences.

## Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of teachers working in “designated failing” segregated urban settings?
2. How do teachers view segregation, poverty, and cultural influences impacting the outcomes of their practice?

## Setting

Magnolia Engineering and Science Academy is a middle school (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade) located in a southern urban area. The school has recently undergone a recent change to the grade configuration. The school was previously a kindergarten to 8<sup>th</sup>-grade span. The new grade configuration combined several communities, which has caused some territorial issues at the school. The school is comprised of 98% African American and 2% Hispanic. The school is located in a community of older, established homeowners. Many of the homeowners are active in the school. However, the greater community in which the students reside is classified as high crime and impoverished. Although the district has several magnet and specialty schools, Magnolia is a zoned school catering to the students within the identified communities.

The school has a total of 28 teachers. There are six teachers on each grade level. Each team has a reading, math, social studies, and science, STEAM reading, and STEAM math teacher. Although the two courses are designated as STEAM courses, there is no distinction in standards taught versus the regular math or reading course. This is the composition of grade levels from each grade level in the 6<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup>. There is also a special education or resource teacher for each team (three total). There are two physical education teachers who service all of the students. There are two teachers assigned as in-school suspension or restorative practices teachers. The school has a STEAM Coordinator to assist the school with integrating technology into the curriculum. There is also a coding, art, band, drama, and technology teacher. The school has an engineering teacher position but has not been able to find a credentialed teacher.

The staff consists of teachers from the three schools that merged to form the new school. The principal, Mrs. James, was the principal at one of the other two schools that combined with Magnolia Academy. Mrs. James has been a principal for six years. The assistant principal, Mrs.

Smith, remained at Magnolia, and the teachers are a mixture of the three schools. The STEAM component of the school was conceptualized as a way for the district to provide technology; one-to-one computers; high-tech science labs; and qualified, skilled teachers to enhance students' skills in a high-poverty school. The superintendent aimed to give students in the community access to some of the programming of traditional specialty schools within the district. This information was gathered from the brochures in the office, the school and district's websites and in articles written about the formation of the new school.

Magnolia Academy was recently remodeled to change the elementary classes into larger middle school rooms. The school is aesthetically pleasing with all new amenities. Each of the grade levels is vividly colored in bright colors. Each color has become the reference of pseudonym for the hall. All of the classrooms have Apple Smart-boards and devices for teacher usage. The school was rewired to allow for additional technology features; however, students were unable to use the technology until January. Students were given i-Pads in January and able to take them home once the wiring was redone and chargers were ordered. The school is the only specialty school within the district that does not select its students and is utilized by 477 students living within the community.

### **Study Participants**

For this study, I contacted the 12 teachers who met the criteria for participation in the study. To avoid apprehension among novice teachers, I chose to solicit and limit participation to teachers with at least 10 years of experience. I wanted teachers who would feel free to discuss the dynamic of the school without fear of reprisal for honest expression. I also wanted teachers who possessed experiences in urban settings. I observed and interviewed five teachers in their

classroom settings. The participants selected are teachers at a school that has been on the failing list for three years.

Table 1

*Demographic Description of Participants*

Participant	Age	Race/Gender	Subject	Experience
Mr. Green	49	Black/Male	6-8 Coding	17 years
Ms. Redd	62	Black/Female	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade History	37 years
Ms. Indigo	Would not disclose	Black/Female	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts	30 years
Mr. Blue	62	Black/Male	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade History	24 years
Ms. Hazelwood	57	Black/Female	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Resource Teacher	27 years

It is important to note that at one point in the participants' careers, they all worked at another school, Magnolia East, which is approximately five miles from Magnolia Academy. Four of the participants, with the exception of Mr. Green,) worked at Magnolia East when it was considered a magnet school. Students had to apply to attend Magnolia East until 1996. It is important to note that all of the participants live within a seven to 10 minute drive from their current location. These factors are essential because although not an intended part of this study, these teachers' backgrounds are essential. Most of the participants were born and raised in the area, and all of the participants continue to spend their professional career and personal lives within the study site. A significant part of their narrative is situated within the study site. They have a wealth of experience within the community, which provides a different insight into the setting and the students they serve.

## **Data Collection**

To obtain The University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study, I contacted the person at the district level for the required permission to conduct research. After achieving district-level approval, I contacted the principal of the school to gain her consent. After successfully securing permission from the district and school, IRB approval was submitted and granted by The University of Alabama (Appendix C). The collection of data occurred over a two-month time frame. Utilizing Corbin and Strauss (2008), Dyson and Genishi (2005), and Weiss (1995) as guides, I conducted interviews with each participant.

## **Interviews**

The first interview served as an introduction to garner information about participants, and their background regarding the reasons they began teaching. I wanted to allow participants to feel at ease with sharing their experiences. I asked participants about their demographics such as age and experience teaching in an urban setting. I asked about their educational background and their upbringing. I felt this initial meeting helped to establish rapport with participants. I also gave participants a chance to ask questions about the study and to clarify any questions about the purpose of the research. I felt this was important because I did not want to be seen as someone coming in to take their important resources, knowledge, experience, and leave. I spent approximately 45 to 60 minutes with each participant during this initial interview.

I conducted subsequent semi-structured interviews (Appendix A) to discuss with teachers their practices within the setting. Interview questions were semi-structured and asked about their roles as teachers in an urban, segregated, high poverty setting designated as failing. I asked about how they saw the students they teach and the community in which they teach. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to provide an avenue for pursuing deeper levels of

discourse surrounding teaching and learning in this environment. I used my literature review to design the interview protocol based on the research previously conducted in urban schools, such as the history of the location, teachers' beliefs, and the benefits of experiential knowledge. As a researcher, I developed the questions to address the gaps in research regarding teachers' experiences in segregated, urban designated failing schools.

I wanted to gain knowledge about their experiences teaching in this setting and how they cope with the many mandates associated with teaching in designated failing urban schools. I wanted them to tell me their stories and how they used the curriculum to enact change in this setting. These interviews often lasted for more than one hour. I was very intrigued by participants' stories, and participants seemed to want to share their expertise with me. Time seemed to pass relatively quickly, but participants were open to other interviews to conclude the discussions. We were able to agree upon place and time for completing interviews. These concluding interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

### **Observations**

The next phase of research involved observations at Magnolia. I utilized observations to understand the setting and how participants saw and experienced their environment. My first observation involved sitting in the vestibule observing the beginning of the school day and how people in the study site began their day. I wanted to capture the interactions of people within the study site at various times of the day to observe the routines, procedures, and practices. I did not want to be seen as a stranger within the setting. I wanted my presence to feel as normal as possible to allow authentic interactions. I utilized field notes to write down behaviors that were exhibited by staff members, students, and guests. I noted conversations I overheard, and observed actions.

I also observed within participants' classrooms to witness their practices and interactions. I wanted to see their practices firsthand to see how students responded to their pedagogy. I also wanted to see the relationships between teachers and students during the delivery of instruction. I wanted to see how students responded to the directions and delivery of the curriculum in this setting. The use of observations allowed me to see and hear a small glimpse of how learning takes place. It gave me an entree into conversations with the participants about their curriculum choices.

Observations in the hallways and vestibules occurred on five different occasions. I typically came into the building prior to my observation. I sat in the halls and vestibule for an hour prior to my visit. My presence was inconspicuous for the most part. On one occasion, while sitting in the hall, a student I taught recognized me. We had a brief chat and he hurried to class. On another occasion, a student asked if I was a parent. Overall, students did not seem to recognize visitors or alter their behavior for guest in the building. The teachers and the staff appeared to only recognize my presence when students were using inappropriate language or as a result of an altercation. I do not feel that they altered their behavior. I conducted two, one-and-one-half hour observations. Some of the teachers' strategies were aligned with the lesson plan and there were few interruptions. However, during some of the observations fights and other classroom disruptions ensued. The observations provided a glimpse into teachers' experiences on a daily basis. I believe that teachers' and students' behaviors were authentic due to the district and state's mandates for administration to observe classroom instruction and behaviors constantly.



## **Document Analysis**

I utilized teachers' lesson plans during observations to study their pedagogical practices and curriculum choices. Lesson plans were obtained from teachers prior to my visit. I felt this was important to the study to examine the content knowledge that teachers felt was important for students in this setting to know and understand. I wanted to see how participants planned to impart this knowledge to students. Document analysis also allowed me to see if the delivery of content matched the planning and how teachers pivoted instruction to match the daily needs of their students. I coded lesson plans based on the behaviors I saw exhibited during instruction and what was written on the plan. I used the document to see if teachers followed their lesson plan as a script or provided impromptu academic or behavioral corrective actions, which cannot be catalogued on a lesson plan.

Another document I utilized was the discipline report at Magnolia. I was able to gather this information from the principal. The discipline report contained the number of discipline infractions and the disposition results. This information was vital to examine which offenses were punished and how administrators dealt with discipline within the school. I wanted to explore this information in light of the school-to-prison pipeline and to see how students experienced policies designed by the district to combat maladaptive behaviors. To gain information about the school, I studied the school's website. The website was instrumental regarding information about the inception of Magnolia STEAM Academy. It provided the background surrounding the superintendent and district support for the initiative. The website also provided information about the principal's vision for the school and community partnerships.

## **Post-observation Interviews**

I conducted a semi-structured post-observation interview (Appendix B) with participants to gain insight into their perceptions of their practices. I wanted to know why teachers selected particular lessons and the relevance to students in their classes. I maintained a relaxed setting that allowed teachers to share their expertise working in this setting. Post-observation interviews lasted about 30 minutes. I recognized my position as an administrator in the system, and I did not want this to be seen as an evaluation of their practice.

## **Data Analysis**

I began by organizing the data. To accomplish this orderly and efficiently, I incorporated the seven stages as outlined by Marshall and Rossman (2011):

- (a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes;
  - (d) coding the data; (e) offering interpretations through analytic memo; (f) searching for alternatives understandings; and (g) writing the report or other format presenting the data.
- (p.156)

For accuracy, I requested interviewees' permission to record their interviews, and I transcribed each of the interviews. After reviewing the transcripts for accuracy, I conducted a member check to ensure that I had the correct understanding of what they were trying to relay to me.

I coded data using a grounded theory methodology. I used themes to allow a narrative to emerge. I began with a broad coding to categorize themes to extend to the lens of CRP. I did this by color-coding vital phrases or words used in transcribed interview and field notes. I grouped these common phrases and words and looked for similarities and differences of experiences among participants. Each participant narrated their career in urban settings, and I became immersed in their experience as I analyzed the data. This inductive approach allowed me to

actualize the systemic issues relevant to teachers' skills at Magnolia Academy. I also coded according to the social constructs of the study site and participants. Recognizing that marginalized students often receive different educational experiences due to zero-tolerance policies, disproportionate referrals to special education, and irrelevant curriculums, I reflected upon participants' voices as to how this impacts their practice and experiences as teachers.

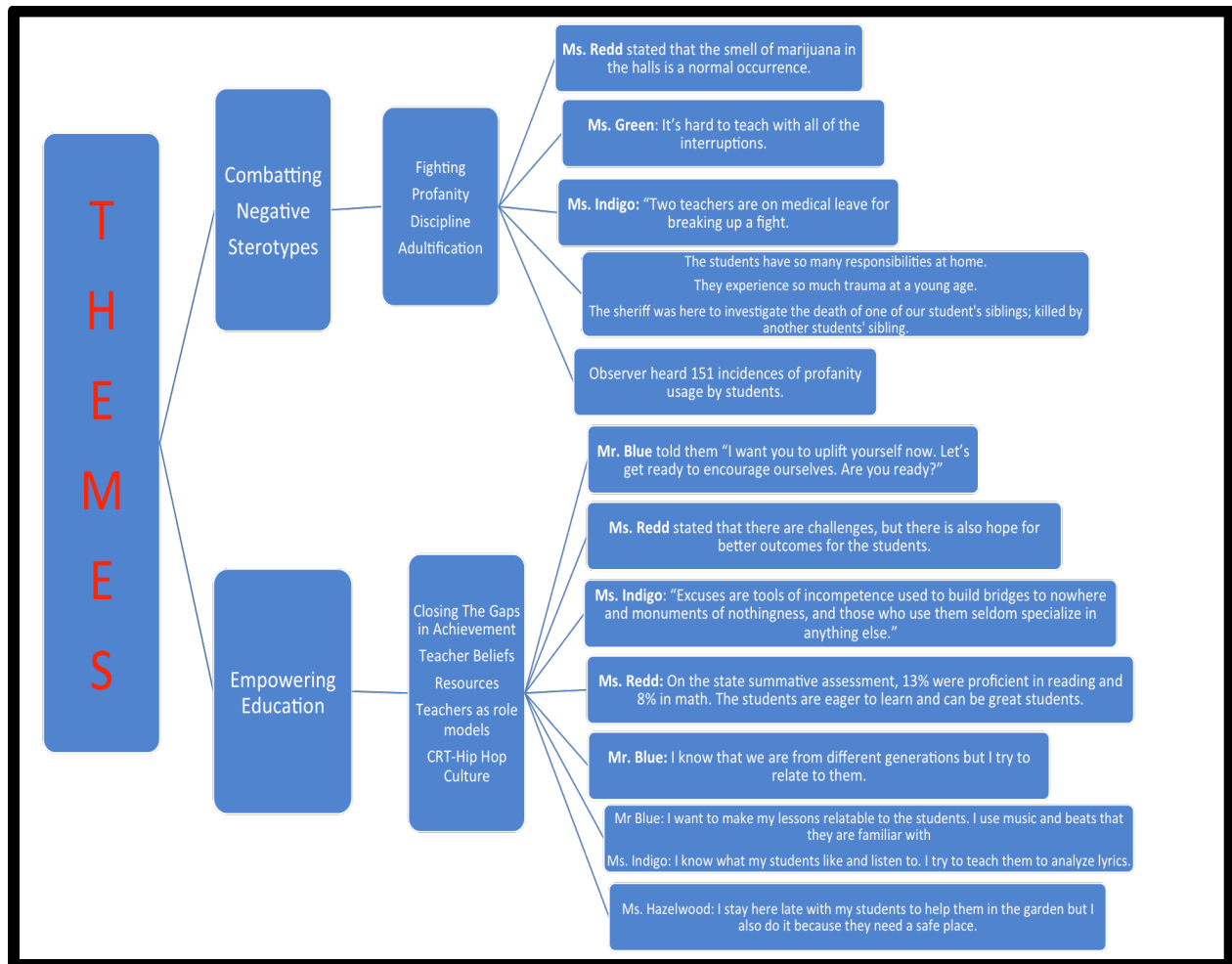
As a researcher, I used my knowledge and expertise to analyze the codes and develop categories surrounding my analysis. The categories of profanity, fighting, discipline, adultification, Hip-Hop Culture, teachers' beliefs, achievement, testing, and generational differences were used to help explain the overarching themes. I initially did not expect the issue of adultification to assume a primary role in the research. However, participants voiced their experiences with students experiencing adult situations. Adultification is a phenomenon where youth are exposed to and expected to perform adult-like functions such as being the primary caretaker of siblings or assuming responsibility for family finances (Burton, 2007; Jurkovic, 1997; Minuchin et al., 1998). This characteristic is often seen in impoverished children due to the need for their parents to work to support the family. This category was relevant to some of the experiences that educators in this setting experienced due to children being placed in adult roles.

After I established categories, I began to see a vivid picture of how teachers voiced the experiences of the setting. The themes that emerged from these data included combatting negative influences and empowering education. These two themes encapsulate a narrative about the experiences of the courageous teacher leaders in this setting. These two themes helped to tell the stories of how participants experienced the systemic issues and sought to overcome them. It also painted a picture of how hopelessness can turn into hope in settings often portrayed as deficient.

The practice of allowing participants to voice their experiences and the researcher's attention to the accuracy of interpretation of participants' voices is the greatest priority in research (Baszille, 2008; Degaldo Bernal, 2002; Harper, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It informed my reflective processing of transcribed interviews and field notes to explore how teachers' instruction impacted their students' learning experiences and outcomes. I explored aspects of the school and community, giving insight into "the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequence of places where the inquiry and events take place" (Connelly et al., 2006, p. 480). The conditions in which these students learn helped to tell a story about the experiences of teachers in this segregated urban setting.

Figure 1

*Overview of Themes*



**Personal Justification**

My location within this study is as a black female educator. I have served many roles in this particular setting as a teacher, instructional coach, and assistant principal. Culturally, I consider myself coming of age as Hip-Hop music developed. We sort of grew up together, and it has been a love-hate dichotomy. I understand the culture and how it grew, and I do recognize how my Hip-Hop culture is different from today's youth. I prefer to listen to the raunchiest of music, and I can problematize and separate the message from reality. I do not know if young

urban youth are taught the difference between listening to and absorbing this message. As educators, we do not recognize or acknowledge the impact of influences outside of the school. This disconnect between students' culture and the school's beliefs impacts what our students hear and internalize about themselves.

I have strong ties to this community. I have worked in this setting for 17 years, with many of the teachers involved. I pondered whether I could separate myself from the setting and provide an objective look. However, I do understand that many of the teachers in this setting rarely have a chance to have their voices heard and to give their perspective on what happens in their lives and the lives of their students. I used these tensions to be reflexive as a researcher and to acknowledge that “there is no way we can escape the social world to study it” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 17). Therefore, understanding that I am not a passive observer and remaining open allowed me to situate myself as I studied this familiar setting.

I also had to reassure participants about the confidentiality of the study. I was careful to maintain my objectivity while working in this familiar setting. I am very aware of the dynamics of the school system. Therefore, I continued to ask educators for permission to remain during a tense time. I asked clarifying questions and conducted numerous member checks to ensure that I represented their opinions, feelings, and perspectives. I also obtained participants' permission to record the interviews for accuracy, and I asked during the interview if they remained comfortable with recording the conversation. I also used jot notes during the meeting to assist with data collection. As I jotted, I clarified participants' answers to develop trust by representing their views accurately. I was careful in balancing this because I did not want them to think that a response was incorrect but to better garner their viewpoints r.

## **Trustworthiness**

Although I have relationships with the study participants, my positionality did not negatively impact how I conducted the study. Many of the teachers are colleagues of mine. I am also an assistant principal at another school in the district. To separate my administrator role from that of researcher, I utilized the opportunity to spend time in the setting to familiarize myself with the school. I did not want to be seen as someone who just appeared and began asking questions. I also explained the purpose of utilizing the lesson plans to gain information about practices but not to critique them. I tailored my post-observation interview questions to be open-ended and not to seem as if it was a formal observation. I also clarified their answers to inquiries to ensure that I was representing their views accurately.

I focused on the lived experience of participants and listened to their stories. There was a disclosure regarding the nature of the assignment to the participants. Therefore, interactions were natural and normal. There was an ease of communication because of our familiarity and working relationships. All of the participants are veteran teachers and do not have to fear reprisal for answers because they are established at the school. While I observed and participated, I was able to experience a new vantage point. To ensure validity, I conducted member checks to ascertain that information was accurate. I periodically reviewed the data collected to see if it would reveal additional data, which I did not anticipate.

## **Conclusion**

Data analysis allowed me to develop themes, which aligned with the theoretical framework of CRP. Students in marginalized settings need to experience a curriculum that recognizes their culture and integrates it throughout the curriculum. This case study allowed participants to give their perspectives on this urban setting while analyzing the multiple facets

involved, such as re-segregation, neoliberal, political, and cultural influences, which effect the educational landscape. The focus of this investigation was on teachers charged with the responsibility of educating marginalized students and exploring how they function in light of these conditions.



## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Magnolia Academy is comprised of many dynamics. The school edifice is nestled in a low-income urban setting, with a 98% African American student population, and has been identified as a *failing school* for two years. The school is located in a low-income area categorized as high crime. The system has undergone a re-segregation since *Brown versus Board's* mandate to integrate schools. The city's white citizens have left the education system either attending suburban or private schools.

Along with white residents, the economic support within the community vanished for public schools. In 2018, over 90% of the state's failing schools comprised students of color and low income. Recently, the school was reconfigured as a middle-aged STEAM school to provide students with more instructional opportunities. The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences in these settings and provide insight into the cultural and social conditions that impact their practice. Participants were asked to describe their feelings about the connotation of failure as it relates to their practice. They were also asked to describe their students and community to determine how the culture impacts their practice.

As I utilized my interview protocol, overall themes emerged regarding teachers' experiences. After transcribing the interviews, I analyzed and coded the transcripts. Categories were developed to help organize the codes. Based on my analysis, I categorized two significant themes: Combatting Negative Stereotypes and Empowering Educations. The two sections were developed from participants' experiences and observations within the setting. Combatting

negative stereotypes involved categories that spoke to the conflicts within the school that resulted in (1) fighting, (2) discourse of pejorative language and its place in the academic setting, (3) adultification, and (4) prioritizing obstacles: negotiating discipline versus academic demands. The section on empowering education involves how teachers processed these behaviors to provide educational opportunities in these settings. In this section, four categories emerged: (1) closing the gaps with teacher's beliefs, (2) prioritizing resources, (3) bridging the gaps, connecting with the students as a role model, and (4) culturally responsive teaching and critical consciousness. This research was conducted to provide insight into the practices of five teachers, using their voices and experiences to help create a narrative about their involvement and role in southern urban, segregated schools. As I observed, interacted, engaged, and conducted interviews, in this setting, I sought to gain insight into my two research questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the experiences of teachers working in “designated failing” segregated urban settings?
2. How do segregation, poverty, and cultural influences impact teachers’ perspectives of the outcomes of their practice?

### **Participants**

Mr. Blue is a 62-year-old black man with a jovial spirit. He is very energetic, with an impeccable sense of style. Mr. Blue is a graduate of the school system. After graduating, he attended one of the state's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). He disclosed that he wanted to be a fashion model and an attorney. However, he obtained his Master's degree in education and has been teaching for 24 years in this school system. He described education as his calling, and said that he loves teaching at the school. This is his 6<sup>th</sup> year at the school. Before

this location, he worked at a neighboring school. Mr. Blue currently teaches 6<sup>th</sup>-grade social studies/history.

Mr. Green is a 49-year-old black man. He has worked in the system for 17 years. He has taught computer technology and, most recently, coding. Mr. Green is a proud graduate of one of the state's HBCUs. He is also proud of the city's school systems. His mother was a long time educator at the school. Mr. Green has lived in the community all of his life.

Ms. Hazelwood is a 57-year old black woman. She describes herself as very conservative. Ms. Hazelwood was born and raised in a rural area. She is also a graduate of an HBCU in her home state. Ms. Hazelwood has been teaching in the school district for 27 years. She loves to garden and uses her skills to help engage students in horticulture. She is a special education resource teacher. She has a passion for her students due to taking care of her brother, who is disabled.

Ms. Indigo is a black female who would not disclose her age. She is from a small rural area but has been living in the city for over 30 years. Ms. Indigo loves the arts and wants to instill that love in her students. She is also a proud graduate of an HBCU. Ms. Indigo and Mr. Blue attended undergraduate school together.

Ms. Redd is a 62-year-old black female. She was raised in the local housing project, which is located about five miles from the school. She attended one of the schools that were closed due to rezoning. Ms. Redd attended a local university. Ms. Redd still resides in the area with her daughter, who works as a pharmacist in a local drug store. Ms. Redd is very proud of her ties to the community. She attends church and has a large number of ties to the community.

## **Combatting Negative Stereotypes**

### **Fighting for Respect in the Urban Setting**

After spending time in the school, some themes became evident from the research. The first theme was the evidence of students' inability to amicably resolve conflict. The behavior extended beyond just fighting. It included a pervasive desire of students to watch, record, or participate in the fighting. This behavior greatly impacted teachers' practice. Upon my initial visit to the school, I observed a female student running away from the school, being followed by two male staff members and a security officer. A car drove up, and a middle-aged black female got out of the vehicle. She spoke to the student, and the student got in the car. The female driver brought the student back to the school. I later learned that the female driver lived in the community and noticed the student was running from school officials. The female driver hugged the student and assured her that everything would work out in her best interest. The student was escorted to the principal's office. As I sat in the vestibule, the student's mother arrived with a belt in her hand. I heard her mother express her frustration with the daughter for fighting at the school.

After the incident, I learned that the man chasing the student, Mr. Green, was one of the participants I was scheduled to observe. As a result of chasing the student, Mr. Green was winded and out of breathe. Several students waiting in the office asked if they could go to his classroom for the day instead of sitting in the office. He agreed and took several of them with him. As he entered the room, the students went to their seats to begin working on the lesson. The room was very appealing with several lounge pods. The room was designed to resemble an Internet Café. There were four bistro-style tables on one side of the room, with three other tables

on the adjacent wall. All of the students had their own devices. The students were involved in a coding activity.

During the lesson, there was another incident that came over the walkie-talkie. This caused Mr. Green to run out of the room. I learned that another fight among a group of female students caused the disruption. Mr. Green returned with another female student, whom he instructed to sit in a corner. At that time, Mr. Green resumed his lesson. Several of the students explained their codes and how they chose to move their robot. As the lesson developed, several students were brought into the room for Mr. Green to supervise, because they were a discipline problem in other classes. I asked him if I needed to come back to observe on another day? He stated, "It is like this every day!"

Occasionally societal influences have a way of impacting the school. At Magnolia, many of the teachers noted that the most significant obstacle in teaching students was discipline and fighting. On the first day of my school visit, there were four fights within one-and-one-half hour. The fights were not between two students but a melee of students. The fights mirrored brawls, and required multiple staff members to leave their classrooms, unattended, to assist. Students often followed the assisting teacher to watch, which further complicated the situation. Mr. Green stated:

I break up fights all the time. All of the men have walkie-talkies, and when there is a code 33 on yellow, I know there's a big fight on the 7th-grade hall. The 7<sup>th</sup> graders have the most problems because they have all new teachers with less than two years of experience. They also have two long-term substitute teachers, and sometimes the substitutes do not show up for work. This causes a major issue because it leads to overcrowding, and 45, 7<sup>th</sup> graders in one class is a major problem. It's hard for me to teach when I'm interrupted

every 15 minutes. In addition to the interruptions, I have to settle the students down because they want to talk about who won the fight. Most of the time, the students who fight are not disciplined. I'm overwhelmed with this situation. It is just like watching "World-star Hip-Hop," all-day.

Most of the teachers mentioned the "World-star Hip-Hop" comparison. "World-star Hip-Hop" is a website where vicious fight videos are posted. Students often shout, "World-star," which is an indicator that a fight is about to occur. At the school, there have been 15 Class III Suspensions. Class III Suspensions involve offenses that result in a hearing. If students are found guilty of a Class III Suspension, they can be assigned to an alternative school or expelled. Seven of the Class III Hearings were a result of students filming the fight. Teachers suggested that many of the fights are territorial. Mr. Green stated:

The kids see fights all day on Snapchat or Facebook. The fights usually start in the neighborhoods. I think that they listen to music that is violent and play video games with people shooting and killing each other. It is only natural that they emulate what they see. Most of the students came from three K-8 configured schools. The students had formed familial relationships and friendships in their previous schools. Now, students have formed quasi-gangs based on their previous school affiliation. Mr. Green said, "It is an 'Us versus Them' type of mentality." Mr. Green stated a belief that students do not have any conflict resolution skills, and that factor leads to excessive fighting. Mr. Green stated:

Two teachers are currently on medical leave as a result of breaking up fights. One of the teachers had to have six surgeries to repair bones from the incident. I see the frustration among staff members, due to the constant disruptions and disrespect in the classroom. This is a high crime area, and I believe that some students lack the support from parents

due to work schedules or trying to survive. Students like to fight, and they use social media to plan fights to start at school. The exposure to violence is why the school experiences wasted time and discipline issues. It is a struggle for respectability in the community that most of the students are attempting to obtain. Many of them learn to survive by being strong in the community. Usually, that involves proving that you can protect yourself or others. It frustrates the teachers that students are so reckless without regard to the result.

The teachers also witness this behavior after school. Ms. Indigo observed:

We are assigned to the buses to monitor students on their way home. Before the monitors were placed on the buses, the students would fight and throw objects at each other and the bus driver. One of the bus drivers was assaulted and had his jaw broken by several students. It was a very dangerous situation for all occupants—the school zone for the students spread across several communities due to the rezoning. I have witnessed the students fighting as soon as they get off the bus. I have seen the families waiting at the bus stop ready to fight students due to a neighborhood disagreement. Sometimes we have to bypass stops and go back to the school due to the danger. The parents are called to the school to pick the students up. I do think that community conflicts hinder our academic progress. I believe students feel, when they fight, they are defending their honor, community, or names. I think that (fighting for honor) is more important to them and the only thing they have control over. I try to teach them to overcome this mindset. I use songs they suggest as poetry. We analyze the lyrics to see if it contains a reasonable option or a solution to a problem. We also analyze the message. I let them see and hear

the words. Sometimes, they can problematize the lyrics, but other times they think the shooting and profanity is acceptable.

It is this clash with the negative aspect of Hip-Hop Culture, violence, and stereotypes that teachers expressed a desire to eradicate or to offer a counter-narrative around growing up poor and black. This is not always the narrative of a socioeconomically challenged black child.

### **Discourse of Pejorative Language and Its Place in the Academic Setting**

Teachers are also *fighting* for respect in this setting. It is not in the physical way that students exhibit disrespect, but these educators fight daily to teach a new reality to the students. Students balance being true to their upbringing and beliefs while contrasting the lived realities of the urban youth that they teach. A significant point of contention for many of the teachers was the constant usage of profanity by students at school. This profanity used by students was often directed at teachers but mainly towards each other. During my observations and other visits at the school, I heard students use profanity 152 times. All of the profanity was from one student towards another. Teachers voiced frustration with the casual usage of profanity in the middle of lessons that turned into shouting matches that disrupted the entire lesson. Ms. Redd said:

I have to stop my class often because someone calls someone a stinky motherfucker or a bitch. I'm so tired of the blatant disrespect. Even though it is not aimed towards me, they know that I don't want to hear that language. It causes all of the other students to lose interest in what I'm teaching because they are being entertained by foolishness.

Sometimes I go home and cry because I don't want to return to work the next day.

This sentiment, expressed by Ms. Redd, was echoed by all of the other teachers. The school system does address the use of profanity as a Class II referral, which can result in an in-school or out-of-school referral. However, Mr. Green stated that administration is "too busy dealing with



more egregious behaviors such as constant fights and marijuana usage at the school." All of the teachers tried to reconcile the cultural aspect of Hip-Hop music with explicit language. They all acknowledged that their students hear and sing profanity-laced music. Mr. Blue stated that when he was asked to go to the 7<sup>th</sup>-grade hall to fill in due to a shortage of teachers, he thought his name was "motherfucker" by the end of the day. He said:

I was told to "Shut-up Motherfucker" and "go back to your hall, Motherfucker" all day long. I'm old enough to be these students' grandparent. I understand their communication, and I want them to understand my way of communicating. I want them to consider me as an "OG" in the community. I have lived in this community almost all my life, and I have witnessed the same violence and survived. I have to use street vernacular such as old head and original gangster to hook them into my lesson. I then take them down a path of exploring our history as black people. I use their language, without profanity, to help them understand, and then I code-switch. I show them how to maneuver in both worlds. It is ok to listen to music and use profanity, but there is a context for all of it.

The teachers are often told that it is just a new generation and that they need to understand the students' reality. The teachers attempted to navigate this generation gap by making connections with the students' culture.

Ms. Hazelwood expressed a belief that the most significant issue is discipline in the school. The students need to "buy into" the rule. According to Ms. Hazelwood, "As a southern-born black Christian woman, I cannot sit idly while a student tells me or any other adult to shut the f-up talking to me." Ms. Hazelwood said she understood that they talk to each other in the community with such viciousness, but the street and the school have two different codes. She

said she could not do anything from a school discipline perspective, but she can tell them right from wrong. She noted that they cannot ignore the importance of cordial conversations and must teach the children how to "code-switch." Ms. Hazelwood observed that the more "maladaptive behavior goes unchecked," the more students believe it is acceptable. She stated that the students usually respond to redirection. Ms. Hazelwood said that students often say they are playing when they curse one another. She said, "I know 'cracking' is the norm in the school and helps them (students) establish 'street cred' among their peers. I understand that cracking is a form of joking, and street cred is creditability amongst their peers."

She suggested that this is also a reason for the number of fights that occur at the school. Many students begin their conversations innocently, but the situation escalates. She referenced an incident that happened before my visit. Before our visit, as I waited for Ms. Hazelwood, I heard students arguing outside of class. One of the students told the other student, "Bitch, your dad is a girl, a fucking tranny." Another student replied, "He turned that way cause your mama always eating my mama pussy." I heard a female voice gasp (Ms. Hazelwood), and she told the students, "I have never heard such vulgarity from children. Apologize!" I heard two voices, say "I'm sorry" and "My bad." Ms. Hazelwood walked into the classroom, apologizing to me for the students' behaviors.

Ms. Hazelwood said the students do not know how to resolve conflict without resulting in violence:

I spend a large portion of my time navigating conflicts and cannot teach what I am tasked with teaching. A lot of my students struggle with oppositional defiance and other disabilities. They tend to be the perpetrators of some of the most egregious offenses. Teachers tend to want my students out of class, and I know my students need their

expertise the most. I also understand other teachers wishing to work and be respected. I can see how the two positions do not align to some people. I can see both sides of the coin. I want students to understand that there is a place for all things. I know that many students curse but I want to teach them that there is a right place and time for all things. Do I want them to curse each other or me? No! But I understand that that is how they communicate.

Although there is a huge generational gap, Ms. Hazelwood also stated a belief that it is important for teachers to relate to the students' culture:

I know that students spend the majority of their day listening to Hip-Hop Music. It is only natural for them to bring the culture into the school. I want to show them that there are other forms of art, and there can be positivity in Hip-Hop music. I listened to Queen Latifah and Public Enemy. I know there is a generation gap, but I listen to all kinds of music. I want them to listen to music they like, but I also want them to listen to positive lyrics like Kendrick Lamar and some of Nas' music. The kids are very amused when I play rap music or any kind of music. I utilize music in my class to help students to understand the lyrics and what they mean. Studying song lyrics is a part of literacy. I allow them to listen to Drake, and then I'll play something I want them to hear. We read the words and analyze the meaning.

There is a significant generational gap between participants and their students. The language that students used and the background of the teachers had to be reconciled in a calculated way by teachers. The teachers understood the need for students to believe that their teachers could relate to them while providing them with knowledge.

### **Prioritizing Obstacles: Negotiating Discipline versus Academic Demands**

Educators outlined a daily schedule of balancing obstacles. The participants dealt with so many distractions from constant fights, struggles with academics, and maintaining discipline that the designation of a *failing school* was seen as an afterthought. Ms. Hazelwood said, "It's sad and unfortunate, but what can I do about it?" As a special education teacher, she recognized the small victories that her students accomplish:

I understand that although the school has the failing designation I must teach them the skills they need to move a little further towards reaching their grade level. I also believe that my students may not progress three or four grade levels to be considered proficient, but I am responsible for making them gain at least an academic year.

Ms. Indigo said that on a day-to-day basis, teachers deal with a myriad of situations:

I teach in a high poverty area. Most of my students depend on the school for breakfast and lunch. They have emotional needs that I could not deal with as an adult. Many of them live with their grandparents, who are not able to care for them adequately. I have to teach them, show compassion but discipline them all at the same time. They are not failing, the world had failed them. So I cannot worry about what the state or newspaper says because it is bigger than the standardized test. These kids are worried about surviving from day to day.

Ms. Indigo's discontent with the failing school designation was expressed throughout participants' interviews. Teachers are tasked with so many responsibilities outside of their instructional duties daily. They are asked to mentor students, referee fights, connect to the culture, serve as bus monitors, and discipline students regularly. The frustration was evident, but

not in a way that displayed that they do not care. The disappointment was from a place of concern for their students.

For example, Ms. Redd stated:

Students smoke weed at school, and nothing is done. Students fight and injure teachers, and they are sent home for two days. Students record a fight, and people see it on the Internet, and they are expelled. It doesn't make sense to me.

Ms. Redd's frustration was evident during her interview. On the day that I observed her, she was visibly shaken with tears in her eyes as she tried to quell the emotions of her class regarding the smell of marijuana. Although her disappointment was evident, she continued to teach her class. Following our observation, Ms. Redd voiced her concern about the incident:

I am embarrassed by what we all had to experience today. In over 30 years of teaching, I have never had students openly smoke marijuana. This happens at least two or three times a week. I feel it shows disrespect for me. It is also sad for these other students. The majority of them are trying to do the right thing, but there is so much pressure to do other things. I think all of us are beginning to believe this is normal. They cannot focus on academics or passing a test at the end of the year. I think that we are failing to provide a good outcome for students. It makes me sad

Ms. Redd was crying towards the end of our conversation. As a result, I did not feel it was appropriate to further question her. However, I used a member check to clarify her statement that "we are failing at providing a good outcome for students." Ms. Redd elaborated:

I mean that "we" as in the community, society, and world. My students have so many obstacles to overcome from birth. I can't compete with their upbringing or home situation. All I can give them is the chance to learn, nurture, wise words, and compassion.

I struggle with what I can do to help them more. I just think the messages that we send to the students are confusing. We must find a way to help students make sense of what goes on home and at school.

Ms. Redd's feelings of being overwhelmed and at a loss for the many intrusions in the academic day was evident. The school seemed to struggle with which behaviors to punish and which to overlook. There is a delicate balance in urban schools with data that suggests students of color are punished more severely than their peers. There are many struggles with trying to navigate a system structured to punish students of color. The students score far below their expected grade level. Very few of the students can read fluently for comprehension. On the state's summative assessment, 13% were proficient in reading and 8% in math. There are several overage students. These are students who were two or more grades behind. Some of these same students were not going to be promoted to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Ms. Redd stated:

There are at least 15 students who are two grades or more behind in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The overage students seemed "stuck in a rut". They are being educated with students who are not only developmentally, but socially younger than them. I don't want them to give up, so I do my best to find ways to celebrate them. I make sure that I ask about them if they aren't in class. I talk to their parents weekly. I try to make sure that they are excited about the dances and other activities because some cannot participate in sports at this level due to their age. I try to keep them engaged in school by using engaging activities or strategies.

Ms. Redd found it hard to reconcile all of the dynamics and to connect the pieces to help students experience "some wins." Ms. Redd said:

"[s]ome wins" mean that students know what it feels like to have things go their way. I think my students have grown accustomed to failing and need to hear that they are going

to make it. I grew up in the projects around the corner. I know how it is to be poor and how it feels not to have things. So I want to push them in a way to help them see that they can be successful. I don't want them to think that I am ignoring bad behavior, but I also want them to know that we have all made mistakes at 13. They can overcome anything at this age. I want to provide them with the support to keep trying.

In this setting, the school attempted to address the maladaptive behavior. The school has a 33% suspension rate (see Table 2). The number of suspensions is the seventh highest of 41 schools in the district. Overall, 73% of the school's suspensions were for physical contact with another student or fighting. The next highest category was defiance of authority, with 15% of suspensions. These numbers supported a need for some interventions regarding students' inability to resolve conflicts without arguing or fighting. The suspension of students for fighting does not seem to serve as a deterrent to the behavior in the school. These numbers did support a need for some interventions regarding students' inability to resolve conflicts without arguing or fighting. Administrators were able to avoid punishing students for normalized behaviors, such as profanity and over penalizing students with disabilities.

Table 2

*Rates of Student Suspension*

<b>Magnolia Engineering and Sciences Academy 474 Students</b>	
<b>Number of Suspensions for All Students</b>	<b>154 Suspensions</b>
<b>Number of Students with Disabilities</b>	<b>92 Students</b>
<b>Number of Students with Disabilities Suspended</b>	<b>18 Students</b>
<b>Suspension Rate</b>	<b>33%</b>
<b>Physical Contact or Fighting Highest Category</b>	<b>73%</b>
<b>Defiance of Authority</b>	<b>15%</b>

Ms. Hazelwood, the department leader for special education, noted that 20% of the school's population is classified as students with disabilities, and 18% of those students were suspended. Ms. Hazelwood said:

I feel that the number for my students with disabilities is low because I advocate to the principal to adhere to the policy that my students cannot be suspended more than 10 days without a manifestation of the student's Individual Education Plan. I teach life skills and conflict resolution. I sometimes find myself separating them from the peers to avoid the sparks that tend to set them off. I find myself teaching coping skills more than academic skills.

Ms. Hazelwood's support for her students may be one of the reasons that the school's suspension rate for students with disabilities is the lowest among the district. She has a caseload of 28 students with learning disabled and emotionally conflicted students. According to Ms. Hazelwood, she spends a tremendous amount of time redirecting behaviors, while her students are the most needy, both academically and socially.

It is a delicate battle to meet the needs of the marginalized students in this setting. The fighting, profanity, and other disruptive behavior seems to take precedence over academic at times. The school and teachers are faced with creating an equitable policy that addresses behaviors and creates a safe and orderly place for students to learn. Navigating the terrain of accountability with evenhanded policies and procedures requires a true understanding of the school's dynamics. This is a difficult feat with a new population of students, especially students who are accustomed to being rivals within their communities. This confusion causes the teachers to juggle roles and responsibilities to overcome these obstacles.



## **“Adultification”: Growing Up Too Fast**

In the setting, many of the participants expressed a belief that students’ home lives influenced their school experiences. Ms. Hazelwood stated, “Many of my kids come to school so they can eat twice a day. Some of them have to get their younger siblings ready because their mother is at work.” She noted that the stressors of being an adult too soon made them a little angry. Ms. Hazelwood said, “If I had all these adult responsibilities at home, I wouldn’t know if I would know how to be a child at school.” Ms. Indigo echoed this sentiment stated:

I have students who sit with me until I leave because they are afraid to be at home. I let them stay as long as I can because I know their parents have to work. I also know they are afraid to go home due to the violence in the neighborhood. My students have a lot to shoulder at a young age.

Mr. Green also expressed a similar sentiment, “We don’t know their home life. They have a lot to do before they arrive at school. They don’t have much interaction with parents due to mom working, and they have a lot of responsibilities.” Mr. Green suggested that this contributes to the problems in the school. He recounted a story about the sheriff arriving the previous day to question students regarding a capital murder:

I walked out to talk to the sheriff because I know him from college. I asked who he was looking for at the school. The sheriff told me that he was looking for a student at the school whose brother was wanted for killing another teenager. The victim also has a sibling at the school, and he wanted to speak to both of them. The incident happened two days before his visit, but both students were present at school. I just think that’s sad. They don’t get a chance to grieve. I did not know if I would be able to come to school and act

like nothing happened. Or maybe this is their safety zone, and they feel safer here than at home.

Mr. Green proposed that this failure to allow students to process grief and trauma robs students of their childhood. Students are faced with adult situations while still having to navigate adolescence.

## **Empowering Education**

### **Closing the Achievement Gap: Teachers' Beliefs**

From the data, it was evident that teachers in this setting experienced the effects of students internalizing negative stereotypes. Educators regarded some of the behaviors that students exhibited as an effect of the media and other for-profit entities that inundate youth with negative images of people of color. Often, middle school students have viewed this behavior for years, and some internalize profanity, fighting, and drug usage as normal. Study participants recognized the systemic problem inherent in this consumption of maladaptive behavior. Although frustrated, they remained committed to giving students other options of viewing positive aspects of urban living. Teachers, who were tasked with teaching in this complex setting, all voiced their desire to ensure that students learn and that students were bigger than any obstacles they faced.

Educators expressed a belief that they have the potential to change the outcomes of their students. Participants understand accountability, and most agreed that students need to show academic growth from year to year. They indicated that it is within their ability and responsibility to make sure that their students learn the curriculum.

As I sat in Ms. Indigo's class, I heard students engage in call and response throughout her lesson. It was a way to retain students' attention, but it also motivated them. I could hear the

excitement in students' voices as they performed their "No Excuses" Poem before dismissal.

Students loudly and in sync recited, "Excuses are tools of incompetence used to build bridges to nowhere and monuments of nothingness, and those who use them seldom specialize in anything else." During the interview, I asked Ms. Indigo to expound on her usage of the poem:

I use it as a motivator for them and me. Every day I demand the best of them. I know that everyone is not on grade level, but I know they are capable of doing the work. I have taught kids how to read in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I have seen those same kids go out in the community and succeed. I am the teacher! I recite the poem with them daily. I cannot give up on them. If they see me give up, it makes it easier for them to give up and not care. So, despite the classification of failing or how many people come in to analyze my practice, I have to keep on going. I cannot build bridges to nowhere and monuments of nothingness. So I need them to remind me each day that I cannot have excuses, and neither can they!"

Others echoed Ms. Indigo's sentiment. Mr. Blue stated that he believed in the community and the students they serve:

I have parents who sit in my class to learn the skill so they can help their children. I believe that my parents want what is best for their children. I have parents who come to the bus stop to gain assistance with homework. I know my parents care, and that makes me want to help more.

Mr. Blue's beliefs about his students and their parents also translated to assignments in the classroom. I witnessed his affirmation towards his students. He often energetically praised them during the lesson, and students eagerly sought to please him. This was also evident in Mr. Green's classroom. His room served as a refuge for students who were in trouble in the school.

Students seemed to feel comfortable going to him to re-center themselves until it was possible to leave. Mr. Green stated:

All kids make mistakes, especially in middle school. I try to teach them how to calm down and reflect. We often talk about what they think they did wrong and how they can make amends. I tell them about the restorative process of mending relationships. I often encourage them to apologize and discuss the problem. I have had success with helping teachers and students to rebuild relationships after problems have occurred in the classroom. The teachers and students respond positively to the process.

Teachers and students seeking him out to intervene in conflicts is a testament to Mr. Green's belief about his students' abilities to resolve disputes and create a better learning environment.

### **Prioritizing Resources**

The setting as a STEAM school has allowed students to have world-class amenities. Mr. Green noted that the school system has “given the students so much. They have magnificent technology.” All of the students have either iPads or Mac Books. He said that the district had given his students more than any other school in the district. He stated, "They (the school district) have remodeled the school to provide the support that our students need. None of the magnet or specialty schools have coding, additional science, reading, and math classes daily."

Ms. Redd also commented on the priority the district and school have placed on the students receiving additional support:

The children receive a double dosage of math and language arts, four times a week. They have two language arts teachers and two math teachers. Two of the classes are designated as a STEAM math and language arts class. These classes are strictly enrichment, but the

teacher uses the state standards to provide the students with needed instruction to help students become proficient.

Ms. Redd identified this as important because students and teachers need the extra academic support. Ms. Blue commented, "I think the extra help is essential, but the district has also provided students the opportunity to experience more electives such as drama, art, coding, Spanish, and French. The students can develop other interests."

The school has also developed many community partners that come in to offer training to students with coding. Mr. Green stated:

I have so much community support. I have local developers who come in to work with the students and sponsor an after-school coding club. The company provides dinner and snacks for students to encourage them to stay. I have three students who are working on certificates in coding in middle school.

Mr. Green posited that this is not an opportunity that other students in the district have. Ms. Redd also relayed the same sentiment about prioritizing of resources to help students in the school:

Many people think that these are opportunities that should be afforded to students in a specialty school. However, I believe that these students need it more than other students. Some teachers were apprehensive about trusting the students with laptops and iPads, but they have proven that given a chance they can utilize the resources in class. We have received training to be able to help them use this technology in meaningful ways. I believe the neediest students need the most.

All of the participants suggested that the school is moving in the right direction towards its goal to incorporate the STEAM initiative into its curriculum and provide students with different opportunities.

Several participants spoke about the resources in terms of not just material things but also support from the community. On the day of my arrival, I witnessed a woman bringing the student back to the school after leaving. That woman is a part of the resources the teachers count as integral to their work. The woman is not a parent but a community member who is committed to seeing students succeed. According to Mr. Blue, the community president is very active in support of the school, and the community wants to see the school succeed. He stated, "if there is a need at the school, they pool together to try to fill it." The community association is a network of older homeowners or from the Magnolia Area Neighborhood Association. Ms. Indigo stated, "They come to the school and sit in the hallway to help with student transition." Mr. Green said, "They help us when the students leave walking home or if there is a problem in the neighborhood. They are really good people."

### **Bridging the Gaps: Connecting with the Students as a Role Model**

Due to the infiltration of negative media images fed to students through various platforms, teachers at Magnolia found that it was essential to provide students with another view of people of color. Participants understood the dynamics of the culture and were compassionate about empathizing with youth. Four of the educators in this study were reared and educated within 10 minutes from the school. Ms. Redd grew up in the local housing community. Mr. Green's mother was an educator at the school for over 25 years. Mr. Blue also has strong roots and is a longtime member of the community. All of the participants still reside in the city and near the school.

Their commitment to challenging stereotypes and providing another story about the community was evident in their accounts. Mr. Blue said, "I try to incorporate rhymes, movement, and music in my lesson because I recognize that my students relate to those things. I may be old

school, but I recognize the attraction of the new school culture." Mr. Blue recognized the power of music to his students. He understood that cursing, profanity, misogyny, and violence are the byproduct of exploitation and expression in black culture and Hip-Hop Music. He said, "It is my job to provide them the same outlet of expression but by shouting out positive affirmations." Mr. Blue stated his daily introduction to his class is a way for him to let his students know and understand that older teachers can relate to younger culture.

Mr. Blue said that he wanted his students to learn about positive rap music and how rhymes can help empower people:

I think about the lyrics of KRS-1 and how he started the "Stop the Violence" Movement. I teach them about black-on-black crime and how people use that to justify police brutality and the killing of black people by white people. I want them to know about Hip-Hop before it became about making money and sex. I teach them about police brutality and how they can rap about that part of their lives. I try to teach them about the history of music. I can easily combine the story of Hip-Hop when I cover the 70s and 80s. It is very eye-opening to the kids and fun for me. It helps them relate to me.

Mr. Blue continued:

I want to use my history class as a platform for students to see themselves throughout history. Students need to see, hear, and interact with the world through multiple perspectives. I want them to understand that every person has their view based on his or her lived experiences. I want them to own their footprint in the world and to see the possibilities for their own lives. I hope that students seeing multiple perspectives can help them understand the violence that they see in the media are chosen options and that they can choose other, more positive alternatives. When we discuss the Great Depression, I

discuss with them Great Migration. During our unit on World War II, I incorporate stories of the Tuskegee Airmen. I let students know about the role of minorities throughout history. I use my knowledge of living as a black man to reach and teach my students. I want them to be able to tell their stories, too.

Ms. Redd also expressed her understanding of the generational gap between her and students. She stated:

I watch shows like "Real House Wives of Atlanta," and I see myself in those characters. So I also tune into shows like "Love and Hip Hop," and I understand that my students see themselves in those characters. I know that both shows do not show the multifaceted experiences of black people. I also can distinguish between a storyline and real life. However, my students do not have the maturity, life experience, or knowledge to know the difference. I know when they curse or fight it is due to what they see depicted in music, videos, television, and other media.

Acknowledging that life often imitates art is important in this setting. Many students are inundated with violence and other negative behavior outside of school. Ms. Redd said that she is drawn into the drama on some of these shows. Therefore she knows it is only natural for students to mimic what they see and hear daily. Ms. Redd said, "It's the school's job to teach them and prepare them to function in society." She expressed the belief that there must be structure and consistency:

We must always show them that there are other possibilities besides fighting. I have to show them how black females interact with each other. I make sure that my exchanges with other black females are cordial. I know that I am on display and need to demonstrate civility with every interaction. Being mindful of my interactions with people can be



exhausting, but I know that I am being watched. I can't preach one thing but show another.

All of the teachers echoed being role models as black educators. They also stressed the importance of image and being under a microscope as teachers. Ms. Hazelwood stated, "As teachers, we ask them to act a certain way, and we have to model how we want them to engage with each other." All of the teachers are proud graduates of HBCUs and products of the school system. All of them use their stories of triumphs with students to let them know that they have overcome struggles. They often use this knowledge to help paint a positive image of college-educated black people and to let them know about career options. Mr. Blue stated that his students "need to understand that this moment is important. They need to be brave in their thinking. They need to know how to express themselves positively. I try to teach them this daily." Mr. Blue said he tries to relate to the students as a black male from the same community. He does recognize the generational gap, but he tries to help them see that they carry the same history of oppression:

I tell the students about the obstacles I faced growing up in the segregated south. It helps them understand that I walked the same streets as a student . . . to and from school. I want them to know that they are an extension of me. I am not their parent, but I care about them. I want them to succeed. I know what they can become because I did. I often tell them about my travels to other countries. I want them to see that I attended college, lived in other places, visited different locations, but I came back to my community to teach them.

Mr. Green expressed a belief that he serves as a trusted role model as a black male. He also grew up not far from the school. Mr. Green stated:

I try to remain involved with my community. I coach baseball at the school and in the community. I am also a deacon at a local church, and my fraternity helps with many projects in the neighborhood. I want my students to see an alternative to the negative characters they see in music videos or on television. I arrange career fairs so they can see people of all races in successful careers. I think it is important to give them another view of the world.

Mr. Green's commitment goes beyond his regular work schedule. He wants his students to know that there are other options. He stated, "I have lived and worked in this community, and I know many students who have struggled. I also have seen those students become professionals and able to support their families." Mr. Green continued:

I help students to think about career options. I work with the counselor to bring professionals in during career fairs to give students a visual of different options. I want them to set goals and make plans. I believe that they need to visualize their dreams. I want to connect with them beyond academics because some of them require extra guidance. Making connections and showing them you care about their well-being is important to bridging the gap. The way I make the most significant impact is letting them come to me when others in the school are completely frustrated with them. I help that student develop a plan to come to an agreement with the teacher. Initially, when they are placed in my room or put out, they are too defensive to hear me. I let them listen to some music on their ear pods and calm down. We have discussions about their day or what they are listening to. We talk about different rappers or groups. They usually ask me what I listen to, and I will tell them about one of my favorite groups when I was younger. I am honest and tell them I use to listen to 2 Live Crew. The students will listen to the music or

watch a video on 2 Live Crew. We have conversations about inappropriate music because 2 Live Crew has an extensive history of raunchy music. This helps me make connections and see that I wasn't always the Mr. Green they know. Most importantly, I tell them that just because I like a certain group or type of music, I don't have to emulate their behavior. I also expose them to different types of music. I have to switch it up on them to let them know I'm versatile. I want them to be versatile, too, but I know at their age it is a process.

Ms. Indigo has taught in this community for over 30 years. She has had the opportunity to teach many of the students' parents and some grandparents. The sense of connection with her students' families commands a measure of respect. It is just not the mere fact that she has taught them, but she has also formed bonds with many of them. Ms. Indigo reported:

I have attended some of my students' baby showers. I have taught both of their parents. I have been to their parents' graduations and even some of their funerals. I use this leverage to encourage the parents and grandparents to help me when assignments are not completed. I use my influence to help settle neighborhood disputes, so these issues do not cause a problem at the school.

Ms. Indigo is committed to engaging her students and promotes another perspective on their community. She offered additional support to help them internalize the importance of school. These tactics helped to bridge the gap between home and school.

Ms. Hazelwood and Ms. Indigo sponsored a college tour to some of the local and state HBCUs. Ms. Hazelwood said, "I think it is powerful for students to see and experience a setting where they can see people who look like them in college." Ms. Indigo observed that students are given a glimpse of the possibilities. "We allow the students to experience college life. They get to experience a step performance by the Black Greeks Letter Organizations. The students see

another aspect of learning.” Both teachers noted that this helped to counter the narrative that students are besieged with about people of color.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Consciousness**

As I continued to interview and observe in this setting, I was able to view the teachers infuse the culture into their curriculum. During one of my visits, I was escorted to Mr. Blue's class on the 6<sup>th</sup>-grade hall. Mr. Blue met me and allowed me to sit at his desk while he ended one class and transitioned to another. The classes transitioned in and out effortlessly. Mr. Blue started the class off by saying, "If you hear me say word!" The students all in unison said, "WORD!" Mr. Blue said, "We are going to begin the day with a word story. How do you tell a word story?" Several students said, "retelling" and "collaborating." The students all "circled up" (the act of getting in a circle). Mr. Blue gave several commands and said, "Let's warm-up. Show me your superman pose, roll your neck, move your mouth and enunciate." The students eagerly followed each of Mr. Blue's commands and warmed up their mouths to enunciate for the task ahead. The students were excited and participated enthusiastically. He instructed the students to turn to a partner and say the following,

Mr. Blue:     You are worthy  
                  You are necessary  
                  You are healing  
                  You are healed  
                  Your being is a blessing  
  
                  You're the sky and "mo."  
                  You're the sea and "mo."  
                  You are the most  
                  You are limitless  
                  You are forgiving  
                  You is regardless

Students were very engaged in the activity and enjoyed uplifting each other. They were very expressive towards one another. Mr. Blue told them “I want you to uplift yourself now. Let’s get ready to encourage ourselves. Are you ready?”

Mr. Blue:     I am the most  
                  I am limitless  
                  I am forgiven  
                  I am forgiving  
                  My being is a blessing  
                  I am hope  
                  I am regardless  
                  I rise regardless  
                  I am enough  
                  I am alive  
                  If death was suppose to be at my doorstep by now,  
                  They must be running late  
                  Cause I am ALIVE

Mr. Blue instructed the students to return to their seats. The students all hurried to their seats to begin their daily instruction. Some were still reciting parts of the chant, and Mr. Blue had to redirect them to the learning target for the day. The lesson was about the Green books and how Negro motorists would encounter danger while traveling due to Jim Crow Laws. Mr. Blue explained that although the standard says to explain the causes and effects of the Great Depression on the people of the United States, many history books leave out the effects on black people during lean times in the nation.

He explained how many people experienced abject poverty, but the Great Depression affected black people differently due to racism. He explained this to his students. Students were shown a video about Jim Crow and Negro Motorist Green books. Students were given the rules of engagement for the class. Mr. Blue reviewed using technology, how to work in groups, and the culminating task of creating a group poem about Green books. The lesson incorporated history and the English Language Arts strands. Mr. Blue focused on encouraging students and

reiterated that he wanted to hear positivity in their conversations. Mr. Blue explained that he thinks it is important for black students to see their reflection in history. He wants them to see how black people were able to overcome obstacles throughout history.

In Mr. Blue's class, I witnessed students genuinely affirming each other. Students also affirmed their greatness, and they did so with an energy that exuded confidence. Mr. Blue stated, "I do this to teach them how to complement each other instead of criticizing each other. We all have to be taught the rules of engagement. I am teaching them to engage with love and positive words."

I also witnessed Ms. Indigo making cultural connections with her 6<sup>th</sup>-grade students. Her room was very print rich with students' work displayed throughout the classroom. Ms. Indigo used a close read of Langston's Hughes poem "Mother to Son" focusing on RL 6.2 standard, "determining a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments." She began with a short clip about the Harlem Renaissance, and students read in a popcorn style (not calling on individuals but students pop in to read). Ms. Indigo read the poem and then asked students to circle words that gave details. She guided students through this process in the first stanza, pointing out words like crystal stairs, splinters, and boards torn up.

The class continued to the next stanza by pointing out how Hughes used words to show how he triumphed over adversity. Students related to the poem by talking about tough times and making analogies to life. Students worked in groups to answer the questions, and the class ended with a poem. Although I did not see the physical energy of Mr. Blue's class, I did witness students grappling with grade-level text successfully. Ms. Indigo encouraged and prompted students when necessary. She used phrases such as "you did an awesome job of lifting that up"

and "That's an awesome answer. She needs some snaps for that one. Let's snap it up." Students were eager to make connections with the poem and their lives. The poem was relatable to them but also allowed them to make meaningful connections.

All of the teachers used opportunities during their lessons to help students make real-world connections. For example, Ms. Hazelwood, the 8<sup>th</sup>-grade special education resource teacher, incorporates as many opportunities to engage with her students in nontraditional ways. On the day that I visited Ms. Hazelwood for a member check, her students were working in the garden that they created. Students had planted winter vegetables such as onions and kale. Ms. Hazelwood stated that most of her students would avoid physical education to work in the garden. She said:

I'm teaching them life skills while also reading and doing math. Food is expensive, and vegetables are scarce in this community. I want to teach them to be self-sufficient. Many will stay after school, and I even have parents who come in to help.

Teachers used their knowledge of their students to provide them with the opportunity to engage with sociopolitical concepts such as food deserts and learn about solutions to the problem.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter revealed finding at Magnolia Science and Engineering Academy, an urban middle school with an instructional framework focused on STEAM. The school recently changed its configuration from a kindergarten through eighth-grade school to a sixth-eighth-grade configuration. This change caused the school to combine three middle schools into one school. This transition has been fraught with growing pains. Many of the teachers discussed students' lived experiences and how the culture impacted their teaching. Teachers recognized the generation gaps and provided connections for students in their classes to Hip-Hop Culture.

Teachers were very expressive about their experiences in the setting. Participants were entrenched in this community and sought to paint a different narrative to the deficit framework associated with urban segregated schools. In the next chapter, I will further describe these findings in the context of the research literature.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### **Introduction**

This study began with a discourse, centered on my former students who were arrested or incarcerated as young adults. The article made me pause and reflect upon the systematic influences that allowed my students to fall into such perilous situations. I wanted to explore the perspectives of other teachers, similarly positioned and hear their views. In the previous chapters, I presented information on the integration and re-segregation of schools in the South. I also delved into the connotation of failure, as related to the state's definition, which classifies schools that score in the bottom 6% on state tests, as *failing*. I wanted to hear the stories of teachers in these schools to garner insight about their experiences and the possibilities it can hold regarding educating in segregated urban spaces.

In this final chapter, I discuss the findings of this study with implications for policy and practices. The section commences by restating the purpose of the study and the research questions. Secondly, the chapter provides an overview of the research method, which encapsulated an in-depth discussion of the findings connecting to the research questions. Lastly, the study culminates discussing limitations of the study, implications for policy and practice, and offers recommendations for future research.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The United States has struggled with providing equitable education to students of color since the passage of *Brown V. Board of Education* (Adams & Adams, 2018; Patterson, 2001).

Teachers in these settings are given an enormous task to instruct through inequalities and distractions. Teachers are expected to be the equalizers of society's ills with few resources considering the educational terrain has remained as segregated by race and socioeconomics as it was before the passage of *Brown*. Segregation has posed a significant problem from the aspect of structural policies that have been implemented, often affecting marginalized populations more than others. It is imperative to note that the tribulations facing urban school systems are not only prevalent in cities, nor are all urban schools facing the same challenges. Unlike suburban and rural school districts, schools in urban areas are more populated and serve more students. There are higher concentrations of poverty, a larger population of students of color in urban school districts, and more frequent rates of student transiency (Kincheloe, 2004, 2010).

Urban school challenges are both cultural and structural. The cultural problems in urban schools are those policies that contribute to perceptions of students of color as deficient and incapable of learning (Noguera, 2003). The structural trials are encompassed in the practices that impede student success, such as disproportionate school suspensions and placement in special education classes for marginalized students. The trials of teachers in these settings are exacerbated when urban schools that are already challenged are further saddled with a designation such as a *Failing School*. The *Failing School* moniker is applied to a school if the school scores in the lowest 6% based on the state's end-of-year assessment. This failing delineation is more of an example of the structural and cultural influences than the students and teachers via a school classified as non-proficient.

This qualitative study explored the connotations of *failing* in an urban school setting and teachers' experiences in these settings. I used semi-structured interviews and observations to allow teachers to lend their voices to the conversation on the structural and cultural challenges

that impact their practices. The current research does not explicitly focus on teachers' belief in urban settings classified as failing. There are gaps in the research relative to an urban environment classified as failing within a city with a historically racist past. Furthermore, pondering how the failing school delineation impacts teacher roles in working with their students can provide insight into how we teach impoverished urban students. Finally, it is important to ask how these teachers imagine change in these at-risk settings and why. This study was guided by the following research questions:

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the experiences of teachers working in “designated failing” segregated urban settings?
2. How do teachers view segregation, poverty, and cultural influences impacting the outcomes of their practice?

Teachers at Magnolia Science and Engineering Academy articulated their narratives of working in high poverty urban failing schools. Vignettes and observations were, at times, painful for me to watch and hear. Teachers told tales reflecting times when their values conflicted with those of the school and how they learned to maneuver them. As an observer, I witnessed these critical occurrences. Teachers described how they used students’ culture of Hip-Hop to engage them and create a narrative. These incidences provided a way to problematize the appalling, and also served as sources of hope for the possibilities in this paradigm.

### **Research Question 1**

In the previous chapter, I shared my principal findings from my observations and the semi-structured interviews with study participants. This section provides a summary and analysis of the key findings related to the research questions that guided the study. The first question

stated, “What are the experiences of teachers working in “designated failing” segregated urban settings? The question sought to examine teachers' narratives in urban settings and to actualize how teaching in a failing, isolated urban setting impacted their practice. The questions were framed around their perceptions of the school, students, and community. The question also sought to understand their practices and how they are affected by standardized tests, accountability, student proficiency, and testing. I grouped the findings into four categories: (1) fighting for respect in the urban setting, (2) discourse of pejorative language and its place in the academic setting, (3) prioritizing obstacles: negotiating discipline versus academic demands, and (4) adultification: growing up too fast.

Study participants had a multitude of experiences with this setting that demonstrated resiliency in the face of structural and cultural problems, which seemed overwhelming. Teachers were very vocal about their desire to teach and instill in their students better coping mechanisms when settling disagreements. All of the teachers described their students in very affectionate terms, but usually with a caveat. The teachers would say, "they are young and impressionable," but "some of them can be very violent towards each other." Teachers grappled with the fight culture. All of the participants explained that "fighting seemed like a source of entertainment for the students." This was due to the filming and sharing of fights on social media.

Another aspect that teachers commented on was the school's constitution, and the lack of transitioning strategies to help rival neighborhoods begin to acclimate to a familiar setting. Only one-third of the students previously attended the school before the conversion to a STEAM school. According to the participants, integrating rival students into a new environment without any consideration of the outcome was detrimental. Therefore, the theme of fighting for respect was evident in students settling conflicts as a sign of their brawn. Many of these educators

expressed the belief that students were able to receive status if they won fights, protected their friends, and defended their neighborhood. For teachers, this fighting behavior was disheartening. The educators told stories of their peers being injured, and teachers noted that they felt as if they were fighting for their form of respect.

Participant narratives painted a picture of their experiences as warriors trying to balance education with a culture that equated respect with bravado. The teachers revealed that they feared for their safety and well-being. They exposed themselves to personal harm and liability by attempting to stop brawls at the school. Mr. Green also mentioned that he feared for students' safety. He frequently has to leave his classroom unattended while intervening in other situations. It was normalized in the setting as expected, as evidenced by Mr. Green saying, "It's like this every day." Although they were frustrated with the situation, I did not hear or see the frustration with individual students. However, teachers often apologized for their students' behavior. For every fight or curse word I witnessed, if there were an adult around, he or she would apologize for the students' behavior. I analyzed this as teachers taking responsibility for the students' behaviors, good or bad.

In the 1970s, the study site developed attendance zones to integrate schools. The district's efforts to legislate integration did not equate to equal opportunity for the students at Magnolia and other schools within the district (Loder, 2015). Students had to continue to fight, physically and emotionally, against the systemic issues that plague urban schools. The power of persuasion is very impactful for young students in impoverished areas (Chang, 2005; Dell'Angelo, 2016). Students are inundated with images of black people as violent and aggressive in the media. Students at Magnolia began to internalize this caricature of their community. This played out daily in their interactions and could be seen as a self-fulfilling prophesy for students (Becker,

2013; Hedstrom, 2005; Merton, 1948). Teachers in this setting refused to perceive their students as failures and continued to encourage them to overcome obstacles (Gass & Laughter, 2015; Neumann, 2013). Teachers recognized the role of a racist and classist society that caused their students to be angry. They continued to provide other options and safe spaces for their students to find other ways to channel their frustrations. Participants understood that students' outward aggression was a sign of the oppression that has overwhelmed them.

Another evident category was the discourse of pejorative language and its negative disposition in the academic setting. Students used profanity very freely throughout the hallways and in the classrooms. Participants expressed frustrated by student use of profanity. The swearing was so pervasive that many of the teachers thought that cursing was more adverse than fighting. The opinion was formed because the profanity was often directed at or towards teachers. Many of the teachers reported being cursed by students for asking them to comply with directions. Educators in this setting promoted deference to adults, especially older teachers. The cursing was an affront to their Christian belief. As a result, teachers often said they felt conflicted and upset that administrators did not discipline the usage of profanity by students. Teachers thought that they were being asked to accept a behavior that did not align with their values or upbringing.

The administration recognized that profanity is a normal boundary-testing behavior amongst teens (Jay, 2009) while also recognizing that student cursing at Magnolia could be judged more harshly due to their blackness (Fanon, 1967). Refusing to provide harsh punishments for these offenses was a conscious effort to prioritize the handling of more serious offenses and to avoid being hyper-vigilant with behaviors that are boundary testers for all youth. Although there was a generation gap, teachers did understand that students listened to music,

played video games, and watched television shows that besieged them with profanity. Teachers began to realize and verbalize that they understood the politics of labeling and punishing students for cursing was counterproductive to their goals (Jay, 2009; Lee, 2016). Nevertheless, teachers wanted to discuss with students the appropriateness of their language and offer other ways to communicate.

The third category involved prioritizing obstacles and discipline versus academic demands. Teachers in this setting had many challenges to overcome that required them to navigate violence, illegal behavior, students' academic accomplishments, and a designation of failing. Systemically speaking, all of these obstacles took a negative toll on the educational undertakings of the schools. The data also suggest that the suspension rates are considerably high at 34%. The school struggled with which behaviors required discipline and which should not be punished. The school-to-prison pipeline starts by third grade and there is a distinction in the types of punishments that students of color receive as opposed to their white counterparts (Lutze & Bell, 2005). Teachers experienced verbal assaults and suspected marijuana usage as they attempted to engage students in their academic studies.

The school's refusal to label some behaviors or involve law enforcement seemed to stem from a desire to recognize the impact of law enforcement on school-based discipline problems. Students of color are often arrested and taken to juvenile court for their offenses (Lee, 2016; Morgan & Farkas, 2015; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). Interactions between students of colors and police are problematic and can end tragically. With reluctance, teachers were willing to intervene with reason instead of force. Students' behaviors were met with discourse and reflection instead of the harsh hand of the judicial system. Participants expressed a belief that they could improve

their students' social and emotional health by using students' strengths instead of involving the police.

The reliance on test scores to categorize the *success* or *failure* of the school was acknowledged by study participants. Teachers were aware of the numbers. Less than 15% of students in the school were proficient in math and less than 10% in math. The other pressing needs of the students superseded their ability to worry about the designation of failing school. They recognized the humiliating ironies that "stab at students" foster feelings of inadequacy (Tuck, 2011, p. 232). Educators internalized the need to improve student data, but they did not seem deterred by the numbers. The teachers understood the indignities that students had to deal with being young, poor, and black. Furthermore, they tried to triage the other problems associated with the trauma experienced by students. Participants' experiences and perspectives (Thys & Houtte, 2015) of growing and living within the community provided insight. The educators experienced the same pain as their students based on a common bond and knowing. Their experiences allowed them to see beyond the classifications of failure, urban, and poor. They did not minimize their roles as the conveyors of knowledge but understood that they had an even more prominent role as combatants of negative behaviors

The fourth category was based on adultification or growing up too fast. Teachers' references to students' home responsibilities required them to take on adult tasks. The exposure to negative Hip-Hop culture has caused students to simulate adult personas. Young black girls are often over-sexualized in Hip-Hop media and unprotected because they are responsible for being caretakers of younger siblings (Epstein et al., 2017). Their intersectionality, being black and female, makes them a vulnerable group because they are seen as older, violent, and more provocative (Love, 2012). Failure to have adequate time to grow and experience the



developmental cycle as afforded to their more affluent counterparts is another stab at their psyche (Tuck, 2011). According to Goffet al. (2014), “Adultification contributes to a false narrative that black youths’ transgressions are intentional and malicious, instead of the result of immature decision-making—a key characteristic of childhood” (p. 164).

Participants recognized that the *adulting* of students caused students trauma. Many of the students did not have time to process grief or disappointment. Students transferred their uncounseled aggression to maladaptive behaviors, which were evident by participants. This phenomenon caused sadness for participants. I witnessed Ms. Redd breakdown in tears as she recounted how sad it made her feel that she and her students had to smell marijuana in the educational setting. She stated, "It made me not want to return." However, she continued to come back daily. It was her dedication to the students that allowed her to understand that her students had the weight of the world on their adolescent shoulders. Teachers in this setting attempted to create spaces for students to process their mistakes and alleviate their burdens while at school.

Participants expressed a belief that Hip-Hop music and culture was responsible for many of the negative behaviors exhibited at the school. Through their lens, the culture has systematically used media and music to infiltrate the minds of the students that they serve (Sargent, 2012). Hip-Hop music has a gritty past that has infiltrated the present (Edmin & Lee, 2012). The narrative suggests that students have found a vehicle of empowerment that portrays people of color as unfavorable. To the educators, students have used the art of music as a road map for how to act and behave. Students were not able to process the subculture or the systematic problems associated with the portrayal of minorities as violent. Hip-Hop in the academy has the power to use students' cultural capital and to redeposit to form alternative identities (Chang, 2015; Steele, 2009). Instead of images of black people as looters and rioters,

they are seen as a community activists and urban revivalists. With regard to teachers' practices, teachers used strategies to teach that engaged aspects of the culture.

Participants used Hip-Hop as art in STEAM to convey new ways of thinking. They used affirmative words and taught students how to celebrate one another instead of insulting each other. The teachers and the school recognized that profanity was an extension of Hip-Hop cultures' communication style. Teachers recognized the systemic issues that caused some of the behaviors. This was evident in the literature regarding utilizing Hip-Hop Pedagogy in the classroom (Chang, 2015; Dimitriadis, 1996; Edmin & Lee, 2012). Teachers sought to use student culture as capital to change behaviors. Although there was a generational gap between educators and their students, they were willing to acknowledge the cultural capital that students brought into the school to use it to make other meaning for students and help them envision alternative understandings regarding negative behaviors. This is important because of the impact that Hip-Hop and spoken word has had as an impactful teaching tools that are fluid in teaching students to ask questions and engage in social justice (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Educators noted that their responsibilities to teach life coping skills outweighed their need to focus on the designation of failing. Focusing on the emotional well-being of students and providing that acknowledgment of the students' importance over accountability measure is a part of CRP (Ladson- Billings, 1999). These teachers' ability to recognize the cultural influences of their students was a practice that provided insight on how to help students in poverty. It also provided a glimpse of the trauma that teachers experienced but continued to practice as a service to their communities.

## **Research Question 2**

The second question stated, “How do teachers view segregation, poverty, and cultural influence impacting the outcomes of their practice?”

After understanding how teachers viewed their experiences in a segregated urban setting, I wanted to understand their perspective on the impact of culture and poverty. I wanted to know what pedagogical practices helped them to reach students in their setting. From the data, four categories were revealed: (1) closing the gaps with teachers' beliefs, (2) prioritizing resources, (3) bridging the gaps: connecting with the students as a role model, and (4) culturally responsive teaching and critical consciousness. One of the biggest influences that teachers credited with influencing their practices was Hip-Hop Culture. Teachers' experiences and efforts were detailed through the semi-structured interviews and observations.

Teachers all espoused beliefs that they could change students' outcomes in this setting. They were also very positive about their students' abilities to learn. The overall theme was "Empowering Education." Teachers expressed a belief that they held power to overcome the negative stereotypes associated with the culture and teach students how to interact with one another. Teachers noted that the fighting was more of a microcosm of the violence that students watched and experienced via their culture. Many of the participants understood the role of negative stereotypes and how they, as educators, have overcome the perceptions of being black in society. The teachers used this (their oppression and their students) to allow students to make meaning of their culture while providing them with a critical lens to dissect it. The sentiment of community wealth (Yosso, 2006) helped these teachers understand their students and to believe that learning could occur in this setting. Educators valued the community and acknowledged the strengths within the community. All of these educators were involved in aspects of the community and used it in positive ways.

Participants' years of teaching experience in segregated, low-income settings also contributed to their beliefs that students could learn. All of the participants told stories about

teaching students from the area who are now leading productive lives. Participants sought to prepare students to be engaged in learning by exchanging ideas and challenging them to use their cultural knowledge to make meaning. Teachers used cultural responsive pedagogy to respond to challenges of systemic and political issues associated with residing in marginalized areas and offered empowering narratives about the image of people from their community (Collins, 2020). Participants' belief in their students and community was inspiring. Their belief in students influenced their practices and how they continued to positively interact with students in the face of adversity.

The system and school have prioritized resources for students and teachers in the setting. Teachers reported that all of the students in the school had access to state of the art computers and other technology. Some stakeholders come in to provide Apple Certification for students and teachers. It is the only school in the district with one-to-one computers for students. Although there are six magnet or specialty schools, none of them have the resources afforded to Magnolia Academy.

As a STEAM school, students have been allowed to participate in many extracurricular activities. The prior extracurricular activities consisted of band and library media. At the beginning of the school year, all staff positions were filled except the engineering course. Staff consisted of mostly experienced certified staff. Teachers attended professional development weekly to learn how to integrate STEAM in their classes. Inadvertently, many of the teachers utilized students' interest in Hip-Hop music in the curriculum through poetry, lyrics, and refrain as a form of art. This is important because STEAM instruction is posited as necessary in the academy due to its value to the technology sector and Simi Valley (Ladson-Billings, 2016). I have no data to distinguish if this environment or classification of a STEAM school provided any

benefits to the students. However, the most marginalized students in this system were afforded the technology, computers, high-tech labs, physically attractive amenities, and experienced teachers at the district's disposal to educate them.

The resources given were significant because usually these opportunities are thought to be for *other* students. Teachers used their students' knowledge to place value on students' interest by focusing on the arts in Hip-Hop. Participants used students' interest and knowledge to align with self-actualization and social reconstruction (Ladson-Billings, 2020). In self-actualization, the curriculum functions to meet students' emotional and social needs. In focusing on the needs of our students in the curriculum, we make a conscious choice to affirm that marginalized students' cultural knowledge is essential. We must begin to understand "whose knowledge" (Ladson-Billings, 2020, p. 104) carries weight in the curriculum. Teachers in this study socially reconstructed the curriculum by providing their students with the ability to ask questions about the social order.

The school network also formed relationships with community organizations with resources to help them in empowering their students. Many of the teachers discussed their relationships with members of the neighborhood association. The teachers expressed feelings that the neighborhood genuinely wanted to see the school and students succeed. Community support was vital in reaching out to students when the school could not be there. Community members also helped with materials, needs, and school supplies. Teachers acknowledged that they were not in the battle alone and had resources they could utilize when necessary. This formulation of partnerships to provide for the needs of student was encouraging to the teachers.

The countering negative stereotypes and serving as role models to the students was important to teachers. They suggested that providing an alternative to students was a way to

counter the proliferation of stereotypes of black people as violent and continuously in conflict. Teachers were conscious of their relationships and interactions with their peers, and purposely sought to display positive exchanges with their peers. It was a concerted effort by the teachers on the sixth-grade team. They ensured that their students were isolated from the fighting that occurred on the other hallways.

Teachers also introduced students to college by displaying their love of their alma maters. Most of the teachers were instrumental in providing college tours to some HBCUs and local colleges, shedding light on various career paths. This allowed teachers to reference other viable options when speaking with their students. “Blacks must challenge the assumptions of White dominance, and the presumptions of Black incompetence and inferiority, by refusing to accept White dominance in our schools, places of work, communities . . .” (Bell, 2004, p. 200). Teachers communicated that this was a part of empowering their students to have different prospects about career options and develop a plan towards the future. The teachers used themselves as a guide by displaying their degrees with their college colors proudly. Serving as role models for their students and providing opportunities for them to explore careers and life paths also helped foster relationships. The teachers were exemplars to their students. They introduced students to college campuses full of people who looked like them. They sought black voices from the community to mentor students. This relationship building helped teachers and students engage in academic topics and gave students a rationale for learning.

Another aspect of empowering students in these settings involved using culturally relevant pedagogy to help students. Mr. Blue used self-actualization (Ladson-Billings, 2016) as a way of honing in on students' emotional and social learning. He was very passionate about familiarizing students to history and how it impacted African American history. He wanted his

students to not only know about United States history but also critique how it affected people that looked or lived like them. He wanted them to explore how conditions of poverty affected all citizens. He also utilized a powerful chant in his class that students seemed to internalize in his course. When Mr. Blue and his students shouted, "You are worthy. You are necessary. You are healing. You are healed. Your being is a blessing," it meant something to them and me. I saw the exchange and witnessed the smiles. As an observer, this was cathartic for me as I witnessed a pleasant exchange that seemed to engross the students in the lesson.

Other educators in this setting also used culturally relevant teaching to engage their students in the process. Ms. Indigo utilized a poem by Langston Hughes. The poetry was relatable to students, and it also incorporated the standards in the lesson (Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2014, 2020). Spoken word and poetry has a way of given meaning to common experiences. Students were able to internalize the words of the poem about life, not being ideal. They were able to make self-to-text connections that helped them to understand the poem. The cultural connections that students made while learning helped them process the text. Teachers effortlessly used their expertise to allow students to connect with situations and analyze the text using their perspectives. Participants were very adamant about incorporating multiple perspectives in their teaching to help students learn the curriculum and master state standards.

### **Analysis and Implications for Practice**

#### **What's Going On? Countering the Narrative**

As an instructional leader and an advocate for students in urban settings, I struggled with some of my findings. I understand how people may present these findings as a justification for not providing the resources needed in these settings. Students were supported with technology, instructional options, a new building, and human and community assets. Despite all of these

resources, issues with behaviors continued to exist. Some may use these data to paint a deficit portrayal of students in this setting. However, I grasp the students' reality at Magnolia Academy, and I understand that this is a narrative that needs to be told. These students have lived a lifetime in poverty and are exposed to violence daily.

The systemic issues of being academically behind, facing health care inequalities, living and witnessing violence daily without counseling, and coping with adult issues at the beginning of adolescence have manifested at Magnolia. These students are also policed and denied opportunities to learn skills (cooperative learning, peer relations, and problem-solving), which would help develop positive peer relations and learning content that matters. How students choose to react is based on history and nature. Students who have been praised for their excellent behavior and silence may be tempted to comply because of past rewards while others fight to be heard. Despite the performativity in play, there is a material practice of fear and violence, which causes inequality of experiences in some urban settings (Butler, 2004, 2011). However, with each agential cut, students can choose another way to respond. Past experiences do not bind them. They can discover how the body can respond, which can be powerful. At Magnolia, teachers are instrumental in introducing new ways of being young, black, and angry. Connecting with the music that students listen to provides a gateway to their soul. It provides a glimpse of the types of experiences that they (students and teachers) identify with (Ellison, 2004; Hadley & Yancey, 2012; Tyson, 2002). Teachers at Magnolia used their students' musical interests to discuss problems and identify solutions. These previews into students' lives helped students make new meanings and explore other ways to channel their anger.



## **How Can We Change It? Inspiring Practices**

I contend that teachers in this setting wrapped their pedagogical knowledge with the cultural attributes to impact students who are coming of age in these urban settings. The practices that impacted the students in this setting can lead to changes in similar locations. We also must make policies that help students to overcome systemic issues. We need educators and administrators who understand how excessive discipline impacts students' outcomes (Lee, 2016; Lutze & Bell 2005; Tuzzolo & Hewitt 2006; Wilson 2014). We need counseling and mental health services to help students who experience trauma. Educators must take the time to show compassion towards students and teach restorative practices. We must also put in place programs in the foundational years to help students learn fundamental skills and not wait until students are several grades behind to decide there is an academic problem. We must also acknowledge educational inequities and enact policies to help students turn the tide of systemic issues (Au, 2009, 2011, 2014).

Participants relayed their experiences in segregated urban settings classified as failing, and how their practices were impacted by the culture in an impoverished setting. From participants' experiences, Hip-Hop culture influenced students. As educators, the teachers expressed a belief that they had to counter the negative stereotypes with empowering education (Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2016, 2020). My analysis explored how Hip-Hop pedagogy fostered a connection between culturally relevant teachings to supply an exploration of the possibilities in similarly situated settings. The implications of this study provides teachers with what can happen when teachers use students' cultural attributes to instruct and apply a critical disposition to the social and emotional needs of students.

Marginalized students need to be recognized as agents of change and deemed capable of learning grade-level curriculum while also recognizing coercive policies. According to Ginwright et al. (2005), there must be recognition by the marginalized population of the structural and institutional borders in place to limit democratic participation. Teachers in this setting recognized the systemic issues related to poverty and used it to teach students to be self-sufficient. Urban areas are food deserts, and one of the participants taught her students how to be self-sustaining by creating a community garden. Educators can channel some of students' anger towards systemic issues to develop students' agency. The teachers at the school made a conscious choice to prioritize the experiences of the students over problematizing behaviors.

The culmination of recognizing the limits and learning how to resist social controls is defined as social justice, "which is a critical awareness of the systems and institutions that promote or hinder progress toward social equality and respect for human dignity" (Ginwright et al., p. 34). As an educator, Ms. Hazelwood, named the need, helped students understand how and why food deserts exist, created a space, and taught them how to utilize their skills. There must be an analysis of how youth can discuss, challenge, and circumvent social control. Teachers in this study addressed their needs as teachers in this community and developed a voice for change through their practices.

Providing students with knowledge of how to voice their opinions and wishes through action can be very powerful. Pop culture has allowed others to open the door and to use words and music for other purposes. Hip-Hop has transformed music into pedagogy for marginalized urban students. Using the words of Hip-Hop to appeal to teens has been used to change vocabulary and social norms. Educators must teach students how to reconstruct the power structure within the dominant group and improve existing social structures. This disruption

happens in urban settings when students can take their differences and turn them into strengths. Marginalized groups must take advantage of the social capital evident in the community, which can lead to substantial change. Utilizing the intergenerational ties and struggles of past generations can make youth understand that there is hope and a possibility for change.

### **Why Is This Important to Urban Schools? Emphasizing the Importance of the Community**

I initially believed that the designation of failing was like a scarlet letter to the participants and the setting. I thought the moniker of failing stamped on the school served as a self-fulfilling prophecy for teachers and students. However, teachers did not internalize the designation in that way. They were very hopeful and recognized the politics of the designation. They also saw the need to recognize students' experiences and let that need outweigh the classification of failure. Moreover, all of the teachers have taught in the community for years and reside within the community. Seeing themselves as successful made them believe in the community they served. The teachers discussed the problems but thought that students could learn. Viewing themselves as products of the city and knowing other successful people from the community may have allowed them to believe in the possibilities in this setting.

Teachers in this setting bartered with their students and cashed in on students' cultural capital in strategic ways. This allowed them to teach them content while also engaging students in discussions about critiquing problems and strengths associated with Hip-Hop music and culture. Although the teachers did not verbalize it, they were able to integrate art into their curriculum and support the school's overall goal while focusing on needed standards. Lorde (2007) stated:

[e]ach one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears.

Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices. (p. 123)

The educators at Magnolia Academy recognized the differences in their community. They used the master's tool of language arts, STEM, and social studies to provide students with the knowledge of the tools that dominant society believes are important. They helped students to sharpen those tools by using their cultural knowledge. Educators need to prioritize the needs of students above policies and mandates for educators in urban settings (Noguera, 2012). The mainstream has portrayed this setting as failing but the teachers used their practices to counter the label of failure. The teachers were not held hostage by the dominant culture's label of failing (Lorde, 2007). The teachers did not see their practice as deficient and the needs of their students were paramount in these settings. Academic needs must be met and can be, but we must also understand that there are ways to honor students' cultural assets during instruction.

Participants served as community change agents through their maneuvering of relationships. The teachers used the cultural capital they gained serving in the community for between 20 and 30 years. Teachers, such as these participants, with a vast amount of community knowledge, should serve as mentors for novice teachers. There has been extensive research regarding the effectiveness of having master teachers work with novice teachers as leaders (Jones & Straker, 2006; Edgar et al., 2009; Hall et al., 2008). However, there is little to no research on the work of experienced community-based teachers in urban segregated settings. The state's classification of failing might assume nullification of teachers in similar settings. However, study participants have dedicated their lives to urban students. My contribution to the research lies in utilizing teachers' voices in segregated urban settings not to mimic the master

(Bhabba, 1994) but to begin to teach teachers and students how to be comfortable and confident with who they are in schools (Lorde, 2007). These teachers need to be recognized as master teachers and serve as exemplars. Often districts go outside to hire consultants instead of utilizing the valuable resources within the community. This is not needed when we begin to look at the value of our teachers.

As instructional leaders, we must garner the talents in our building and use them to circumvent practices that do not engage marginalized students. We need to recognize teachers' voices that transform their students' lives with culturally relevant pedagogy through community engagement. These teachers must be utilized as centers of excellence and allow novice teachers to develop a skill set that celebrates our marginalized communities. Principals and other leaders must verbalize and deconstruct *whose knowledge* is important. We must use our leadership to make sure our teachers' stories are just as relevant as mainstream culture's views.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study are related to the small sample size. The study only involved five participants, and their experiences are limited to a segregated school located in the South. The study specifically sought teachers with experience and tenure on the job. I attempted to obtain input from each grade level, but many of the teachers did not have the expertise to participate in the study. Due to some of the behaviors exhibited by students in the study, many of the teachers were guarded with sharing their experience as it related to the actions of the students. They were very protective of the setting and did not want to portray a negative image of their school. I reassured participants of the confidentiality of the study and their interviews and observations. I also did not have a firm grasp from participants what they classified as "Hip-

Hop" culture and what that entailed. As an implication for further study, I would like to evaluate what aspects of Hip-Hop participants considered detrimental to students' psyche.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

To gain a deeper understanding of educators' experiences in urban settings, I recommend an in-depth ethnographic approach to further describe and analyze the experiences of this unique population. With this approach, I recommend spending more time with research participants in the school, speaking with parents, guidance counselors, and other stakeholders. Additionally, I recommend future research is needed in the following areas: (1) How cultural influences impact the setting, (2) How educators process the generational gap, and (3) How culturally relevant pedagogy impacts accountability measures in urban settings. Future research should also include analysis of the types of music and media that students consume to determine what is classified as Hip-Hop culture for exploration. Finally, it would be worthwhile to examine teachers' competency and willingness to utilize a critical approach to education in hard to serve areas.

### **Conclusion**

Recent discourse suggests there is promise in the lyrics of Hip-Hop Music and culture for marginalized groups. When teachers help students understand the politics of race and the acknowledgment that changes to racist policies are deliberately slow, the dialogue of Hip-Hop culture is made relevant. The stories of urban youth are vital to understanding their plight. Hip-Hop tells of the oppression that many people cannot fathom. It is a diary from the souls of youth who witness educational inequalities that are apparent daily with the denial of the relevant curriculum. The stories further explain their frustration with being policed as a threat or menace to society.

In research involving marginalized groups, it is important to recognize the cultural capital of the people involved. Tuck (2009) examined how researchers use research to construct a depleted, broken, and deficit community. According to Tuck, this type of damage-centered research is used to record the pain of marginalized people. As soon as the research is over, the marginalized group is left with the pain and nothing else. The framework of this model documents the loss of people and rewards the researcher with political and material gains. Tuck suggested using a Desire Based Research, which does not categorize marginalized people as damaged. This framework works to understand the aspects of lived lives and self-determination. It also creates an action plan to assist disenfranchised groups in improving their plight.

Using Hip-Hop pedagogy corresponds to a Desire Based Model of Research because it allows people of color to discuss oppression through the spoken word. It also enables students to develop meaning and to voice their objection to oppressive conditions. Social action inherent in culturally responsive pedagogy allows students to navigate ways to overcome oppressive situations. It also helps students to speak to the futures they envision for themselves. Enlightening students on discrimination in society, and how institutions are developed to uphold the dominant group supremacy can help students avoid falling into the pitfalls of negative stereotypes. Teaching students how to think critically about race, class, gender, and disability can allow them to ponder other ways to express their frustrations instead of through violence. Students will be able to critique policies within their schools and communities that maintain the status quo.

I initially started my research with a focus on failure. However, as I researched, observed and interviewed, I learned that educators hear the term *failure*, but they are too busy trying to illuminate the positives. Study participants were inundated with situations that the state

department of education did not consider when determining their designation. Participants in this study noted that compassion, critical pedagogy, and an understanding of the culture makes a difference in their practice. It is through this lens that we can begin to make changes in urban settings classified as failing. Some practitioners continue to make an impact on changing the trajectory of students and helping students reach their potential.

I began this study with a story about viewing an article about several students who were in the local newspaper for various crimes. I compared the situation to flower trying to bloom in a garden of weeds. After conducting this research, I have a better understanding of how teachers, including myself, learn to cope with these harsh realities. We continue to work in these settings recognizing the culture and the students in urban settings. We continue to show up, teach, make connections, and encourage them to dream their biggest dreams. Cultural Relevant Pedagogy is a way to nurture the gardens in which we teach. It allows us to see that the weeds in my garden need tending too. They are just as important to pay attention to as the beautiful flower I see. The weeds represent the social inequalities that impact my students, such as poverty, violence, racism, police brutality, and educational disparities. Awakening our students to the weeds around them can help them learn how to grow and prosper in any environment.



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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The purpose of this interview is to understand the experiences of teachers teaching in urban high poverty schools and how it informs their practices with students in these settings.

- 1) Tell me a little about your background?
- 2) How would you describe your school? How would you describe the students in your school? How would describe the teachers and staff in your school?
- 3) What about the community in which your school is located? How do you see the community impacting the students and teachers in your school?
- 4) How long have you teaching? In this setting?
- 5) How would you describe your teaching style?
- 6) What roles does motivation play in teaching your students?
- 7) What do you feel is an equitable classroom?
- 8) How are expectations set and reinforced in your classroom?
- 9) What roles does your background as a black female/ white female/ black male/ white male play in your teaching style?
- 10) What role does standardized testing play in your approach to teaching and learning?
- 11) What do you think influences how students achieve academically? Socially?
- 12) How important is cultural acceptance in your classroom?
- 13) How do you think the community impacts your school? Why?
- 14) What obstacles do you see to your students learning?
- 15) How do you see your students manage these obstacles? What about you?
- 16) Is there any other information about you would like to share?



## APPENDIX B

### POST OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Thank you for allowing me to come in and experience your class. I would like to ask a few questions to help me to process what occurred during the class. Please allow me 15 or 20 minutes to debrief.

1. How do you feel about today's lesson?
2. What were your objectives?
3. Do you think you accomplished your objectives?
4. What went well? What didn't go well?
5. Did anything unusual occur prior to the observation?
6. Is there anything you would do differently?

## APPENDIX C

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Empowering Through Words and Deeds: Teachers Beliefs on the Self Fulfilling Prophecy

#### Participant's Consent

Please read this informed consent carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

##### Consent Form Key Information:

- 45- 60 minute structured interview
- 1.5 hour observation
- document analysis (lesson plans of lessons observed)
- Member check to verify information if needed
- No information collected that will connect identity with responses

**Purpose of the research study:** The purpose of this study is to examine re-framing the notions surrounding the connotation of failure in urban re-segregated schools. Not only is there an overwhelming occurrence of students segregated by race, they are also categorized as inferior with labels such as "failures", "failing schools" or "under performing". Segregation and the usage of labels to classify schools contribute to a climate, which continues to affect the hearts and minds of many youth in this and other urban school settings. The situation causes long lasting and irrevocable harm to the students and communities involve. Observing these contested spaces and the teachers' pedagogical practices can offer insight into the outcomes of the students. It can also give teachers a voice about their experiences in segregated urban settings designated as failures.

**What you will do in the study:** I will observe your practice while you teach. Observations will serve as a mechanism to paint a picture of the location and conditions in which you practice. I plan to spend at least 1.5 hours in your classrooms to gain insight into your practice. Next, you will submit to a structured interviews. The interview should last between 45 minutes to an hour.

**Time required:** The study will require about 2-3 hours of your time. There is a 45-60 minute structured interview, observation of 1.5 hours and a possible member check to clarify information.

**Risks:** There is minimal risk of any adverse reaction due to the anonymity of the study. However, I recognize the intrusion of having a researcher in the classroom and this may lead to apprehension by teachers. I also recognize the risk to their emotional health by discussing their feelings about their jobs and the communities in which they teach

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help us understand the experiential knowledge of teachers charged with educating in a segregated (or urban) system. This study has the potential to gives power to the words, experiences and beliefs of teachers in urban settings, which have the potential to impact the outcomes of urban youth.

**Confidentiality:** The participants' privacy will be protected. The information from the data will be stored in UA Box. UA Box provides a secure cloud based system for file and data storage, sharing and

Project Title: Empowering Through Words and Deeds: Teachers Beliefs on the Self Fulfilling Prophecy

collaboration. All data are encrypted both in transit and storage and are maintained on domestic servers. The data will not be shared outside of the research team. I plan to solicit participants for participation by email. The email is password protected. For information transmitted in email, all identifiers will be erased. At the conclusion of the study, all emails with identifying data will be destroyed. I will audio record teachers during the interview protocol to ensure the accuracy of the information and to help with transcribing data. I will seek the permission of the teachers before recording. The recordings will be stored on a electronic device that is password protected. I will be the only person with access to the recordings. The recordings will be destroyed within a year.

**Data linked with identifying information:**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code number. When the study is completed, and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report. The participants' privacy will be protected. The information from the data will be stored in UA Box. UA Box provides a secure cloud based system for file and data storage, sharing and collaboration. All data are encrypted both in transit and storage and are maintained on domestic servers

**Data not linked to identifying information:**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your name and other information that could be used to identify you will not be collected or linked to the data.

**Voluntary participation:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

**Right to withdraw from the study:** You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All audio or video tape will be destroyed should you decide to withdraw.

**How to withdraw from the study:** If you want to withdraw from the study, you can tell the researcher that you do not want to participate any longer or simply leave the room. There is no penalty for withdrawing. All audio tape of interviews and field notes will be destroyed. There is no penalty for withdrawing. If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact you may contact Donna Ross @ [dmross@crimson.ua.edu](mailto:dmross@crimson.ua.edu) or 205-601-9194 or Dr. Nirmala Erevelles @ [nerevell@ua.edu](mailto:nerevell@ua.edu)

**Compensation/Reimbursement:** You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

**If you have questions about the study or need to report a study related issue please contact, contact:**

Name of Principal Investigator: Donna Ross

Title: Doctoral Candidate

Department Name: Department of Educational Leadership, Technology and Policy Studies

Telephone: 205-601-9194

Email address: [dmross@crimson.ua.edu](mailto:dmross@crimson.ua.edu)

Faculty Advisor's Name: Dr. Nirmala Erevelles

Project Title: Empowering Through Words and Deeds: Teachers' Beliefs on the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Department Name: Department of Educational Leadership, Technology and Policy Studies

Telephone: 205-348-1179

Email address: nerevelles@ua.edu

**If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, would like to make suggestions or file complaints and concerns about the research study, please contact:**

Ms. Tanta Myles, the University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer at (205)-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at <http://ovpred.ua.edu/research-compliance/prco/>. You may email the Office for Research Compliance at [rscompliance@research.ua.edu](mailto:rscompliance@research.ua.edu).

**Agreement:**

- ☐ I agree to participate in the research study described above.
- ☐ I do not agree to participate in the research study described above.

**AUDIO/VIDEO RECORDING CONSENT:**

I understand that part of my participation in this research study will be audio/video recorded and I give my permission to be recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, my participation can be audio/video recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator or other Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name of Investigator or other Person Obtaining Consent

## APPENDIX D

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**ALABAMA**<sup>®</sup> | Office of the Vice President for  
Research & Economic Development  
Office for Research Compliance

February 3, 2020

Donna Ross  
College of Education  
The University of Alabama  
Box 870302

Re: IRB # EX-20-CM-038 "Empowering Through Words and Deeds: Teachers Beliefs on the Self Fulfilling Prophecy"

Dear Mr. Ross:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your protocol has been given exempt approval according to 45 CFR part 46.104(d)(2) as outlined below:

*(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:*

*(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).*

The approval for your application will lapse on February 2, 2021. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit the annual report to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed consent form to obtain consent from your participants.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

  
Carpanato T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP  
Director & Research Compliance Officer

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